

Enhancing English Language Teaching through Films in General Foundation Programs

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Abstract:

Enhancing English Language Teaching (ELT) through films in General Foundation Programs (GFPs), Oman is a practical research paper which aims at exploiting of technologies in ELT in order to develop linguistic competence and learner autonomy of students in the GFP. Research in communicative approach to language has shown that competence in oral and written language grows as the learners actively use the language in and out of the classroom. The aim of this paper is to engage learners in activities that demand their autonomous participation and develop linguistic competence and learner autonomy. The vital question every teacher has to ponder upon is “Can we expect what was taught in the previous class is retained in the next class?” The present study focuses on how films can aid in enhancing ELT in the GFP in Oman. The research data collected will be empirical and qualitative in nature. GFP students will be the main subjects of this research. The research will be carried out on different levels and groups in the GFP. The activities based on films expose the learners to authentic language input, help them learn how language operates and challenge them to use the language independently. The rich visual imagery, the action and motions of the films deliver the learners with multi-sensory involvement (Arcario, 1993). Infusing technology into Education serves a variety of purposes in language teaching. The observation of cultural aspects such as traditions helps to understand the function of the language. By this pragmatic approach an innovative teacher can aid students’ critical thinking skills as well as their linguistic competence. Hence it is suggested that a judicious selection of digital materials along with several learner-friendly tasks can be incorporated in syllabus of ELT.

Key Words: ELT, GFP, films, learner autonomy, linguistic competence

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1. Introduction

In this technology dominating days, English Language Teaching (ELT) to the foreign language learners who are studying in their General Foundation Programs (GFPs) in Oman is not only challenging, but also there is a need to come out of conventional teaching strategies and adapt different strategies which aid the students to develop their linguistic competence and learner autonomy. Thus the learning outcomes should be taken into account while using these strategies. By using films as one of the teaching strategies, one can enhance the English language teaching to the Second / Foreign language learners in the GFP in Oman. Moreover, diversity and flexibility can be encouraged by using films as a teaching strategy in the classroom which in turn can create a comfortable learning atmosphere for the students.

There are many studies which echo the benefits of using films as an adept strategy in ELT to the foreign language learners. To mention a few, Films enhance learning of a language through providing adequate input which is necessary for spoken language learning (Bahrani & Tam, 2012). Champoux (1999) says using films can be a good teaching resource. Mishan (2004) and Gilmore (2007) say that films can bring authenticity to the classroom. Reid (1987) says that films provide a room for different learning styles in the classroom. Using films in ELT in GFP has numerous advantages compared to conventional teaching styles (Wilson 2017). Films offer learners with genuine input so they can be viewed as authentic material (Mishan, 2004, p. 216). Draper (2012) says that visualization is an important prerequisite to be a good reader. By watching films one can easily acquire language sub-consciously (Krashen 1985: p.4). Films inspire the learners to learn English and the visuality helps the slow learners improve their comprehension skills. Films are an ideal way to engage students in doing array of tasks in a second language learning classroom (Goldstein & Driver, 2014). By reviewing the literature one can easily say that using films in English language teaching is an adept method and has numerous benefits compared to conventional teaching styles.

1.2 Back ground Information of GFP

GFP is introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education in Oman, is a study program undertaken by the students before they get admitted into higher educational courses. Students who have completed their Secondary school in Oman have to join the GFP in order to enrich their knowledge, skills and competences they need to undertake a higher education program. All the higher education institutes in Oman are required to offer a GFP before the commencement of their Associate / Diploma or Bachelors degree studies. This program includes four areas of courses such as English Language, Math, Computing and Study skills.

Students arrive into the higher education institutions with diverse educational backgrounds. As English is their foreign language most of the students who steps into General Foundation Program encounter multitude problems while learning English language. Some have poor comprehension skills, minimum vocabulary, very slow reading, difficult to express themselves, poor writing skills so on and so forth.

2. Aim

The aim of this paper is twofold; to engage learners in activities that demands their autonomous participation, and to develop linguistic competence and learner autonomy. The vital question every

teacher has to ponder upon is “Can we expect what was taught in the previous class is retained in the next class?” The present study focuses on how films can aid in enhancing ELT in the GFP in Oman.

3. Teaching Various Skills

Films aid in teaching various skills while using in a foreign language teaching class room. Teacher can exploit in teaching verbal skills, Writing, Vocabulary, Grammar and cultures as these are different skills of a language which are not interrelated, the teacher must use different teaching techniques / methods while teaching these areas.

3.1 Verbal Skills:

According to Katchen (2003), those learners who can communicate well in their mother tongues will also be the decent speakers when they learn L2. Though the verbal skills cannot be automatically acquired but by constant training the student will learn it.

Nation and Newton (2009) point that even though the learner might not be familiar with the topic, but efficient conversation techniques help the students to continue the conversation. One of the useful conversational technique is $Q \Rightarrow SA + EI$, which means a question – information or YES/No is often followed by a short answer and some extra information related to the answer. In addition to this, a supportive partner can be of great help in practicing verbal skills. The supportive partner can supply some vocabulary related to the topic, help in filling the gaps during conversation, may correct the verb tenses, and help in asking needful questions. Next, repetition of conversation can aid in verbal skills. As verbal skills require multiword phrases compared to written language, it's good to memorise small phrases which can aid in improving verbal skills.

There are two kinds of conversations which we engage in our daily life – Formal and Informal. The formal conversation happens in a setting where a question is asked and you reply to that question providing the necessary information related to it. In this type, there is a less chance to prolong the conversation as the information is directly related to the question. In the latter one, as it is related to the social settings so there is a scope to extend the talk and also to switch on to different topics.

By using films as part of language teaching one can impart both the formal conversation as well as informal conversation in enhancing speaking skills. Even the slow learners can be encouraged and engaged in such activities.

3.2 Writing

As we all know that the writing skill is one of the productive skills which requires conscious effort of the learner, so by using films this can be achieved smoothly. Writing can be made more versatile and fun by choosing various tasks and activities from films. Katchen (2003) says that as writing is considered as a productive skill so the engrossment of brain is emphasized in this process. He also says that films can bring array of writing tasks into the classroom.

In order to exploit films to teach writing, the teacher can ask the students to write about the review of the film after watching it, comparison between the films of the same director or writing

contrast between the films, writing summary or gist. Students can do pre-writing about a film after they come to know about the title of the film. In pre-writing, students are free to choose different styles of writing : free writing, information questioning and gathering, interviewing, sketching etc.

3.3 Vocabulary

Vocabulary plays a vital role in communicating well in a foreign language. Teaching or learning vocabulary requires a great amount of dedication and hard work. Learning vocabulary in a foreign language is not as easy as learning words in Language 1. Lot of practice and repetition goes into it. According to Rosenweig, (1979) there are two uses of vocabulary exists in any language: Active use of vocabulary and Passive use of vocabulary. In active use of vocabulary, one can recall the vocabulary and produce it. In passive use of vocabulary one can recognize it and comprehend. However, both active and passive uses of vocabulary are very important in learning a foreign language.

According to Yuksel and Tanriverdi (2009) using of subtitles or captions while watching a film aids a lot in attaining vocabulary, subsequently, they aid the learner integrate a word into a situation. In addition, instance vocabulary can be learned by watching films which revolves around a certain theme. With enough practice and repetition even a slow learner can acquire good amount of vocabulary. While watching the film teacher can point out at certain vocabulary related to the social context in the film. By doing so the learner can be in a position to use the vocabulary in their social life. However, the learners may not acquire 100 % of this vocabulary correctly, but it will be good enough for them to use when the social situation arises. Finally, word lists and gap fills can also help in learning vocabulary while watching films. In order to teach this, the teacher can pick a specific scene which may be related to a social setting and then prepare a worksheet with some missing vocabulary and ask the students to fill in the missing information while watching the film. Thus films help in teaching vocabulary in a simplest way to the students in General Foundation Programs.

3.4 Grammar

In general there are two approaches to teach grammar. The first one is Deductive approach and the second is Inductive approach. As per Larsen – Freeman (1979), the facilitator in deductive approach gives the rule and asks the students to frame examples. This approach is rather guided and conventional. On the other hand, in inductive way, the teacher illustrates some examples in the class and then asks the students to predict the rule for the given examples. This way of teaching grammar is more apt and novel, which inturn involves students and encourage their active participation. According to Van Abbe (1965), using audiovisual methods makes teaching and learning interesting than just in the conventional style. He points out that students can learn grammatical structures more effectively by watching films rather than attending traditional grammar classes. Finally, grammar based activities from a specific scene can be of good practice for students.

3.5 Cultures

There is a saying that every language has its own culture. In order to learn a new culture one must learn its language. A broader picture of English-speaking countries' culture can be taught to students by using films. As each film reflects the culture of its own country so it's important to

teach the students that culture is always embedded in the language. By showing genres like drama and historical, students will have a big picture of the culture variation. Teacher can ask the students to compare their own culture with the culture shown in the film and initiate a debate or ask students to write an essay. By knowing other cultures students become cultural literates. Finally, by introducing various cultures to students through films we can make students tolerant, liberal and sensitive to other cultures and respect them.

Films can trigger culture discussions among the students. Films can be a good source to raise questions and discussions. Various written and verbal assignments can be given to students based on the cultures they have encountered in various movies. Cross-culture communication can also be possible by using films in the classroom.

4. Which Films to Choose?

Stoller (1988) says that preparing the lesson well in advance is considerably significant. Though films bring variety and flexibility to the classroom, one must take enough precautions in choosing the right films to the students in General Foundation Programs in this part of the world. As Oman is a conservative country, not just any film can be shown in the classroom. So the films should be selected and previewed carefully. The teacher must do a lot of homework before showing the film in the class. The teacher should make sure that the students understand the instructional objectives of a film lesson and emphasize that the designed pedagogical goals are accomplished at the end of watching film. Allan (1995) says that the films should be relevant to the students and make them stay motivated.

Stoller (1988) highlights that a film chosen should complement instructional and curricular objectives. The comprehensibility of the film is one of the important factors while choosing a film to show to the GFP students. As the overall comprehension skills of GFP students are above average, so the teacher must take enough care while choosing a film. The students should comprehend the film and accomplish related tasks. The comprehensibility of a film can bring the students together to work on the related tasks. Moreover, it should not be a burden on the teacher to help students understand the language of the film.

Secondly, the films have to facilitate the learner with sufficient pictorial support. The visual images in the film should support the verbal messages so that the students can comprehend what is going on. For students with good comprehension skills less visual images with more verbal messages can do the trick. Then, the delivery of dialogue also plays an important role in choosing the films. In some films, based on their culture the artists use slang which may not be comprehensible for students. Again this is another challenge for the teacher while choosing a film. The accents and the pace of dialogue delivery must be kept in mind while choosing a film. Any extremes may become difficult for students to keep the pace while watching the film. So the teacher should be wise enough to take all these into account and choose the right film to derive the required output from the students. In addition, the teacher should choose the film which complements classroom activities. Pre-viewing, viewing and post-viewing activities better facilitate the learners in comprehension as well as to achieve desired pedagogical goals.

Stoller (1988) points out that before actual viewing of film, students should go through pre-viewing activities. These activities make them ready for the actual viewing. Pre-viewing activities

includes vocab exercises, brainstorming, discussions etc...Pre-viewing helps students to be at pace and comprehend the story and characters involved in it. While viewing activities make the students focus on the film and aid them in understand the twists and turns in the film. Post viewing activities are very important because with those activities the teacher can assess whether the efforts put in showing the film is fruitful or not. Post-viewing activities enhances written and oral skills. Students can be asked to write about the summary or gist of the film or describe their favorite character and also they can be given a chance to add specific details to their favorite character. When it comes to oral skills, students can make presentations about the film or about the climax or about their favorite artist in the film. They can also have debates or discussions. Debates and discussions aids in students improve their public speaking skills. Gathering information exercises can be a good task in all these activities.

Though most of the students in general as well as in General Foundation Programs like action movies, but in my opinion, action movies are not a good source in teaching language because of various reasons. One of the reasons could be they have more action and less room to dialogues, besides violence. Hence some animated films, historical films, educational films, dramas, social issue films and documentaries can be of good source in teaching language while watching.

5. Challenges

Using films bring diversity and veracity to the class, they also bring some challenges to the teacher. In spite of planning the use of film well in advance, and there will be some or other challenges which we have to encounter while watching. There are two types of challenges we face while using a film based in my experience: Technical and Non -Technical challenges.

5.1 Technical Challenges:

Stoller (1988) points at the poor equipment which can pose challenges while using the film. Though the class rooms are equipped with the state of the art gadgets, but after all they are machines so some or other technical issue arises while using the film. For example, issues with projector, Sound system, Computer accessories and Internet to name a few challenges related to technical aspect.

5.2 Non-technical Challenges

According to Stoller(1988), using films in the class is a time consuming act since the teacher has to view it couple of times before showing to the students. By doing so, the teacher has to keep aside all her other works and has to spare her time in watching and preparing the tasks related to the film. Hence, the teacher has to solely focus on the activities related to film and ignore some other classroom activities. Secondly, the teacher has to do a lot of homework before showing the film. As the students in this part of the world are conservative, every detail of the film must be watched and listened to very judiciously. Unfortunately, if the teacher does not do the homework carefully, then it will be chaotic while watching the film. Next, it's very important to note the mood of the students while watching the film because certain scenes may distract the students and may demotivate them while watching. Then, the various slangs and accents used in the film can also be one of the challenges while watching. Most of the Scottish films use the local slang so it becomes very difficult for the students at General Foundation Programs in Oman to comprehend and continue watching. So films with neutral accent which can be comprehended by even the

weaker students must be chosen. Choosing an accent depends upon what variety of English language is being used in your country i.e. American English or British English. Most importantly, the level of students can be a big challenge. As we all know that a class comprises of students with various level of comprehension so it's a big challenge for the teacher to get desired output equally from all the students. In addition, using films to teach Level 1 students is also a big challenge due to the fact that they are very slow learners and it will be complete waste of time to invest such enormous time and preparation. On the other hand, the teacher can introduce films once a while in the class room to get the Level 1 students slowly on the track. There should not be any mode of assessment while this has been introduced to encourage the students. Later stages, when the teacher is confident about the students' comprehension skills related to English language, can introduce some gap fill exercises or information gathering exercises.

6. Assessment

Assessment is mandatory. Every teacher must assess their students' comprehension and progress. This can be done formally or informally. Initially informal assessment helps the students feel comfortable. Formal assessment can be introduced during the term end or course end stages. While assessing a student the teacher should take the overall performance of the student into account.

In General Foundation Programs, most of the times it is difficult to make students sit and watch without formal assessment. Formal assessment may include giving assignments, asking the students to make some presentations. Presentations can be made individually or as a group. Informal assessment may include giving handouts to fill the gaps or gathering facts from the movie.

7. The Present Study

The aim is to engage learners in activities that demand their autonomous participation by using films in General Foundation Program and also to develop linguistic competence and learner autonomy.

7.1 Participants

The subjects involved in this study were the students from Level 2 and Level 3 in GFPs. Total 40 subjects were participated in this study. The L1 of all the participants is Arabic. Most of them have completed their secondary school education in the community schools. They are less exposed to English language and its culture outside the class.

7.2 Questionnaire and Data collection and Results

The questionnaire used for this study is being designed by the author. Keeping in mind the comprehension level of the students from General Foundation Program, the questionnaire was drafted in a simple terms. One of the important questions in the questionnaire was whether students like to learn from the digital sources or the conventional resources. Total ten questions were asked in the questionnaire. In order to facilitate the students the author used multiple choice questions. All that students have to do is just to tick their choice of answer. Open ended or closed questions were not used keeping in mind the proficiency level of students. Some background questions related to personal information such as Age, Sex, Hometown, School information, Frequency of Using English, How long familiar with English, Frequency of watching films etc.. were asked. The

purpose behind these background questions was to collect some realistic information of the students. The data was collected after using a few films in the classroom. Data collection was done in the form of survey. A few instructions related to answering the questions were given in the initial stage.

The results indicate that 38 out of 40 students have shown their interest in learning English using films. The rest of them opined that it is a complete waste of time. They also said that watching films is against their culture and their parents do not consent to this activity in the classroom. Secondly, 13 of the students opined that watching films quite often is time consuming as they have to prepare for other subjects as well. As students have to study other subjects like Writing skills, Math and Information Technology, they said that if they spend most of their time on watching films, then they are unable to focus on the rest of their subjects as their mood is completely diverted from the academics to the films. Some of them also said that they are being distracted and disturbed by some of the scenes in the films. On the other hand, the rest opined that watching films encouraged them in learning English language effectively than in traditional style of learning. They mentioned in the comments section that, they feel motivated and inspired to talk in English when they look at some characters in the films. Some also said that they imitate certain characters after watching the films once they are home. This help them to improve the language. Next, 12 students said that the assignments given after the film were bit tough. They said that they are unable to do the assignments because they are given at the end of the film. They opined that it would be more beneficial if the assignments were given at regular intervals while watching the film inorder to complete vocabulary and fill in the gap activities apart from summarizing the film. Then, 23 students mentioned that they could not follow some part of the film because of the swiftness of the dialogue delivery. They mentioned that the pace of dialogue delivery apart from the regular conversations is tough to comprehend. While another majority said that they found some artists' accent too difficult to comprehend. As most of the films shown are in American accent .When asked about overall learning outcomes that involved in while watching film, 37 students said that they were satisfied with the learning outcomes. Finally, all students have agreed that they have learnt more about other cultures through films than from their text books.

8. Conclusion

Infusing Films into education serves a variety of purposes in language teaching. The observation of cultural aspects such as customs and humor or culturally specific use of the language such as idioms help to understand the function of the language. An innovative and a resourceful teacher can yield meaningful results in not only developing students' linguistic competence but also promoting their higher order critical and reflective thinking skills. Hence it is suggested that a judicious selection of films along with several learner-friendly tasks should be incorporated in the curriculum of language teaching.

Sustained learning can be fostered by making students more aware of language resources available outside the classroom and comfortable, using the authentic materials. Multi-sensory input is likely to assist in more effective memory retention. The observation of cultural aspects such as customs and humor or culturally specific use of the language such as idioms helps to understand the function of the language. Humor in films seems to relax nervous learners and enhance their language learning.

About the Author

Praveen Alluri has completed his M.Phil, M.A, PGDTE and Certificate course in TESOL and has been working as a Senior Lecturer in English in the General Foundation Program at Mazoon College, Muscat. He has more than 12 years of teaching and training experience in India and abroad. His research interests include CALL, TESOL, Discourse analysis, Phonetics and Socio linguistics. His ORCID id is 0000-0002-5541-2024

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