

# The Use of Movie Videos to Enhance Cross-cultural Understanding

**Kusumarasdyati**

*Monash University*

**Kusumarasdyati@Education.monash.edu.au**

## **Abstract**

Learning a foreign language entails learning the culture where it is spoken. Although some educators consider culture as a peripheral element in language teaching, evidence shows that language is hardly culture-free. Therefore, it is essential that culture be embedded in foreign language teaching. This paper attempts to suggest a technique of utilizing movie videos in classes of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia to improve the learners' aural perception skills and promote cross-cultural understanding. This technique engage the learners into some motivating activities that enable them not only to comprehend English expressions, but also contrast their native (Indonesian) culture and the target culture in which English is spoken as a mother tongue. This technique of teaching listening has proved to be effective in developing listening skills in a foreign language and sensitizing them to the target culture, which is an inseparable aspect of language learning.

**Key words:** English as a Foreign Language, listening comprehension, culture, video, film

---

This paper was presented to the 16th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Wollongong 26 June - 29 June 2006. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author who retains copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

Jenny : Would you like a cup of coffee?  
 The author : Thank you, but I had two glasses of coffee this morning.  
 Jenny : You had two cups of coffee?  
 The author : Yes, two glasses of coffee.  
 Jenny : Oh, two cups of coffee.

The above exchange between the Indonesian author and an Australian friend exemplifies an English phrase that became awry due to inappropriate choice of words for the cultural context in which it took place. While this has caused misunderstanding only to a certain extent, occasionally improper diction may lead to grave social risks as discomfiture and inconvenience. On a visit to Australia a few years ago the author was engaged in a conversation with another Australian friend, Melinda, in a car trip. The topic of the conversation was a political rumour in Indonesia, and it seemed Melinda was hardly convinced of the accuracy of the rumour. The following is an excerpt of the conversation:

Melinda : You're kidding me!  
 The author : No. It's true.  
 Melinda : How do you know?  
 The author : Everybody knows that.  
 Melinda : It's in the newspapers?  
 The author : Oh no, it's spread from mouth to mouth.

Upon hearing the last sentence Melinda, who previously divided her gaze to the road and the author during the conversation, suddenly froze and stared at the road in front of her. There was protracted silence, signalling that something went wrong in the exchange. Obviously the expression "spread from mouth to mouth" sounded unusual in the above context as it suggested an activity resembling resuscitation; therefore, this utterance invited such reactions as sudden silence and avoidance of eye contact upon perception. This made the author sense that this was not appropriate to say, and within seconds she realized that she had translated the Indonesian idiom "disebarkan dari mulut ke mulut" (which means "spread through gossip") literally into English, resulting in the above awkward expression. Although the author articulated English words, the utterance did not fit into the English context.

These two cases illustrate the interlocking relationship between language and culture. Apparently the sentence "It's spread from mouth to mouth." consists of English words and is grammatically correct. However, pragmatically this sentence is unacceptable to a large extent. It does not carry the meaning which conforms to the culture where it is spoken, resulting in completely distinct interpretation on the part of the hearer and further causing misunderstanding. Such cross-cultural misunderstanding often occurs in the exchanges where two or more cultures meet. It is not uncommon for speakers to make inaccurate interpretation of

the others' utterance because they do not share the same assumptions about it. In the second example, the author was influenced by her home culture and intended to say it as an idiom. However, the friend, who was a native speaker of English, considered it as a literal expression because such an idiom actually did not exist in the culture of English-speaking countries. The different assumptions made about one expression in a particular exchange can cause communication breakdown and sometimes even embarrassment. This reflects the essential role that culture plays in language use. It is reasonable, consequently, to argue that if one learns a foreign language, s/he should also gain sufficient knowledge about the culture where this language is originally spoken.

This paper aims to present a teaching technique which can assist English-as-a-foreign - language (EFL) learners at tertiary level to improve their listening ability as well as to promote their appreciation in the diversity that exists between their home culture and the culture in which the foreign language is spoken. This technique has been applied in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in some Indonesian universities, and it has drawn a large number of favourable feedbacks from the learners. It is expected that the teaching technique can be adopted for use in other foreign language listening classes.

Prior to elaborating this technique, it is essential that some relevant concepts be reviewed. The initial part of the paper will examine culture as it relates to language and language learning. The next section will discuss the main language skill for which this technique is used, i.e. listening. Afterwards, the third section will elaborate the teaching technique in which culture and listening comprehension merge in EFL classes.

### **LINKING LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL ASPECTS IN TEFL**

In their study Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1978) explore how the concept of culture is defined and found a total of more than three hundred definitions of culture. This finding underlines the well-known nature of culture which is quite problematical to define (Byram and Grundy, 2002; Kim, 2002). Matikainen and Duffy (2000), for example, assert that culture is *a group of people* who share the same background. However, Pryor (2004) does not view culture as people, but rather as learned *patterns of values, beliefs, perceptions and behaviors* which are shared by groups of people but may be practiced differently by the members in a particular situation. Similarly, Straub (1999) defines culture as the total *way of life* of a group or society. An interesting method of describing the term 'culture' is proposed by Brooks (1968), who classify it in two distinct concepts of little "c" culture and big "C" culture. The former refers to the aspects of lifestyle or patterns of daily living, whereas the latter represents a civilization's accomplishments in literature and the fine arts, its social institutions, its history, geography, and

political system. This division has been widely quoted and adopted (e.g., Herron et al, 2002; Morain, 1983), probably due to its clear-cut categorization in narrow and broader senses and—as a consequence—its potential in preventing ambiguity of the concept ‘culture’. Therefore, in this paper the term ‘culture’ can be defined as the little “c” and the big “C” as suggested by Brooks above.

Cultural patterns can be observed in the language that a particular community use, in addition to their organization, customs and material products (Pryor, 2004). The last three aspects are beyond the scope of this paper, so only the relationship between culture and language will be discussed here. Holme (2002) proposes five ways in which culture relates to language. The first one is the communicative view, which considers language as the most important aspect in learning. Culture is separated from the language and only serves as the carrier content for that language. The second is called the classical-curriculum view, which puts language in the spotlight and considers culture as peripheral. The role of culture according to this view is to support the language in that it increases the intellectual value of the language, such as in the study of ancient languages. Third, the instrumental or culture-free-language view considers language as a tool to transmit culture. This is particularly apparent in the case of English which is utilized as the medium of learning in many non-English-speaking countries with the expectation that these countries not only communicate in that language but also adopt the values of the communities where the language is originally spoken. Another view is the deconstructionist one which maintains that language could be broken down into parts and analysed in order to see the social order and value systems that reflect the culture where the language is used. The last one is called competence view. This stance deems culture as inseparable from language as “knowledge of a culture presupposes a competence which is essential to the grasp of language’s true meaning” (p. 212).

It is argued that the last view is the most pertinent to the topic addressed here, as demonstrated in the examples that begin this paper. The first three views (communicative, classical-curriculum, and instrumental) consider language and culture as a distantly related dyad, with one receiving greater emphasis than another. On the other hand, the other two (deconstructionist and competence) deem language and culture as the two sides of the same coin. While it is possible that in certain circumstances culture attains the position as described by the communicative, classical-curriculum, instrumental and deconstructionist views in relation to language, the most common cases in real life appeared to be closer to the situation depicted in the competence view. To reexamine the illustration about coffee in the initial part of the paper, misunderstanding the meaning of “a glass of coffee” was actually caused by lack of cultural knowledge underlying this expression. In one culture “glass” is an acceptable word

indicating the container associated with “coffee”, but in another “cup” fits better than any other words.

To minimize or even avoid such misunderstanding caused by cross-cultural diversity, it is essential that a foreign language and the culture where it is originally spoken be learned at the same time. Herron et al (2002) even claim culture as the core of foreign language instruction, and Pryor (2004) further emphasizes in a broader scope that culture lies at the heart of curriculum. Apparently culture plays a vital role in foreign language learning so it is highly recommended that cultural awareness be integrated into the language instruction. As Kim (2002) suggests, teaching a foreign language is not confined to developing the learners’ language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). It should also raise their cultural awareness that is indispensable in the use of the foreign language. As the present paper attempts to demonstrate the teaching technique that promotes the cultural appreciation in a listening class, the next section will review some basic concepts of this language skill.

### **AURAL COMPREHENSION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

Formerly thought of as a passive language skill, listening was often assigned less emphasis in EFL classes than the active skill, speaking (Herschenhorn, 1979). The label of passive language skill, however, is actually a misnomer as listening requires active processing in the learners’ mind despite the superficially silent activities of perceiving aural stimulus. When receiving such stimulus and then attempting to make sense of it, the learners interactively perform two types of cognitive processing, namely bottom-up (data-driven) and top-down (conceptually-driven).

The bottom-up processing involves constructing meaning from the smallest unit of the spoken language to the largest one in a linear mode (Nunan, 1998). Thus, the learners make an effort to understand a spoken discourse by decoding a number of sounds to form words. Next, a nexus of words are linked to form phrases, which make up sentences. These sentences build a complete text, the meaning of which is then constructed by the listeners. In addition to the grammatical relationships, such suprasegmental phonemes as stress, rhythm and intonation also substantially contribute to this data-driven processing (van Duzer, 1997). Learners can be trained to perform this processing, for instance, by activities that require them to discriminate two sounds or distinguish rising and falling intonations.

The top-down processing, on the other hand, refers to interpreting meaning as intended by the speakers by means of schemata or structures of knowledge in the mind (Nunan, 1998). This view emphasizes the prominence of background knowledge already possessed by the learners in making sense of the information they hear. In the aural perception, the prior knowledge may facilitate their attempt to grasp the incoming information by relating the familiar with the new

one, and significant lack of such knowledge can hamper their efforts to comprehend a particular utterance. It is, therefore, essential that learners are accustomed to performing this processing, usually by extracting the gist of the exchange they listen to.

Thus, it is justified that listening is not a passive language skill. Contrary to the misleading popular belief, comprehension through auditory channel requires some cognitive processes that interact actively in simultaneous manner. To aid the learners in performing these processes better, teachers need to ensure a conducive atmosphere of learning, and one way to create this is by employing a teaching technique that can stimulate the learners' mind and therefore motivate them to learn further. In the following section a technique of listening instruction that involves the viewing of commercially available films in video format will be presented.

### **IT'S SHOWTIME: VIEWING VIDEOS IN LISTENING CLASS**

The sheer development of multimedia for pedagogical purposes has encouraged more and more educators to make use of them in their language classrooms. Among many different types of media, movie videos remain one of the popular teaching tools due to several reasons. The most obvious one is their capability to arouse the learners' interest and motivation (Stempleski, 1992; Allan, 1985; Lonergan, 1984). In addition, the presence of extralinguistic features such as facial expressions and gestures may reinforce their comprehension of the conversations (Allan, 1985; Sheerin, 1982), which are conducted in authentic language. The language spoken in the films is not only authentic, but also presented in the appropriate cultural context (Herron et al, 2002; Chapple and Curtis, 2000) and, consequently, can be an invaluable means of enhancing more appropriate use of language and preventing cross-cultural understanding.

These benefits underline the essential role that movie videos play in the teaching of EFL. The presentations of movie videos, therefore, should be encouraged to assist the learners in developing their language skills, such as listening. The present paper describes some learning activities designed to improve the EFL listening ability of learners at the tertiary level and promote better understanding of diversity across cultures by means of movie videos as the teaching tools. These activities require presenting movie videos which may be available in various formats, namely, Video Home System (VHS), Video Compact Disc (VCD), and Digital Versatile Disc or Digital Video Disc (DVD). Shown in full length (see King, 2002, for discussion on the approaches to presenting films), these videos are viewed by the learners with the guide from a worksheet. The worksheet comprises three parts in accordance with the stages of watching the movies: previewing, viewing, and postviewing. The learning activities in each stage will be elaborated in the next sections.

## Previewing Stage

At the beginning of the listening lesson learners need to activate their background knowledge related to the issue depicted in the movie. It has been mentioned earlier in the discussion on top-down processing that their background knowledge has the capability to hook the new information attained from the aural input, paving the way for less effortful comprehension. Several learning activities can be done to activate their background knowledge prior to viewing the movie.

### 1. Recognizing the theme of the movie.

A brief description of the theme consisting of two or three sentences should suffice to inform the learners what is going to be portrayed in the movie. This description generally contains a very general idea of the plot instead of the detailed one. Care should be taken not to hint a surprising part of the plot or a twisted ending, otherwise this timely revelation will diminish the entertaining nature of the movie and possibly affect their motivation to watch the movie further. Below is an example of description of the theme given prior to viewing.

*You are going to watch an interesting movie about Erin and Alan, two strangers who crossed paths several times without realizing each other's presence. Although destiny seemed to push them further and further apart, it had something nice for Erin and Alan.*

The above paragraph gives a slight clue of what the film *Next Stop Wonderland* is about, and at the end it even arouses the learners' interest due to the hazy expression "something nice." The learners could be wondering what it is so that their motivation can be kept high to find it out.

### 2. Identifying the main characters.

Another useful previewing activity is listing the name of the major characters in the movie, accompanied by brief information about each. This assists the learners to find out who they expect to see in the film and makes it easier for them to recognize these characters in the viewing later. For the aforementioned movie, *Next Stop Wonderland*, the following list can be constructed.

*Now familiarize yourselves with the following characters to help you comprehend the movie.*

1. *Erin* : a nurse, who didn't finish her tertiary education.
2. *Alan* : a student of marine biology, volunteering in the aquarium.
3. *Ander* : a musicologist from Brazil.
4. *Julie* : Alan's classmate.
5. *Sean* : an activist, Erin's former boyfriend.
6. *Piper* : Erin's mother, who is eager to find a partner for her daughter.

### 3. Inferring the meaning of keywords.

It is very likely that learners will encounter a few unfamiliar words in the movie. If these words happen to be keywords, the learners definitely have to know their meaning or else their attempt to comprehend the exchange in the movie will be hampered. Consequently, they need to learn the meaning of the keywords prior to watching. Rather than simply telling them the meaning, the exercise on this previewing part presents the potentially unfamiliar words in a sentential context and requires the learners to infer the meaning from the context. The following instance is an excerpt from the worksheet constructed for the film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

*Guess the meaning of the words/phrases below, using the context as a clue.*

1. *When his sister broke his favorite ashtray, he went berserk.*
2. *This is my father's daytime number. You could call him in his office by dialing this number.*
3. *The downtown area is always busy because there are a lot of shops and offices there.*

Each of the above three activities are usually not done individually during the previewing stage. Instead, one activity can be carried out in combination with another to ensure that the learners have gained necessary information before watching the movie and, therefore, are more prepared for the core activities in the next stage, i.e. viewing.

### Viewing Stage

In this stage the feature film is presented to the learners as a whole, but the presentation is divided into two sessions as the length of the film (90-110 minutes) makes it impossible to fit into one session, which is only 100 minutes. While viewing it, the learners get an opportunity to explore various aspects of the foreign language spoken there with the guidance from the worksheet. The second part of the worksheet comprises a number of items that encourage them to attend to some linguistic features and assist the acquisition of these features.

#### 1. Vocabulary building

Authentic language has been mentioned earlier as one of the advantageous point in utilizing movie videos as media in language learning. Such use of language can help the learners to understand how certain vocabulary items are expressed in the context of real daily life instead of in the (occasionally) artificial context of classroom. It is expected that they can utilize these words appropriately in language production. To illustrate, the following item introduces the synonym of the word *thousand* as spoken in the *Next Stop Wonderland*.

*In Frank's office*

5. Frank said two \_\_\_\_\_ instead of 'two thousands'.

If the learners hear the word *grands* accurately during viewing, they will realize that these two terms can be used interchangeably. In addition to such individual lexical items, the vocabulary exercise may make the most of the longer idiomatic expressions that happened to be uttered in the conversations there. From the same film, the following item provides an excellent opportunity for the learners to realize that their mother tongue (in this case, Bahasa Indonesia) differ significantly from English in communicating the same idea.

*In the restaurant*

1. What are the English expressions for these:
  - a. Menawarkan tumpangan.
  - b. Kalau hilang, ya sudah.

Particularly interesting is item 1b, in which the learners have the opportunity to acknowledge how distinctly two languages express the same idea. Piper, one of the characters, says “Lost is lost.” and at the same the learners see the Indonesian subtitle on the screen which reads “Kalau hilang, ya sudah.” This item requires them to match what is uttered in the conversation and the translated text in the caption. By doing this exercise, they realize that the Indonesian expression “Kalau hilang, ya sudah.” cannot be literally translated into “If lost, that’s all.” Instead, English has a specific idiom to express it, namely “Lost is lost.”

## **2. Comprehension check.**

As the present worksheet is devised for a listening comprehension class, it is compulsory that items assessing their comprehension be included in the worksheet. To find out how much the learners apprehend the conversations spoken in the target language, various types of items can be constructed, taking the balance between the factual, inferential and evaluational comprehension into account. Thus, the items should make use not only the yes-no questions and who-what-when-where questions to recognize the facts in the movie, but also the how-why ones that require them to infer ideas from the exchanges. Additionally, some other items that have them evaluate a particular deed as right/agreeable or otherwise should also be embedded into the viewing part of the worksheet.

## **3. Predicting the next scene or the ending.**

Due to the aforementioned time constraint, the film is presented in two sessions. This turns out to be beneficial as it allows the application of an appealing exercise, i.e. predicting the next scene or the ending. At the end of the first session, I usually cease the presentation of the film at the unpromising, bleak part of the plot. Immediately after this, the learners should write in brief (3 to 5 sentences) what will happen in the next scene, or how the story will end. For instance,

the presentation of the film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* can be interrupted at the scene where Cameron Fry crashes his father's car out of the garage, resulting in severe damage of the luxurious car. Another example is stopping playing the film *A Walk in the Clouds* in the scene where Victoria Aragon turns her room light on and Paul Sutton gazes at the light from a distance with semblance of sorrow in his face. It is fascinating how different can the predictions be made by one learner from another, and it is even more so to find that the learners are quite amused regardless of the dissimilarity between their written predictions and the real scene/ending they watch at the next session!

### **Postviewing Stage**

It is in this last stage that culture can be embedded to language learning. Having received exposures on foreign language skill (listening and writing) and components (vocabulary and pronunciation), the learners are engaged in activities that involve contrasting two cultures in order to raise their awareness of the diversity that exist across these cultures and—further—develop tolerance toward the differences. Two types of activities can be adopted to conclude the video viewing, subject to the culture presented in the movie.

#### **1. Contrasting the native culture and the target culture.**

Generally a movie depicts events that occur to a group of people that observes a particular culture in their community. In the cases where only one culture is portrayed in the movie, the most appropriate exercise for the learners is spotting the components of the target culture that are distinct from those of their native culture. A good illustration is the exercise for Indonesian learners that they do after viewing *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* in my listening class. The film demonstrates the observation of American culture in the United States and therefore can serve as a medium to gain some knowledge about this culture, which is a target culture for the above learners as they are learning English. In the listening class, the learners can be instructed to devise a two-column table, in which they list the activities or events that reflect the American culture depicted in the movie in the left column and write how the activities are done or the events occur hypothetically in the Indonesian culture.

#### **2. Contrasting the diversity within the target culture.**

Certain movies are loaded with cultural issues. If such movies are available, teachers should make good use of them to incorporate language and culture in their classes. An excellent example of such movies is *A Walk in the Clouds*, in which the Anglo-Saxon culture encounters the Mexican one in the United States. Confusion and dispute resulting from cultural diversity

are scattered throughout the movie, making it an invaluable resource to identify the potential causes of cross-cultural misunderstanding. Moreover, the film ends with sound solutions to such conflicts so it is even more worthwhile because it enables digging up the cultural issues as a whole problem-solution case. Similar to the first activity, this activity of contrasting the diversity within a single culture requires the learners to devise a table. However, instead of two columns, it is recommended that the table comprises three columns to list the Anglo-Saxon culture, the Mexican culture, and the solutions respectively. In this way, the learners can easily observe the differences between these two cultures, how they potentially cause misunderstanding, and how to overcome such distinct conceptions over the same subject.

Whichever of the two above activities is adopted for application in a listening class, it is essential to note that teachers have to verbally emphasize that cultures are simply different and this difference does not imply the superiority of one over another. The explicit assertion of the teacher on this matter is expected to assist the learners in developing tolerance to the target culture. The misleading belief held by some learners that one culture holds positive values whereas another does the opposite can hopefully be eradicated after this sensitizing experience in the classroom.

## **CONCLUSION**

Movie videos can be an invaluable teaching tool in language classes if teachers can creatively exploit them for appropriate use in language learning. It has been demonstrated in the present paper that the movies are presented in structured sequences of previewing, viewing and postviewing to ensure optimum gain in learning. Guided by the teacher-made worksheet, the learners go through these three stages. In the previewing stage, they activate their background knowledge to make the comprehension easier later. Afterwards, in the viewing phase they watch the whole movie while completing the items in the worksheet and practice a little bit of composition writing. Finally, they examine the cultural issues related to the movie in the postviewing stage. This technique has been applied in the teaching of listening in several universities in Indonesia, and the learners' response to the use of movie videos in the listening classes has been favorable. They admit that they particularly gain lots of benefit from this entertaining way of practicing listening skills. It is strongly recommended, therefore, that this technique be applied in other listening classes, provided that the available facilities and conditions permit.

## REFERENCES

- Allan, M. (1985). *Teaching English with Video*. Essex: Longman.
- Brooks, N. D. (1968). *Language and Language Learning: Theory and Practice*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Byram, M., & Grundy, P. (2002). Introduction: Context and Culture in Language Teaching and Learning. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15(3), 193-195.
- Chapple, L., & Curtis, A. (2000). Content-based Instruction in Hong Kong: Student Responses to Film. *System*, 28, 419-433.
- Herron, C., Dubreil, S., Corrie, C., & Cole, S. P. (2002). A Classroom Investigation: Can Video Improve Intermediate-Level French Language Students' Ability to Learn about a Foreign Culture? *The Modern Language Journal*, 86(1), 36-53.
- Herschenhorn, S. (1979). Teaching Listening Comprehension Using Live Language. In M. Celce-Murcia & L. McIntosh (Eds.), *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (pp. 65-73). Rowley: Newbury House Publishers, Inc.
- Holme, R. (2002). Carrying a Baby in the Back: Teaching with an Awareness of the Cultural Construction of Language. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 15(3), 210-223.
- Kim, J. (2002). Teaching Culture in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom. *The Korea TESOL Journal*, 5(1), 27-39.
- Kroeber, A. L., & Kluckhohn, C. (1978). *Culture : a critical review of concepts and definitions*. Millwood: Kraus Reprint Co.
- Lonergan, J. (1984). *Video in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Matikainen, T., & Duffy, C. B. (2000). Developing Cultural Understanding. *Forum*, 38(3), 40.
- Morain, G. (1983). The Commitment to the Teaching of Foreign Cultures. *The Modern Language Journal*, 67(4), 403-412.
- Nunan, D. (1998). *Approaches to Teaching Listening in the Language Classroom*. Paper presented at the Korea TESOL Conference, Seoul.
- Pryor, A. (2004). Deep Ethnography: Culture at the Core of Curriculum. *Language Arts*, 81(5), 396-405.
- Sheerin, S. (1982). Exploiting Television Videos with Particular Reference to Teaching ESP. In M. Geddes & G. Sturtridge (Eds.), *Video in Language Classroom* (pp. 122-133). London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
- Stempleski, S. (1992). Teaching Communication Skills with Authentic Video. In S. Stempleski & P. Arcario (Eds.), *Video in Second Language Teaching: Using, Selecting and Producing Video for the Classroom* (pp. 7-24). Alexandria: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc.

Straub, H. (1999). Designing a Cross-Cultural Course. *Forum*, 37(3), 2.

Van Duzer, C. (1997). *Improving ESL Learners' Listening Skills: At the Workplace and Beyond*.

Washington D.C.: National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education.