Cast away!

Sandi Ferdiansyah shares his love of film with his students.

I love watching movies of all genres – action, science fiction, horror, comedy and drama. Occasionally, I take movies to class, and I see my students start to smile as soon as they see I have brought one. Not only are movies relaxing and fun, but they are an authentic source of learning materials. Through them, the students can learn how the language sounds, and they can learn about the cultures portrayed in them. I teach English to students aged 16 to 17 who have 90-minute English lessons twice a week.

Of course, I try to match the movies that I choose with the ages of my students. I also make sure that the plot is easy to follow, the dialogue is relatively easy to understand, and the story has a good moral message. In class, we learn how to review a movie, re-tell the plot and learn about the message.

Movies are generally quite long – some nearly two hours. Because of the amount of class time it would take to watch a whole one, I have two teaching approaches, one bottom-up and the other top-down:

- The bottom-up approach involves the students working on tasks which enable them to understand the movie piece by piece, before they watch the whole thing. In other words, they may only see the complete movie on another day, watching it either in or out of class.

- The top-down approach, on the other hand, means that the students watch the whole film while completing a series of learning tasks which I set them. These tasks are designed to help the students to understand elements of the movie, such as the plot, the characters and the overall message.

In this article, I would like to share the way in which I have used the movie *Cast Away* with my English classes, designing a series of tasks to engage the students in communicative language learning.

Cast Away, which stars Tom Hanks, is one of my favourite movies. It tells the story of a man named Chuck's struggle to survive when he is stranded on a remote island after a plane crash. He spends nearly four years on the island before he finally plucks up the courage to build a raft and try to leave. Whilst on the island, Chuck uses things washed up from the plane, such as boxes of paper, cloth and a volleyball. Missing human companionship, he draws a face on this volleyball and calls it Wilson.

The bottom-up approach

My lessons last for 90 minutes. To save time, I use the trailer for the movie instead of the whole thing. This can be seen at *www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfXpFgyAY_U* and it lasts for just under three minutes.

1 I begin by playing the trailer three times. The first time, I ask the students just to watch and enjoy it. The second time, I give the students the following table and ask them to consider the tasks as they watch, making notes if they wish. When they watch it for the third time, I ask them to complete the sentences. They then discuss their ideas in groups.

Movie elements	Tasks
Orientation	In three sentences, say how the story begins.
Complication	In three sentences, describe the problems that the main character encounters.
Climax	In three sentences, explain the crisis you think the main character experiences.
Resolution	In three sentences, say how the main character might be able to resolve his problems.

2 Next, I ask the students to imagine being in Chuck's situation. This activity is aimed at developing their critical-thinking and decision-making skills. In groups of three, they are asked to imagine that they are stranded on an island and that they can choose three of the items in the following list to help them survive: *tent, knife, lighter, rope, life jacket, food and drink, radio, mobile phone, books, television, clothes, volleyball, shoes, bag, clock*. They are asked to give their reasons for their choices. They then have to compare their answers with two other groups, noting down their choices and reasons. When they have finished, they have a chance to amend their original choices, if they wish, before presenting their results to the class.

3 Bringing them back to the movie, I then explain that Chuck found a volleyball washed up on the beach. Missing human company, he drew a face on it and named it Wilson – the volleyball became his only friend on the island. I ask each student to choose a friend that they would like to join them on the island. They then have to write down their reason for choosing this person and three activities that they would do with their friend to help them survive. They then share their ideas with the class.

4 In a final activity, the students are asked to reflect on the trailer they have watched, answering the following questions:

- *What have you learnt about the movie or about life from this trailer?*
- *Do you find Chuck inspiring?*
- *How would you cope in a similar situation?*

They are then invited to watch the whole movie, either at home or in a subsequent lesson.

The top-down approach

In my top-down approach, the students are invited to watch the movie and analyse the elements of the story while watching it, doing pre-watching, while-watching and post-watching tasks. The pre-watching tasks focus on building the students' knowledge of the movie. The while-watching task is

Text organisation	Content	Your draft
Orientation	This consists of an introduction to what you are going to review, eg the title of the movie, the year it was made, the director, and the actors.	
Brief outline of the story	This describes the main character(s), and tells how the story begins and ends.	
Evaluation	Here, you can write about either the strengths or the weaknesses of the movie – or a combination of the two.	
Recommendation	This consists of the reasons why you would recommend this movie – or not.	

designed to allow them to do an analysis of the plot and characters. In the post-watching activity, the students are required to review the movie.

Pre-watching tasks

I invite the students to use their imagination with the following prompt: *Imagine that you are the only person who survives a plane crash. You find yourself alone on an uninhabited island. You can see some items from the plane that have washed up on the sand and there are trees behind the beach, including coconut trees. You can also see fish in the sea near to the shore.*

5 I then put the students into groups of three and ask them to discuss the following questions for ten minutes:

- *What items can you see washed up on the beach?*
- *Where do you think is the safest place for you to stay?*
- *What will you do to survive? How will you do it?*

While-watching task

We then watch the movie, and I ask the students to think about their answers to the following questions while they watch it:

- *What is the movie about?* (Write three sentences.)
- *Who is the main character in the movie? What sort of person is he?*
- *What do you think are the main problems the main character has?* (Write three sentences.)
- *How did he resolve his problems?* (Write three sentences.)

- *What can you learn from the movie?* (Write three sentences.)

Post-watching task

As a follow-up activity, I get the students to write a review of the movie. I use the guidelines in the box on this page to help them, and encourage them to write between 25 and 50 words in each category.

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If we enjoy movies ourselves, there is no reason for us not to share our enjoyment with our students. Well-designed activities, using either a bottom-up or top-down approach, can make watching a movie a meaningful learning experience.

Students can learn language from movies and see how people interact and communicate in different contexts. Movies also act as a springboard for discussion of experiences and dilemmas; they almost always have a message to interpret and discuss. Moreover, as they are fun to watch, they can inspire and foster in the students an interest in learning language. ■

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