

# Using Film Clips to Develop Communicative Competence

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## Abstract:

Using video presentations at lessons should be considered an essential tool a teacher should make use of during the process of teaching a foreign language. This is a way of increasing students' motivation and to facilitate the process of foreign language learning. The combination of sounds and images offers the possibility not only to understand better the target language but also to help identify and correctly apply culturally specific communicative strategies. Students have the opportunity to see and hear the way in which native speakers interact. This is supposed to enhance their communicative competence. In addition, they have the possibility to observe the non-verbal aspect of communication and later on correctly apply it in a conversation of their own. The present article aims at analyzing the way in which clips from modern American films help students learn the English language. The author will try to offer some methodological tips in selecting and adjusting a video presentation at the lesson of English so that it helps develop the students' four basic skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

**Key-words:** communicative competence, communication, film clips, interaction, body language, motivation, Windows Movie Maker

It is generally acknowledged that the main function of language is communicative. This means that language is primarily used as a form of social interaction. People set goals in their social lives and their ability to achieve these goals depends to a great extent on their communicative competence, that is, on the way they are able to communicate their intentions so that their message is perceived as coherent by the interlocutors. That is why teaching a foreign language should focus above all on how to teach students to use language appropriately in a social context so that they do not fail to communicate efficiently.

The structural linguist Noam Chomsky was the first to speak about the concept of 'linguistic competence' which implied that both the speaker and the listener have perfect linguistic knowledge 'unaffected by cognitive and situational factors during actual linguistic performance' (Rickheit & Strohner 2008: 17). In generative grammar, the term "competence" is referred to as 'the implicit system of rules that constitutes a person's knowledge of a language. This includes a person's ability to create and understand sentences, including sentences they have never heard before, knowledge of what are and what are not sentences of a particular

language, and the ability to recognize ambiguous and deviant sentences' (Richards & Schmidt 2002:93 – 94).

However, this idealized approach did not suit the real-life communicative situation where perfect grammar rules are flouted, yet, the speakers' interaction is unified and meaningful. Diane Larsen-Freeman points out: 'communication is a process; knowledge of the forms of the language is insufficient' (Larsen-Freeman 2008: 128). Effective communication requires that the interlocutors agree both on the referential meaning of words and on the social import or values attached to the chosen words. The interlocutors must be able to manage the process of negotiating meaning.

Later, the sociolinguist David Hymes spoke of 'communicative competence', referring to it as 'social rules of language use' (Paulston 1992: 37), and which stands for 'that aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific context' (Brown 2000: 246). It is an interpersonal construct that can be examined in real-life situation where two or more individuals are involved in the process of communication.

The *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* defines communicative competence not only as knowledge which is formally possible in a language but also as 'the knowledge of whether it is feasible, appropriate, or done in a speech community' (Richards & Schmidt 2002: 90). Communicative competence includes:

- a. grammatical competence (also formal competence), that is, knowledge of the grammar, vocabulary, phonology, and semantics of a language;
- b. sociolinguistic competence (also cultural competence), that is, knowledge of the relationship between language and its nonlinguistic context, knowing how to use and respond appropriately to different types of speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks, and invitations, knowing which address forms would be used with different persons one speaks to and in different situations, and so forth;
- c. discourse competence (sometimes considered part of sociolinguistic competence), that is, knowing how to begin and how to end conversations;
- d. strategic competence, that is, knowledge of communication strategies that can compensate for weakness in other areas (Richards & Schmidt 2002: 90 – 91).

As seen, communicative competence involves not only grammatical accuracy but also extra-linguistic features. Foreign language learners are expected to acquire this competence in

the classroom, where the teacher should design a language teaching method ‘with a face toward communicative conduct and social life’ (Paulston 1992: 40).

However, communicative procedures of the learners’ home culture can prevent them from becoming competent speakers. For example, it is culturally specific for Moldovans to start complaining when asked “How are you?” This phrase is not perceived by them as a ritualistic socializing communicative occurrence, having a phatic function. That is why they would often answer “Bad” or even “Very bad”, which is wrong, especially if they are not close to the speakers. Definitely, there are cases when this question is intended as a sincere concern about the other person’s wellbeing, but it depends on the context.

Another example can be found in the different ways English and Moldovan speakers wish somebody a happy birthday. A common mistake is to start their wish with the phrase “I congratulate you”, followed by a series of many wishes, which sounds awkward in English.

In order to give an example of authentic speech situation the teacher might consider using other types of inputs, such as, film clips, which would provide an already complex set of interacting influences on learning. For example, a teacher might select passages from well-known pictures where people greet each other (greeting an old friend, a stranger, an official), introduce themselves (in different situations), express birthday wishes, etc. Thus, the students will be able to observe genuine social interaction on the one hand, and learn specific formulas for specific contexts on the other hand. Alyson Wray believes that: ‘formulaicity may be best seen as a strategy that can be employed at various times to enable a particular stage to be reached’ (Wray 2002: 186). Therefore, film clips would be a means of reinforcement of the conversational formulas, which would enable students to use them for their own communicative needs.

In fact, films should be regarded as a ‘crucial addition to the teacher’s resources’ (Stempleski & Tomali, 1990: 3). This resource would help enhance not only the students’ communicative competence but also their motivation. In addition, they will be able to make a cross-cultural comparison between the conversational style of their mother tongue and that of the foreign language they are learning and get a better understanding of the conversational procedures in that language.

While selecting the appropriate film clips the teacher should take into consideration the aims of the lesson and the students’ proficiency level. He should use clips from the latest movies (if possible), as this might arouse the students’ interest and motivate them to act out similar communicative situations in class. Watching a video makes the students recall a similar situation

in real-life and learn the linguistic behaviour they will be able to adopt while interacting in a foreign language. Students might also be encouraged to film their own clips.

The video recording of the non-verbal aspects of communication is another important aspect of video clips. It is well-known that body language plays an essential role in communication. Students find it difficult to use their body language in their foreign language interaction because they do not know how to behave. In this case, seeing is reproducing, that is, students must see the native speakers' behaviour in order to reproduce it. To prove the importance of the body language, a teacher may choose two clips of one and the same communicative situation but with different outcomes. For example, he could select two clips of two people meeting each other for the first time, only in the first case they introduce one another in a familiar manner, while in the second, one of them refuses to get acquainted. The teacher could turn the sound off and ask the students which communicative event was successful and which failed.

The editing of the chosen material can be done with the help of the program "Windows Movie Maker" or "DVDVideoSoft Free Studio". Actually, this is the most difficult part of all. It takes a lot of time to find the appropriate fragment that will suit the needs of the class. Sometimes, it is good to have more than one short fragment to show different samples of interaction (for example, a teacher may consider selecting different introductions in three or four films). Thus, the process of editing is tiresome but it is worth doing it. Those few minutes of carefully selected clips can be more productive than a lesson's lecture on the peculiarities of communication in a foreign language.

In conclusion, the use of video clips at the lesson of English as an additional teaching aid could enhance students' communicative competence. It is an opportunity not only to listen to genuine conversation in a particular context but also to see it. This would help students adopt the specific communicative behavior in a social interaction in the foreign language they are learning.

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