

Aligning Teaching and Learning of Foreign Languages through an Integrated Learning Environment of Feature Film Clips

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Abstract: In this paper, we report on a database of feature film clips for foreign language learning and describe constructive alignment of teaching with the learning of English as a foreign language (EFL). The constructive alignment is threefold: (1) Film clips provide intrinsic motivation and learning contents for reflective-active knowledge construction of language and culture; (2) Output tasks through collaborative learning to involve EFL learners' active engagement; and (3) Task directions to serve as the structure of observable learning outcomes for performance-based assessment and a formative goal of enhancing students' learning of language and culture. A total of 60 English majors in the required writing course of Freshman Composition in a university in Taiwan carried out four assignments, each of which involved the writing of a synopsis of the clip content, a description of observed cultural differences, and a list of new vocabulary and expressions. The preliminary results from students' writing samples and post-test of vocabulary knowledge suggest that students can benefit from the constructive alignment of the feature film clips. In conclusion, the proposed approach of performance-based learning and assessment constitutes a role change for instructors and learners. The constructive alignment of the study demonstrates an EFL case that potentially transforms teaching and learning via the integrated learning environment of feature film clips.

Keywords: film clips, constructive alignment, performance-based assessment, vocabulary learning

1. Introduction

Clips cut from feature films and TV series allow teachers of foreign languages to introduce authentic materials modeling cultural values and attitudes into the language learning environment. In a classroom setting, the great value of using video lies in its combination of sounds, images and the socio-cultural information about habits and traditions. However, such authentic videos are not frequently nor widely implemented in the foreign language classroom. There are two obvious problems for instructional use. First, films are created for native speakers of the language and therefore lack the scaffolding and heuristic tools necessary to allow their exploitation in a classroom environment. The other problem is that the length of feature film, or even television shows, either discourages classroom use or the length impedes a close viewing of individual scenes. To make a long video into short sequences, teachers also need to make the clips clear, independent, self-contained, and interesting enough to motivate students and stimulate discussion. Such tailor-made design is too time-consuming for the language teacher to consider using authentic videos.

For foreign language learning, this study reports on the Berkeley Language Center's (BLC) online database of 14,600 tagged clips from feature films and television serials in 23 languages. To aid comprehension, the feature film clips are provided with a brief synopsis, a summary of the film's plot, a list of the spoken vocabulary in dictionary form, subtitle options, and a separate audio track retarded by 50%. For teaching with the feature film clips, this study provides an application of the LFLFC based on the theory of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996), i.e., to align "teaching method and assessment to the learning activities stated in the objectives, so that all aspects of this system act in accord to support appropriate learning" (Biggs 2003, p. 11). The ultimate aim of aligning teaching

into practice is to establish whether the students have been able to meet the learning outcomes, namely, the acquisition of the foreign language and culture. In order to put aligned teaching into practice, an approach of performance-based learning and assessment is proposed for language teachers to align instruction with learning from feature film clips. Performance-based learning and assessment represent “a set of strategies for the acquisition and application of knowledge, skills and work habits through the performance of tasks that are meaningful and engaging to students” (Hibbard, 1996, p. 5). As the learning activities are performed by the students, promoted by teaching via the feature film clips, and tackled by the assessment tasks, the constructive alignment is threefold between instruction, learning and assessment:

1. Feature film clips are used to provide not only intrinsic motivation but also the instructional purpose for learning based on reflective-active knowledge construction of language and culture;
2. Performance tasks through collaborative learning are intended for students’ active engagement;
3. Task directions are served as the structure of observable learning outcomes for both a summative assessment and a formative goal of enhancing students’ learning of language and culture.

On the one hand, performance tasks via watching feature film clips can be interesting to students, particularly in the process of collaboration where students can help each other with constructing the important content. On the other hand, performance assessment helps answer the question of what students learn. Performance-based assessment provides teachers with information about how students understand and apply knowledge. Teachers can integrate performance-based assessments into the instructional process to provide additional learning experiences for students. To evaluate the effectiveness of using feature film clips to enhance teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), two research questions are posed for pedagogical objectives:

1. What language competence will students develop via watching film clips?
2. What will students learn of the culture both explicit and implicit in the film clip?

2. Methodology

Drawing on the integrated learning environment of feature film clips, this study demonstrates a case study of EFL learning in a required course of Freshman Composition for English majors in a university in central Taiwan. Sixty students participated. They formed 19 groups and set their group wiki for collaborative writing. Then for each film review, they needed to write three paragraphs according to the task directions. As a result, students’ understanding language and culture can be demonstrated in their writing assignment:

1. Write a summary
2. Discuss cultural differences.
3. Discuss and share the vocabulary, phrases, or expression learned from the film clip.

The empirical study conducted the practice of the proposed approach to four film clips for four weeks. Students watched film clips on their own and did the collaborative writing task on wiki. The next week, the writing teacher chose some of students’ samples to provide good feedback practice to strengthen the students’ capacity to self-regulate their own performance. Principles of good feedback practice, based on a synthesis of the literature on formative assessment (Nicol, & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), were used to facilitate students’ self-regulated learning for their writing assignment.

As film clips can provide authentic input to improve vocabulary acquisition through three different channels (subtitles, oral text and images) that contribute to offer a better and potentially longer lasting mental representation of new and old lexical items, the study investigates whether the multimedia input enhances students’ vocabulary learning. The empirical data collected through pre- and post-test via the measures devised of Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) (Paribakht & Wesche, 1993, 1997) to assess the incremental development of vocabulary learning. A follow-up interview was conducted to explore students’ processes and procedures for the film-reviewing tasks.

3. Results and Discussion

The preliminary results of students' writing samples suggest that all of students can benefit from the constructive alignment of the feature film clips. Results of task completion show that only 4 tasks out of 76 (19 groups x 4 tasks) were not produced. Students' responses in the interview reveal that the use of prepared film clips puts instruction under the control of the students -- they can watch, rewind, and forward as needed. The collaborative tasks were student-led and communication among students determined the social construction devoted to achieving the common task. As the film clips allow students to explore how the linguistic and cultural components contribute to the creation of meaning, their writing samples demonstrate students' understanding language and culture.

In terms of vocabulary learning, the deliberate learning of idioms and phrases were displayed in their third paragraphs, while the non-intentional vocabulary learning concomitant with film reviewing was shown in the paired samples t-test of VKS, indicating a significant incremental development ($p < .05$) of the target 9 words (out of 10) in the four films. Half of the participants (28/56) acquired one or two new words and about 18 % (13/56) participants acquired three to five words in the post-test.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates a case of applying the principle of constructive alignment that transforms the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) via an integrated learning environment of feature film clips. The proposed approach of performance-based learning and assessment constitutes a role change for instructors, who must give up their front-of-the-class position in favor of a more guided contribution to the teaching process. Performance-based assessment gives language teachers a better opportunity to detect errors in students' language use and cultural understanding. What the proposed approach does particularly well is to bring about a distinctive shift in priorities — from merely covering material to working toward mastery of it for learners. Also there is a change in the role of students from passive learners to active ones. Many students are used to playing the role of passive participants in the classroom learning process, where instruction is served to them. By contrast, performance-based learning puts more of the responsibility on the shoulders of students by offering them greater opportunities for engagement, which may be of particular value to students with accessibility concerns.

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