Making Movies More Comprehensible: The Narrative/Paraphrase Approach

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It can be argued that movies are today's literature: newspapers regularly report movie attendance and publish detailed reviews, and a sure way to open a successful conversation is to ask "Did you see ….?" But this potential source of comprehensible input is not available to second language acquirers until they reach the highest levels.

In this paper, we describe an approach to making movies more comprehensible for second language students and present evidence supporting its effectiveness. The approach was developed as a part of the Focal Skills Approach (Hastings 1995, 1996) in which university level ESL students participate in models devoted exclusively to one aspect of language at a time. Each module lasts several weeks, and includes 15 hours per week of class-time. The approach we describe here is part of the Listening Module, which is presented first in the sequence of modules.

Movies have the potential of being excellent sources of comprehensible input, since they usually feature a coherent plot, a set of main characters, and recurring environments. Viewers thus establish a framework that facilitates the comprehension of new information as the movie progresses. But the language of movies is complex.

The central purpose of the Narrative/Paraphrase technique is to enhance the input that students hear, making it more comprehensible than the movie sound track. The technique has two key features.

First, the teacher narrates the scenes in deliberate, clear, simple English, describing and commenting on the objects, characters, places, and actions that are on the screen at that very moment. This enables the students to associate what they hear with what they see, making the spoken input more comprehensible than it would be without the images.

Second, the teacher paraphrases some of the dialogue, especially when it is of particular interest or importance in following the story. These paraphrases make the input more comprehensible than the original sound track by replacing less common words with more common ones, by simplifying structures, and by furnishing deliberate, clear pronunciation. This is important, because there is often little on the screen in the way of visible referents to assist students in understanding.

Research on Effectiveness

The movie technique has usually accounted for most of the class time in the Focal Skills' Listening Module. Thus, an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Listening Module is, at least to some extent, an evaluation of the movie technique, even though other means of delivering aural comprehensible input are typically used.

In Hastings (1995), 74 students in the Listening Module of a FOCAL SKILLS program were compared with 42 similar students in a standard ESL program. The scores are from the FOCAL SKILLS Listening Assessment, and represent the percentage of items understood. As indicated in table 1, Focal Skills students easily outperformed the comparisons.

Table 1: Focus Skills vs. traditional ESL, Listening

	duration	pretest	postest	gain/wk
Focal Skills	4 weeks	20.8 (18.8)	43 (26.9)	5.6
Comparison	6 weeks	20.7 (20.7)	27 (25)	1

Comprehension

Effect size (d) = 1.81, p < .001

A Quantitative Lexical Analysis of the Narrative/ Paraphrase Technique

Additional evidence comes from a study of the vocabulary used in the movie technique, as compared to the vocabulary used in the actual film. In these studies, we asked two questions: First, to what extent does the teacher's narration use words referring to visible matters, and how does this compare with the soundtrack? Second, to what extent do the teacher's paraphrases of dialogue simplify the vocabulary of the soundtrack by using more common words?

"Illustrated" Words

In order to study the first question, we selected 15 movies that had often been used in the Listening Module. We then used a random number generator to pick a single one-minute segment from each movie. We viewed the segment, listening to the sound track and noting every instance of a word that was heard while its referent was visible (nouns, verbs, and adjectives were considered). We then replayed the segment and narrated the scenes, noting the nouns, verbs, and adjectives that we were able to use while their referents were visible. This procedure was repeated for all 15 movies; the combined results are given below.

Table 2: mean number of "illustrated words" in 15 segments

	sound track	narr/paraph
mean (s.d.)	2.1 (1.5)	18.5 (2.9)

It is apparent that the movie narration technique far exceeds the typical sound track in terms of the amount of illustrated vocabulary provided, strongly suggesting that a student can get many more comprehensible words from the teacher's narration than he or she could obtain by listening to the sound track alone.

Word Frequency

We approached the second question by videotaping a portion of a Listening Module class taught by Brenda Murphy at Shenandoah University and studying the differences between the vocabulary used in the sound track dialogue and the vocabulary used in the teacher's paraphrase. We examined the first 100 nouns, verbs, and adjectives occurring in each source and determined their frequency by consulting Carroll, Davies, and Richman (1971). The mean ranks of the words in the dialogue and the narration are shown below.

Table 3: Frequency of words used in the film and in the narration

	sound track	narr/paraph
frequency rank	1265	670

Clearly, the teacher's paraphrase used a vocabulary that, on the average, contained more high-frequency words and fewer low-frequency words than the original dialogue. Because most of the words are relatively common, students are more likely to be at least somewhat familiar with them. The paraphrase can therefore be considered more comprehensible than the movie sound track.

Conclusion

The data presented here support the hypothesis that the narrative/paraphrasing movie technique enhances the comprehensibility of input. Students in the Focus Skills Listening Module spend many hours every week listening to spoken English that is transparently related to visible referents, or that is phrased in relatively accessible vocabulary.

Since the sound tracks are not very comprehensible to our students, we use narration and paraphrase. These measures allow the students to hear language that is much more comprehensible than the sound track, because the vocabulary refers to visible matters or is drawn from those words that they are likely to know already. The requirements for acquisition are thus satisfied, and we observe that our students do in fact develop listening comprehension much faster than students in other ESL programs that do not use the movie technique.

Of course, this technique is not the only one that can be used to make movies more comprehensible. Cho (in press) provides strong evidence that reading a graded reader corresponding to a movie before seeing it also enhances comprehensibility. We are eager to see if combining these two ways of making input more comprehensible will lead to even stronger results and more movie enjoyment for second language acquirers.

References

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