

Phim ảnh cho việc dạy học giao tiếp liên văn hóa trong tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam

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TÓM TẮT

Giao tiếp liên văn hóa bằng tiếng Anh đang là đặc trưng của quá trình toàn cầu hóa hiện nay, vì tiếng Anh đã trở thành một ngôn ngữ quốc tế. Do đó, năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa rất quan trọng trong việc học tiếng Anh. Dù vậy, ở Việt Nam vẫn còn thiếu các tài liệu dạy học phản ánh chân thực mức độ đa dạng của việc dùng tiếng Anh và nền tảng văn hóa của người nói tiếng Anh trên thế giới để nâng cao nhóm năng lực này. Bài viết dưới đây sẽ trình bày các lợi ích của việc dùng các bộ phim ảnh có sẵn để làm tài liệu dạy học hiệu quả giúp nâng cao năng lực giao tiếp liên văn hóa, và đưa ra một số hoạt động dạy học sử dụng phim ảnh trong lớp học để thúc đẩy việc dạy học giao tiếp liên văn hóa trong tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: *Dạy học tiếng Anh, giao tiếp liên văn hóa, phim ảnh, tiếng Anh với vai trò là ngôn ngữ quốc tế.*

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Movie for intercultural English language teaching in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Today's globalization features intercultural communication in English as an international language. It has been urgently needed for English language learners to acquire intercultural communicative competence for successful international communication; however, instructional materials reflecting the authentic diversity of current English and its cultures to develop this competence have remained limited in Vietnam, contributing to the ongoing lack of interculturality in language teaching, especially at the tertiary level. This paper aims to present some arguments supporting the use of movies as accessible and effective intercultural materials as well as to propose practical classroom activities based on movies, so as to promote intercultural English language teaching in university classrooms in Vietnam.

Keywords: *English language teaching, intercultural competence, English as an international language, movie.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century world is the world of globalization. It requires every person, every organization and every nation to stay connected. English, as the most widely spoken language, has emerged as an international language to address this burning need. English as an international language thus feature speakers from different cultures all over the world. Since culture considerably impacts communication,¹ intercultural communication in English has become inevitable for today's generation.

As a result, the need for intercultural language teaching has been repeatedly confirmed and emphasized, especially in contemporary English language education.^{2,3} According to Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for*

Languages, language learners must achieve more comprehensive communicative competences, including "intercultural awareness, skills and know-how."⁴ That is, language teachers should appreciate not only the linguistic competence but also intercultural competence for students' effective communication in cross-cultural interactions. Undergraduates themselves have also expressed a strong desire for achieving such competences given their own understanding of the practical necessity of intercultural communicative competence for their future career as global citizens.⁵

However, English language teaching in Vietnam has long ignored intercultural competence. Research findings revealed that teachers rarely integrated intercultural activities into their English language teaching despite their

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strong awareness of this growing demand and their fairly good understanding of intercultural teaching.⁶ Their teaching was reported to rely heavily on mandatory textbooks, most of which have a sole focus on linguistic components and on British and American English.⁶ One of the frequently cited reason behind such practice is the lack of useful English teaching materials for intercultural communication.⁷ If this approach remains dominant in English language education in Vietnam, especially at the tertiary level, Vietnamese graduates may keep hindered in their employability and their engagement in the current globalized world.

To overcome such problem, this paper attempts to present some arguments for the adoption of movies as readily available intercultural materials and some practical suggestions on how to use movies for effective intercultural English language teaching in university classrooms in Vietnam.

2. MOVIES AS ENGAGING AND EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING MATERIALS

The widespread popularity of Western movies has awakened a great curiosity and generated a strong interest among young people for English and its culture backgrounds.⁸ Movies are strong in artistry, featuring a dynamic combination of sounds and vision along with zigzag or suspense story plot about current issues. This might not be the main reason behind all students' pursuit of learning English, but taking this universally appealing recreational activity to classrooms is more likely to motivate students than their normal textbooks. As motivation has been well documented to be pivotal to successful second language learning,⁹ watching movies in classrooms can help students unwind and learn simultaneously, making their learning process more enjoyable and effective. In other words, English speaking movies can serve as motivators to facilitate English language teaching and learning.

When being used in English language classrooms, movies have been found to be

associated with noticeable positive effects. As snapshots of living, vibrant people from different countries all over the world, characters in movies employ the language that is not artificially simplified for the purpose of language learning; therefore, they can bring students various instances of real-life communication outside the classroom. Such exposure to the authenticity and diversity seems quite impossible to most language learners whose study is frequently constrained in the four walls of a classroom though they are required for effective learning.

According to Communicative Language Teaching, one of the most influential approaches in the current language education, effective language learning is more likely to occur when authentic instructional materials are utilized.¹⁰ Unlike traditional formal language instructions, authentic materials that are often up to date can familiarize learners with meaningful communication in everyday situations and engage them in focusing on content and meaning rather than language form.¹⁰ Consequently, learners no doubt can communicate effectively with confidence in the target language environment.

Obviously, movies are not the only authentic materials that a teacher can bring into his or her classrooms. Nevertheless, authentic videos like movies with on-screen text appear to be more efficacious for language learning than newspapers, magazine articles or novels. In addition to the visual linguistic stimuli that the latter can provide, pure pronunciation and normal speech speed in movies can also provide learners with authentic audio input which has proved effective in fostering their acquisition of both receptive and productive skills in the target language.¹¹

Not less importantly, movies are unique since the language in use is visually contextualized with complete background information about settings, participants, genders, roles, social status and with facial expressions and gestures simultaneously. Such visual aid can actively assist learners in interpreting the given

context in the shown movie and thus knowing how to form more accurate judgements about the social context in future interactions in the target language as well as how to produce appropriate utterances for that context. Neuroscientists affirmed that images can strongly influence learners' behaviors even though the visual input may not be the focus of the activity.¹²

Additionally, there is no question that characters in a movie often utilize a wide range of conversational strategies such as fillers, hesitations and backchannelling. Along with the contextual information, learners thus can better comprehend the delivered verbal message which may not be always explicitly expressed both in movies and in daily life, making them more competent to pragmatically communicate their purpose in the target language in real life. In other words, learners may achieve sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence, integral parts of communicative competence,¹³ thanks to the authenticity in movies.

Nevertheless, successful communication in English in today's globalized world may remain hard for learners to have if the movies to show in their language classroom only depict native speakers. Given the increasing geographical mobility, English has been internationalized, and non-native English language speakers have become the norm in today's communication. Fortunately, capturing this increasing tendency, more and more English-speaking movies have been produced with the inclusion of characters from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. For example, the recent popular movie *Eternals* directed by Chloe Zhao is a potent mix of different races and accents including African, east Asian, Latino, Irish and Indian subcontinents. As a result, while watching these movies, learners can observe and learn how English as an international language works with different accents, speaker voices, dialects, slang, and stress, making them more familiarized with information exchange with both native and non-native speakers in international communication.

Additionally, observing different social and cultural groups in these movies can also enable learners to describe and to reflect on how English is used by other cultures to handle their social relationships, allowing for meaningful comparisons with their own practice to get more competent at developing a desired relationship through English with people of other cultures. That is to say, movies can expose learners to a variety of English and cultures and thus facilitate not only their communicative competence but also their intercultural competence. Such affordances are in alignment with intercultural language teaching,¹⁴ making movies promising materials for this approach.

3. MOVIES AS INTERCULTURAL TEACHING MATERIALS

With respect to the diverse use of English, movies bring students a shortcut to many of the cultural variables around the world. However, skeptics would argue that the diversity in movies does not compare with the immense cultural diversity in real-life communications. Although movies cannot substitute for actual interactions with members from foreign cultures, learners can have some preparation for those encounters with better understanding and deeper sensitivity. There is a wide variety of intercultural themes embedded in movies, ranging from stereotypes, discrimination, acculturation to cross-cultural behaviors, intergenerational conflicts and intercultural conflicts.¹⁵ Noticeably, numerous movies can reflect more than one theme. For instance, comedy *The Prince and Me* directed by Martha Coolidge offers a perspective on stereotypes, cross-cultural behaviors and intercultural conflicts. Such feature makes movies more utilizable in university language classrooms in Vietnam since it would be easier for teachers to find an appropriate movie to expand on a topic presented in mandatory textbooks.

Still, those who are against movies may claim that movies contain wrong pictures of

cultures and that they are too difficult for students to learn the language in use and the embedded intercultural themes. These statements are somehow true, but these drawbacks can be overcome with the teacher's intervention.

Specifically, the teacher must make a careful selection in consideration of the student level and the versatility of language in use and the cultural elements embedded in the movie. Linguistic factors in a movie that should be examined beforehand are speed, the style of registers, dialects, verbal and non-verbal language.¹⁶ The selected movies should not consist of taboo language or cultural issues. Furthermore, in order for students not to feel overwhelmed by authentic language, only those who are at the intermediate level or above should be engaged in learning activities using movies.¹⁷

The intervention of language teachers can also help students avoid any possible cultural misunderstanding when they watch English speaking movies. It is the case that the confrontation of different cultural values can make people from different countries end up in clash and conflict. Only after a long period of living together and empathizing with the reasons behind these cultural differences does mutual understanding and compromise come. This period can be shortened if students can acknowledge and understand these conflicts in advance and in a relaxing atmosphere with professional guidance. This is what a movie can offer in language classes with the teacher's assistance as it is "a story that wants to be told rather than a lesson that needs to be taught".¹⁸

Nevertheless, one may still cast doubt on the practicality and efficacy of using movies for intercultural teaching in Vietnam where English language teaching focusing on linguistic competence has been well-established for years. In response to this doubt, there has been an effort to examine the effectiveness of movies in the Vietnamese context. In 2014, Le and Ly engaged 16 tertiary English language students

in a case study using the American film *Million Dollar Baby* for intercultural teaching.¹⁹ The class observations were recorded, and student reflective journals were collected. In-depth interviews were also conducted to provide more insights into the participants' intercultural learning experience. Data analysis uncovers marked improvements in their knowledge about cultural differences and their engagement in making cross-cultural comparisons as well as rejecting cultural stereotypes. Findings likewise provided support for the use of films to immerse English language learners in authentic learning and to foster their intercultural competence through an integrated mode.

Although further research into the use of movies in intercultural language teaching in Vietnam has remained hard to locate, similar findings were also reported in a larger-scale case study in China.²⁰ Disney film *Mulan* was shown to 30 non-English major undergraduate students, and they were then engaged in writing study blogs, participating in quizzes and interviews about cultural values embedded in that film. Their reflections indicate major gains in their intercultural knowledge and skills as well as their positive attitude towards the greater integration of foreign movies into their course. Interestingly, the participants in this study also showed greater critical awareness of cross-cultural issues when commenting on the film.

More recently, in 2020 undergraduates in a Thai university were involved in a mixed-method quasi-experimental study to explore how movie-based mobile learning instructions could affect their English-speaking skill and their intercultural competence.²¹ Data were collected from the tests, the interviews and the attitudinal questionnaire about their acceptance of using movies in language classrooms. Findings reveal significant improvements on both of the target competences and the students' popular approval for the implementation of movies in their intercultural English learning.

Evidently, movies as intercultural language teaching materials have been consistently validated by not only qualitative but also quantitative empirical data in different countries in Asia. Given their comparable teaching culture to Vietnam, movie-based activities are thus worth employing in English language classrooms to heighten students' cultural awareness.

4. MOVIE-BASED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES FOR INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE TEACHING

Implementing unconventional instructional materials like movies may be time-consuming. Accordingly, the following learning activities are suggested to foster intercultural language teaching in Vietnam. As recommended by intercultural training experts, learners need to be engaged in exploring, observing and interpreting the behaviors of foreigners to have better intercultural knowledge, attitude and skills.^{14,21} These stages can be described as pre-, while- and post-watching stages for the optimal use in language classrooms in Vietnam. The proposed activities in these stages can be used to supplement watching both a complete movie and individual scenes in the classroom. A sample lesson plan is also presented in this section to best illustrate the proposed activities.

The selected movie in this sample lesson plan is comedy drama *The Intern* directed by Nancy Meyer, a Hollywood blockbuster released in 2015. The movie is about a 70-year-old widower who lands an internship in a fast-growing e-commerce start-up. The movie is selected because it contains no taboo language and features some characters from different cultural backgrounds.

This movie also vividly depicts the modern concepts of corporate culture, which is useful to expand on topics in *Market Leaders* (3rd edition), a textbook series that is often required for university students majoring in Business English in Vietnam.

For this lesson plan, the teaching objective is to develop students' integrated language skills with a focus of speaking skills and students' awareness of business meeting etiquette in the United States.

The students' level is the upper-intermediate level.

Time allocated for this lesson is 1 hour and 40 minutes.

4.1. Pre-watching (30 minutes)

The purpose of pre- watching activities is to raise students' interest and to make their watching the movie meaningful. This can be done by activating their prior knowledge of the chosen culture topic with guiding questions in order to build their background knowledge of the target movie.

Regarding this lesson plan, the teacher can have students work in groups and discuss the following questions,

1. How do men and women dress in business in Vietnam? Is casual dress permitted in business meetings there? What about people in the United States?
2. How important is punctuality in your culture? Is it OK to be late for a meeting? What about the American culture?
3. Is silence common in business meetings in Vietnam? What about business meetings in the United States?

The teacher then can let some group representatives present their answers and take notes of key points on the blackboard.

Next, the teacher can show the movie trailer and asks students to speculate the setting, the characters and the plot. A trailer is very effective in attracting students' interest in the target movie and in engaging them in watching the movie.

After students' presenting their ideas, the teacher can correct some details if necessary

or add more contextual information about the movie. Such information will no doubt help students understand the movie better and faster, especially when only a few scenes are shown.

Next comes a brief introduction to the director, the cast and the ranking of the film.

If students are at the intermediate level, it is highly recommended to teach students difficult vocabulary in advance. A list of used words or the selected scenes in the target movie can make students not only able to guess the context but also able to overcome the feeling of being overwhelmed often caused by watching a movie in a foreign language.

4.2. While-watching (20 minutes)

While-watching activities aim to deepen students' understanding of the film and raise their sociocultural awareness of the target cultures. A list of comprehension questions can be useful in achieving these aims and should be handed out before students actually watch the movie.

These guiding questions can include, but not limited to, those about the depictions of the target values or behaviors in the movie, the evolved conflict, the motives of people involved in the conflict and the differences between what is shown about the target cultures and the students' perception of those cultures as well as their own one. Focusing these questions can help students realize any stereotypical notions they have about the target cultures, easily leading to their sympathy with people in those cultures later.

For this lesson plan, the teacher can ask students to look at the notes about people in the United States taken from the four discussion questions in the pre-watching stage and decide whether their guesses about business practice in the United States are similar or different to what is shown in the movie scenes.

Then the teacher plays the scenes about the first day at work of Ben Whittaker, the main character in the movie, and the business meetings he participates in. The scenes are first played

with the sound off and the English subtitles on to reduce linguistic barriers. The sound can be turned on along with the subtitles when the scenes are played the second time. Students then can watch the scenes again with the sound and no subtitles. This activity can foster not only their cultural awareness but also their English listening skill.¹⁴

4.3. Post-watching (45 minutes)

Post-watching activities allow students to demonstrate their understanding of the movie's messages and their ability to use the newly-learned language from it. These activities can vary, depending on teaching aims, the students' language level and the time allocated for this stage.

For this lesson plan, after watching the movie, the teacher can ask students to discuss the following questions.

1. What are the reasons behind the differences you found while watching the movie? Should you adopt such practice in every business encounter with the American?

2. Make comparison of the Vietnamese and American modern concepts of business meeting etiquette. Find reasons for any differences you found.

These questions are designed to help engage students in interpreting, analyzing and solving problems resulting from cultural conflicts in order to increase their intercultural awareness and their critical thinking ability. When understanding the background information of differences, students can broaden knowledge of the target culture and their own culture, gaining the appreciation of different cultural values with tolerance and respect.

To facilitate students' discussion, the teacher can join the group discussions, listening to their ideas and giving guidance if necessary.

Then, the teacher can regroup students and ask them to take turn to share the ideas of

the former group to the latter. Accordingly, all of them can have a chance to speak up and help each other clear any possible intercultural misunderstandings.

At the end of the lesson, the teacher can ask students to choose one of the movie scenes about the business meetings they watched to prepare for a role-play at home. Doing a role-play can further deepen the students' understanding and create a more motivating learning atmosphere. Depending on the number of characters in the movie clip, students can be grouped accordingly and perform it to their classmates in the next sessions. This task is assigned as homework for students to have time for rehearsal before performance. Role play has been proven highly effective in practicing dialogue, using body language and speaking English in a more relaxing way.¹⁷ It allows students to use some useful language they learned from the movie to take part in a business meeting.

Alternatively, if the lesson is aimed at students' public speaking skills, each group representative can take turns to deliver a presentation to the whole class after finishing discussing in their groups. The speaking tasks can be followed up by a written report for better writing ability among students. This task can be assigned as homework for the time constraints.

If the lesson focus is on writing skills, students can be engaged in recalling what they have seen from the movie and then writing down their summary of the plot.¹⁶ The teacher can replay the scenes and allow them to make amendments to their draft if it is necessary. This activity can be useful for learners to understand the motives for the behaviors that seem incomprehensible and to be more tolerant to these behaviors.

Another challenging task that may be more suitable for learners at the advanced level is to write a detailed analysis of a character or to write a diary from the viewpoint of a protagonist of their choice.¹⁴ The analysis will require students

to use their critical thinking to synthesize the information and make a conclusion. Writing a diary will put students into the character's shoes and make them defend their characters and be more tolerable towards unfamiliar points of view caused by cultural differences.

For time constraints in classrooms, these writing assignments should be assigned as homework so that students can have enough time for critical reflections on the assigned character. Their writing often involves searching and reading for more information on the Internet, which obviously can further improve their reading skill in English.

5. CONCLUSION

As a universally appealing form of entertainment and a rich resource of authentic language and cultural diversity, movies can serve as useful instructional materials for teachers to integrate intercultural teaching into their English language classrooms at university in Vietnam. However, movies may not be fully exploited without teachers' acknowledgement of their usefulness and their appropriate guidance on using movies in classrooms. This article highlighted affordances of movies as easily accessible teaching aids and practical implications of utilizing movies for intercultural communicative competence cultivation in English as an international language. Once interculturality is successfully integrated into university language classrooms, Vietnamese graduates can have more effective communication across cultures for real achievements in today's globalized world.

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