

Using Popular Culture to Invigorate the EFL Classroom

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Background & Context

University students have a set number of core classes that they must pass to graduate, however, their interest in attending classes outside of their major is often quite low. Students dutifully applied six years of English education, or more, to pass university entrance exams, but many are not motivated to apply any effort to their university English classes, as they see no future use for them. One method of capturing their interest and igniting their motivation is to provide a topic-base from popular culture.

1. Course Content

In consideration of the previous points, the course was designed around a recent movie, *Twilight*, which was based on the novel of the same name by Stephenie Meyer. This movie was chosen because the characters are fairly close to the students' actual ages, the basic setting of the movie, a high school, is familiar to all the students, and there are exciting, exotic elements in the story.

The movie itself provided opportunities to practice listening skills, as well as the launching point for many types of communicative activities. Prior to viewing, information regarding the genre of the film and its place in Western folklore was provided, followed by discussion and related activities. In subsequent classes, scenes from the movie were viewed on a weekly basis. The movie was viewed in English, without subtitles in either English or Japanese. Scenes were paired with activities focusing on general comprehension, and vocabulary building, as well as increasing listening, speaking and cultural

comprehension skills. Familiar exercises such as questions and cloze exercises were used. These were supplemented with “game” style activities to increase student participation and motivation. Two examples are “Creature Quiz” and “Word Bingo”. For each activity, the content was student generated. In “Creature Quiz”, they wrote descriptions of five creatures as homework. The following class, students were divided into teams and used their homework for the quiz questions. “Word Bingo” was used to explore new words, expressions and slang. Using provided movie transcripts, students found new words, familiar words used with an unfamiliar meaning, and so on. They explained them in English and wrote original sentences. Those words were used to create Bingo cards. Teams that could explain and use the word received a Bingo stamp. These formats provided a lively forum that drew in even the quieter, shy students.

Oral communication activities were also inspired by various situations in the movie. Practical role-playing exercises and student-created skits were used to recycle language previously learned by students, and were performed in front of the class. Situations included getting to know people, shopping, ordering food in a restaurant and carrying on a conversation. Students were also encouraged to identify differences and similarities between their own experiences and what they saw in the movie through small group discussion. They summarized their ideas orally for the class and submitted a written summary to the instructor.

The course ended with oral final presentations

done individually or in pairs. The theme, “anything related to Twilight”, was deliberately very broad. All topics had to be approved by the instructor, but any topic was acceptable providing the students could provide a logical, clear link to the movie. Presentation topics included the original novel, the movie soundtrack, special effects in recent movies, vampires throughout history, the geography of Twilight, American food culture, high school life, the influence of western mythology in Japanese manga, and more.

2. Course Evaluation

Regardless of whether students liked the movie/story or not, they were extremely active and positive throughout the semester. Utilizing small groups, all students were able to participate in a safe environment, even if they were shy about using English or lacked confidence in their ability. A questionnaire conducted by the university midway through the semester showed an overall positive response to the variety of activities and course content.

The following are a few of the comments offered by students:

- ・授業を通して他の生徒とコミュニケーションがとれる。

We can communicate with other students through the lesson.

- ・英語を話す機会が増えた。

My opportunities to speak English have increased.

- ・生徒が参加できる授業なので興味がもてる、眠くならない。

Students can participate in the class so we are interested, and don't get sleepy.

- ・英語で授業を進めてくださることで、集中力が上がり、リスニング能力やスピーキング能力も向上させることができた。

Completing a class in English helped me to increase my concentration, as well as improve my listening and speaking ability.

- ・全員が参加しやすい形の行事になっている
The form made it easy for everyone to participate.
- ・グループ形式の授業の場合が多く、内容の discussion や skit など楽しく授業をすることが出来ています。これからの授業も楽しみです。
Much of the class was in group format, and I could enjoy the class discussions and skits. I'm looking forward to the rest of the class.

Furthermore, students in this course also approached the instructor outside the classroom, using English and/or Japanese, to discuss or chat about some of their interests stemming from the class content.

3. Conclusion

Not unexpectedly, a movie-based class is a very effective tool to keep students involved in the class and actively using the target language. Within this context, students can also recycle previously acquired knowledge. It is also a stepping stone for them to explore and/or generate interest in other cultures, and gain confidence when using another language.

Class Materials:

- 1.Meyer, Stephenie (2005) Twilight. Hachette Book Group, New York.
- 2.Twilight. Dir. Catherine Hardwicke. Summit Entertainment, 2008.