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Using Movies in English Teaching

Att använda film i engelskundervisning

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Abstract

This research synthesis investigates the topic of movies in education, and explores advantages and challenges when using movies as a tool for language development in the English classroom. With the framework of language learning theories and methods, scholarly journal articles are synthesized to explore significant themes within this area. There are several advantages relating to the use of movies in language teaching, such as the benefits of multimodality, authentic language input, and knowledge construction. The challenges that might influence the benefits of the use of film as a teaching tool are, for instance, how to create tasks that make the viewing of movies more than just entertainment for learning language and knowledge development.

Keywords: Movies, feature film, language learning, language development, ESL/EFL, SLA, teaching strategies, task-based teaching, multimodality.
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1. Introduction

In English teaching, there is an expectation that the teaching should be varied and relate to the interests of the learners and their everyday life. The Swedish curriculum for English in grades 7-9 states, “…in order to deal with spoken language and text, students should have the opportunity to develop their skills in relating content to their own experiences, living conditions, and interests…” (Skolverket, 2011). Young people today have broad access to movies and TV series through both traditional media such as television and cinema, but also a wide range of streaming services, for instance, Netflix and HBO. Therefore, it is of interest to examine how to incorporate movies in English education with deliberate regard to teaching theories and methods, and how to explain and motivate the use of movies in teaching.

We have personal experience from our teaching practicum and working as substitute teachers, and have observed that movies are quite often used a tool in English education classes. However, it is our experience that movies are often used only as entertainment and filling, without the reflection of second language acquisition (SLA), task-based language teaching (TBLT), and social constructivism, and with a lack of knowledge on how to use movies as a multimodal text successfully. Consequently, this research synthesis aims to examine how researchers discuss the benefits and challenges when using movies as an aid for teaching English. The advantages are related to audio-visual teaching, authentic language input, and knowledge construction through the content displayed in movies. The challenges are mainly related to the duration of time spent on movies, as well as planning meaningful activities that enable language development to avoid movies only being a source of entertainment.
2. Purpose statement

The purpose of this independent project is to review some of the existing research on the use of movies in the English classroom and identify some of the main questions, concerns and patterns in this area of study. The primary interest is in secondary school, and learners in Sweden, but this will not limit the focus of the synthesis.

2.1 Research question

- What are some benefits and challenges involved in teachers’ use of movies in the English classroom?
3. Background

3.1 Second language theory and method

The amount of research on language teaching methods is extensive; therefore, the theoretical approaches that we chose to use in this research synthesis are based on their relevance to movies as a teaching tool in a multimodal context. This section provides a background to second language theory and method with the focus on three theoretical approaches: second language acquisition (SLA), task-based language teaching (TBLT) and social constructivism. Furthermore, the aim here is to unpack concepts and theories mainly related to the use of movies in the English classroom.

3.1.1 Krashen's’ hypotheses of second language acquisition

Stephen Krashen’s monitor model, presented in the early 1970s, forms the basis for the theory of second language acquisition (SLA). The ‘morpheme order studies,’ which investigated the acquisition of key grammatical morphemes in English, developed into the hypotheses of language acquisition. The studies showed that the morphemes were acquired in much the same way as learners acquired their first language, with no conscious attention to form. The main idea in the theory of SLA is that the input of target language forms the foundation on which language learning can take place. Five hypotheses were formed to explain the monitor model: the acquisition-learning hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Krashen argues that acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to the target language on a comprehensible level and contain i+1. The concept of i+1 is about the notion that: “The ‘i’ represents the level of language already acquired, and the ‘+1’ is a metaphor for language (…) that is just a step beyond that level.” (p. 106). The theoretical approach of SLA has been influential to the paradigm shift from the structures promoting rules and memorizing language, to emphasizing the focus on meaning (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).
3.1.2 Task-based language teaching

The method of TBLT is implemented in the approach of SLA, as it correlates with Krashen’s input theory. David Nunan (2010) is a significant figure within the field of TBLT and argues that the focus of language teaching should be on creating opportunities of subconscious learning, which allow students to engage in tasks that are communicative and meaning-focused. Van den Branden (2012) further explains that TBLT does not rely only on language input but revolves around students engaging in tasks that entail interaction and negotiation of meaning. In other words, students should participate in pedagogical tasks that promote exposure and use of the target language.

There are seven principles for task-based language teaching, which involves scaffolding, task dependency, recycling, active learning, integration, reproduction to creation, and reflection. First, scaffolding describes the process of the teacher forming a supporting framework that the learning will occur within. Secondly, task dependency is about the notion that “...one task should grow out of, and build upon, the one that has gone before” (Nunan, 2004, p. 35). Thirdly, the notion of recycling language means that linguistic terms should be repeatedly used to enable language development. Fourth, the principle of active learning is that learners develop language skills by actively using the language and constructing their knowledge. Fifth, integration is where the teaching should not only focus on form, such as grammar, but on the connection between form, function and, semantic meaning. Sixth, reproduction to creation is about the notion that students should be able to move from reproduction of language to creative communication. Finally, the principle of reflection states that students should reflect on their learning and be aware of their language development (Nunan, 2004).

3.1.3 Social Constructivism

In their book, Lärande, skola, bildning (2014), Lundgren and Säljö describe Vygotskij’s sociocultural tradition and claim that the theory contributes an additional view to the concept of language and learning and describes how the social environment strongly influences the learning process. When students are learning a new language skill, the cultural environment strongly influences the students’ knowledge construction. When learning a skill, the students are using two skills: language and material. The language
skill includes symbols, letters, and numbers. An example is the triangle symbol; it could have the same meaning to a group of people, but could mean something different to another group. The meaning depends on the cultural history and experience of the group of people. Therefore, a symbol or a word can even have different meanings even within different professional areas.

Within the sociocultural tradition, different types of language, such as visual, spoken and written, should not be seen as opposites working against each other, but as different parts working dynamically together. Another concept widely associated with Vygotskij’s theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where he claims that people are continually developing and learning. When a person already knows a skill, s/he is able to master a new one. As the notion of scaffolding in TBLT, the ZPD describe the difference between what the student can do on their own and what they can do with the tools provided by the teacher. Furthermore, the sociocultural theory claims that learning takes place in relation to and interaction with others (Lundgren & Säljö, 2014).

3.2 Movies in second language education

Movies can be a tool in a multimodal teaching context, but they are also a medium of entertainment. According to Petra Magnusson (2014), written texts are presumed to be more valuable for learning a language than the multimodal text of movies. Yet, Jessica Sturm (2012) claims that movies can provide a context where second language learners experience the target language differently than the classic textbook. To provide a theoretical background to movies in English education, the theory of multimodality, and its connection to the Swedish curriculum for English in year 7-9, will be introduced in the following section.

3.2.1 Multimodality

Kress and Bezeemer (2016) explain that the theory of multimodality is about the resources used for making meaning and how different mediums effect what is being communicated. The authors argue that learning takes place in every encounter with the
world when different *signs* and *modes* are used to communicate. The concept of *semiotic resources*, which can entail speech, body positioning, and gestures, providing the receiver with signs to interpret the situation, are the signs and modes used to communicate in a multimodal context. Lindstrand and Selander (2009) adds that when students interpret the signs used within a multimodal text, such as a movie, interpretations are formed within the student, enabling interpersonal understanding to take place.

Bateman and Schmidt (2012) state that movies are more comprehensible than written texts because it guides the viewer in a multimodal way. Lindstrand and Selander (2009) explain how movies contribute different types of meaning and fulfill three types of meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunction. The ideational metafunction explain how the movie represents some aspect of the world, the interpersonal metafunction represents how a movie constructs relationships between the participants in communication with each other, and textual metafunction describes how conventions that surround movies organize them.

3.2.2 Swedish Curriculum on Movies in English Teaching

According to Petra Magnusson (2014), the Swedish curriculum does not directly mention the term multimodality, but the concept of aesthetic aspects could include movies. In the chapter “Overall goals and Guidelines” it is explained that the education should ensure that all students “... can use modern technology as a tool in the search for knowledge, communication, creativity, and learning...”. In the chapter “Fundamental Values and Tasks of the School,” it is stated that, “[t] he school should promote the harmonious development of pupils. Teaching should utilize a varied and balanced combination of content and working methods” (Skolverket, 2011). In addition to this, one of the aims in the English syllabus is that the students should experience English in a different context, and develop the confidence to use English for different situations, recipients and purposes. The syllabus also states that the students should be equipped to search for, and use, content from different sources and to develop tools to be creative, to learn, to understand and to communicate (Skolverket, 2011).
Furthermore, the core content of year 7-9 states that students should experience English in different social contexts, traditions, and cultural phenomenon. They should also experience the language in different media, such as literature, poems, and the Internet. Finally, it is clearly stated in the section of reading and listening, that the teaching should include “[c]learly spoken English and texts from various media” (Skolverket, 2011).

The use of movies in English education can be motivated by the previously mentioned sections from the Swedish curriculum. Therefore, movies can provide students with opportunities to engage in modern technology, clearly spoken English in various forms and in different contexts.
4. Methods

This section explains the methods used for the gathering and selection of studies presented in this research synthesis. The three parts of this chapter are the search process on databases and search engines, the key terms used to the search, and the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

4.1 Search engines and databases

Discussing and listing relevant key terms and using these in the databases that were considered most relevant concerning our subject area initiated the search process. The choice of databases was based on access, as Malmö University offers a limited range of databases. This synthesis focuses on English teaching in the context of English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL); therefore, the chosen databases have a focus on linguistics and teaching. We included four central databases: Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA), ProQuest, and Libsearch. We chose seven publications after an elimination process, and they include research directly related to the use of movies in EFL and ESL teaching. We used Libsearch and ProQuest at Malmö University’s web page to examine the general amount of studies on the use of movies in the ESL/EFL classroom. Furthermore, we used the database Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), which is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education to provide education-related literature, to narrow down the results. To get more detailed research related to language education, the search for articles focused on Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA) via the database ProQuest.

4.2 Search terms

Feature film/movies, ESL/EFL, learning, teaching, multimodal perspective, culture, speaking skills, feature film in education, and second language. We used the selected keywords in a variety of combinations to search within the different databases.
4.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Initially, the number of studies chosen was twenty. We went through a thorough process of choosing articles for this synthesis. We revised and adjusted the key terms several times to find previous research related to our subject matter. Moreover, we aimed to include relevant studies with the potential of answering the research question. A first criterion was that the articles chosen had to be peer-reviewed, and therefore several articles were excluded. A second criterion was the assurance that the studies chosen were up to date, starting with a time span of five years. After reviewing the chosen studies, we had to expand the period of the publishing date of the studies, because of the relevance to the research question. The publication year of the studies and publications would be in 2009 at the earliest. Furthermore, the articles had to be related to the research question, revolving around the use of movies in English teaching and its connection to learners’ knowledge construction. The original intention was to use studies examining English teaching in secondary school, but many studies included older learners and thus this widening of the age criterion.

Finally, the primary interest of the research question lies in ESL and EFL teaching, but we also used relevant studies using the term “L2 teaching” in other languages than English since L2 learning is the same regardless of the target language. The total studies remaining are seven.
5. Results and Discussion

In order to clarify the results that respond to the research question of this research synthesis, the arrangement of the different passages follows the major themes identified in the chosen studies. The three main themes audio-visual teaching, authentic language input, and knowledge construction will organize this section. Every theme has several subheads relating to benefits and challenges involved in the use of movies in English education. Hence, all of the sections and subsections relate to the main research questions: “What are some of the benefits and challenges involved in teachers’ use of movies in the English classroom?”. Each theme will be followed by a brief discussion of the results, connecting the findings to the theories stated in the background section.

5.1 Audio-visual teaching

This section will present the chosen studies and their view on multimodality and audio-visual teaching. The findings relate to the research as it presents certain benefits, as well as challenges relating to audio-visual teaching through the use of movies.

5.1.1 Language in a multimodal context

A majority of the studies explicitly mention the benefits of audio-visual teaching in a multimodal context. Tuncay (2014) emphasizes the fact that audio-visual tools for teaching, such as movies, increase the students’ motivation to learn and engage in pedagogical tasks. A study conducted by Pandey (2012) demonstrates that students tend to recall information better when a movie is used as an educational tool because they experience movies as less monotonous than using a textbook.

According to Sert (2009):

Contextualization is an integral part of any classroom activity. The context of situation is easier to present in multimodal audio-visual materials compared to traditional materials, as they represent interactions as embodied social actions through which students can make sense of. (p. 28)
The use of movies in English teaching is beneficial regarding the audio-visual elements that this form of multimodal text provides, since the opportunity for interpersonal understanding of language increases. Students interpret the audio-visual elements such as sounds, gestures and face expressions and acquire an individual experience of the message and content of the movie (Khosravi et al., 2014).

5.1.2 Time management

When using movies as an educational tool, a prominent challenge identified in the studies is the time consumed when showing a full-length movie and planning tasks revolving around it. It is often impossible to show a full-length movie in one lesson. Mu (2018) even argues that teachers should show a movie at least six times in order to enable language development, involving tasks where learners practice expressions and words used in the movie. Pandey (2012), on the other hand, presents several methods of using movies in the classroom in a more time efficient way. In one of his methods, the teacher shows a full-length movie but selects a few scenes and creates tasks revolving around a specific content displayed in the chosen scenes. In another method, the teacher does not show the full movie but selects a couple of scenes, which are followed by tasks and in-class discussions. Finally, Iranmanesh and Darani (2018) and Tuncay (2014) points out that except the time dedicated to a movie screening, studies have shown that the process of choosing a movie itself is considered time-consuming by teachers since it is difficult to decide what is suitable for students regarding content.

5.1.3 Discussion

The level of language development using audio-visual teaching is difficult to measure. Nevertheless, supported by the theories of multimodality and TBLT, there are opportunities for development of language skills, depending on the implementation of the movie, and what type of tasks the students are asked to do. The benefits identified in the chosen publications in audio-visual teaching are student motivation and teaching in a multimodal context. As Tuncay (2014) explains, opportunities for language development increase when the teaching and tasks relate to learners interests, where they engage and use the target language. This finding is supported by the theory of multimodal teaching, as the process of meaning-making and the semiotic resources
movies provide can help learners to interpret communication and develop their understanding of the multimodal text (Kress & Bezeemer, 2016; Lindstrand & Selander, 2009). Consequently, because movies contain two main mediums; *audio* through words spoken and *visual* by seeing face expressions and gestures, compared to listening to a tape - the multiple modes of a movie effects the meaning and help students to understand the target language on a deeper level.

The main challenge identified in all of the studies is related to time management, which is a topic often present in the discussion regarding teaching and lesson planning. However, in the chosen publications, several methods are presented which allows teachers to work with movies in many different ways. The Swedish curriculum for English in grades 7-9 is promoting varied activities and prompts that learners should experience English in different contexts. Using movies is one way to achieve such a variety (Skolverket, 2011).

### 5.2 Authentic Language Input

The aspect of authentic language input is one of the main themes through all the chosen studies on the use of movies in English teaching. This theme relates to the research question as it presents certain benefits, as well as challenges relating to movies in English education.

#### 5.2.1 Movies as a source of target language

English movies provide language that is argued to be authentic and life-based. According to Mu (2018), the language displayed in English movies is often authentic as it occurs in real-life situations. For students to be able to develop interactional skills, movies can provide real conversations that function as a resource for language development (Sert, 2009).

Iranmanesh and Darani (2018), further explain:

> Indeed, movies offer a variety of methods and resources for teaching the target language, helping students to improve their listening and communicative skills. Obviously, through
showing movies to the learners, they have exposure to what occurs in the real world or in a relatively natural context. (p. 8)

Both Tuncay (2014) and Iranmanesh and Darani (2018) conducted studies that revealed that learners experienced movies to be effective when learning idiomatic expressions and expanding vocabulary.

5.2.2 Movies as more than entertainment

A challenge with the use of movies for language development is that people often view movies as nothing more than entertainment, and therefore there is a risk of passive viewing. Consequently, Tuncay (2014) explains that teachers tend to avoid using that type of tool in their teaching. According to Mu (2018), to avoid passive viewing and create learner activity, the teacher should plan tasks that involve before-watching, while-watching and, after-watching activities. Before-watching activities could include discussions of the plot and the characters. Activities during the screening of the movie can entail students writing down keywords that they find difficult, and later discuss those terms and words in class. Finally, after watching the movies the students should engage in the production of language, for example, writing a movie analysis or discuss essential themes addressed in the movie. Pandey (2012) adds to that by stating that watching the movie should result in discussions where learners get the opportunity to use the target language.

5.2.3 Discussion

As stated in SLA theory, the input of the target language is fundamental when teaching English. It is of importance that the language presented is comprehensible and contains i+1. Therefore, to provide opportunities for language learning, the movie should be chosen concerning the learners’ proficiency level. The studies presented strengthen the theory of TBLT, that learning does not only rely on language input, and consequently, planning of tasks should entail learners using the target language themselves. As in the notion of scaffolding it is crucial to offer students clear goals and instructions in order for any development and deeper understanding of the target language to occur. When planning tasks concerning the screening of a movie, it is essential to be aware of active learning and task dependency. An example of task dependency in the studies is the
method explained by Mu (2018), where the different tasks of before-watching, while-watching, and after-watching build upon the movie, as well as the task that has gone before (Nunan, 2004). Additionally, the tasks revolving around the movie forces the learners to be active and engage in the target language. In accordance with the concept of reproduction in TBLT, the target should be the student creatively using the language, for example in the discussions described by Mu (2018).

5.3 Knowledge construction

The reviewed publications of this synthesis use different types of movies for their research. The use of a variety of movies could have a range of different advantages and challenges concerning cultural content, understanding and culture of a language. This section relates to the research question since it focuses on themes, appropriate movies and knowledge connected to advantages and challenges with the use of movies as a teaching tool.

5.3.1 Cultural content in movies

Along with the linguistic knowledge of a language, the students should also learn about the cultures of the language. Mu (2018) explains that:

Language is part of a culture, and it plays an important role in culture. On the other hand, language is influenced by culture and reflects culture. It can be said that language reflects the characteristics of a nation, it not only contains the nation’s historical and cultural background, but also contain its values, life style and way of thinking. (p. 618)

Khosravi et al (2014) supports this by explaining the cultural importance of languages; “mirroring a nation’s identity, culture incorporates its history and geography, art and literature, perspectives, practices and products. Literature, as a cultural element, encompasses a nation’s values, ideas, and morals” (p. 1210). The researchers even argue that it is impossible to learn a language without understanding its culture (Khosravi et al., 2014). If the learners of the language do not understand the culture, lifestyle, and history of a language, it can lead to misunderstandings and uncomfortable situations when the language is communicated (Mu, 2018). In addition to this, the movie can help the learners to experience the language in a realistic setting, and the
movie with its narrative help the students explore new cultures (Sert, 2009). While watching movies with different dialects and in different settings, the students will also learn how to use different idioms, which also can be seen as a way of understanding and exploring the dialectal culture of a language (Iranmanesh & Darani, 2018).

5.3.2 Using appropriate movies

When using movies in an educational context, the teacher has to prepare thoroughly before using movies in the classroom to make the learning process as successful as possible. Pandey (2012) argues that the teacher should consider not showing movies that involve foul language, nudity, and violence since this could result in students choosing not to participate in the discussions afterward. With this in mind, the movie has to be relevant thematically and be able to work as a source of knowledge, which can make the process of choosing an appropriate movie both time-consuming and exhausting. Mu (2018) provides examples of movies that can be used when teaching English. Three examples are; Forrest Gump, The Lion King and, The Pursuit of Happiness since they display relevant themes such as kindness, life and death, and the definition of happiness that the students can relate to and reflect upon.

5.3.3 Discussion

The authors of the studies argue that the aspect of culture when using movies as an educational tool is essential. As Pandey (2012) points out the teacher has to be thorough when choosing movies to use in the classroom since the students can have different viewpoints of the content of the movie. According to social constructivism, the culture of the environment influences the skills that students know and learn. Furthermore, Khosravi, Moharami & Karimkhanlouei (2014) claim that language and culture are strongly related to each other and that the language reflects the culture - as well as the culture reflecting the language. With this in mind, it is crucial to consider different cultural aspects when choosing an appropriate movie in the classroom is crucial. If the teacher decides to use a movie that involves foul language, s/he should make sure that the students receive information and can discuss the topics beforehand to avoid any misunderstanding while watching the movie.
6. Conclusion

This research synthesis has given us insights into the benefits and challenges when using movies in English education. The findings demonstrate that there are extensive benefits with the use of movies as an educational tool in a multimodal teaching approach, but also that there are significant challenges. The most visible benefits are learner motivation, target language input, and knowledge construction. First, the benefit of learner motivation is related to movies providing varied activities and tasks, since movies provide audio-visual elements in a multimodal teaching approach. Secondly, movies contain target language in an authentic context, exposing students to different dialects, language and, real-life situations. Third, following the theory of social constructivism students can develop language and cultural knowledge through the content displayed in movies. Crucial challenges in using movies in English teaching are: time management, creating meaningful tasks for language development, and selecting appropriate movies for the target group. These challenges force teachers to reflect on different teaching methods, theories on teaching and learning, and be aware of the different cultural aspects of the target language.

The results of this synthesis indicate that movies could play a role in English teaching, but there are substantial challenges to take into account. As mentioned earlier, one of the most significant challenges with movies is that people view them as pure entertainment. However, this particular fact could be movies’ greatest strength. Movies engage, inform and inspire its viewers differently and entertainingly through languages, stories, and culture. We claim that even though the use of film as a teaching tool is time-consuming, the advantages could potentially outweigh the challenges. However, in order to fully understand the potential of movies as a teaching tool, questions regarding students’ experience and language development need further investigation. The limitation of this synthesis lies in the number of studies reviewed, and answers to the question of movies as an educational tool demand further research.
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