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Online interactive courseware: using movies to promote cultural understanding in a CALL environment

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Abstract

Student interest in films as a medium for ESL education is high. Interest, however, is not enough to foster understanding in a traditional classroom environment. A more hands-on interactive approach to studying a second language via film is needed. By using online interactive exercises to study the language and culture in film, students are able to gain a better understanding of the language used in the film. This paper outlines a course that was developed using online interactive exercises and film to study language and culture. The course incorporates several modern technologies to allow students to take an active role in their learning and to increase their skills in areas that the students perceive to be of value in the future, namely listening, reading, and presentation skills. Automated feedback functions let the students, as well as the instructors, constantly monitor their progress. These technologies allow a more efficient use of classroom time and permit the students to go into the content of the film – especially the cultural aspects – much more deeply. Through this course, students are able to boost their confidence and their motivation to continue the study of language and culture via films on their own

1 Why online film studies?

Film has long been a staple in the classroom diet of EFL teachers (Lottmann, 1961). For nearly half a century, teachers have found that "film in general and video programs in particular represent an inexpensive, as well as a versatile, pedagogical tool" (Salaberry, 2001:41). In Japan, a country that imports Hollywood films and their ideologies at a dizzying rate, the desire to be able to understand these films without sub-titles can be evidenced by a casual poll in any EFL classroom. However, as Ryan (1998) notes about the use of films in the Japanese classroom, "the original intent is both worthy and genuine, but when limited linguistic competence is faced with a dense input of L2 materials, boredom is often the result." Thus, the challenge of giving the students the content that

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they want – knowing full well that the level is beyond them – in a manner that they can readily digest.

Provided with self-paced interactive exercises, with the video controls in their own hands, students feel one step removed from the traditional authority-based, transmission mode of learning and one step closer to a learner-centered mode highlighted by the active exploration of knowledge – an approach that students tend to prefer (Littlewood, 2001). With an active role in their learning process spurring them on, students are less likely to experience the boredom or lack of motivation in the classroom that can be associated with the traditional use of films (Ryan, 1998).

While some institutions have lagged in incorporating the latest technology, leaving teachers scrambling to find ways to bring technology into the classroom individually (Netsu, 1998), the school where this project took place was the opposite. When moving to a new campus, the administration opted to ride the wave of technology in education sweeping Japan (Holmes, 1998) and install state-of-the-art CALL facilities rather than traditional analog language labs. Unfortunately, the curriculum and the instructional staff were ill-prepared to use these CALL labs to their fullest. Courses in these labs used either the computer facilities for internet and CD-ROM-based instruction or the Audio/Video (A/V) facilities for listening and video-based instruction. The goal of this project was to produce CALL applications that would complement and facilitate the understanding of the A/V materials used for teaching language and culture – thus taking full advantage of the CALL lab facilities.

2 The materials

2.1 Selection

As this project was designed for students majoring in comparative culture, great care was taken to select materials on the basis not only of language, but also cultural-historical value. For this course, an ideal film portrays a real-life situation (either factual or fictional), contains language that is neither offensive nor overly difficult, has cultural and historical value, is teachable, and is entertaining. In an era when Hollywood sex and violence reign supreme, finding a suitable film is no small task.

A good candidate for a culture class is the movie *Forrest Gump*. It is realistic in the sense that all of the historical events actually happened and the language is simple yet real, with limited specialized slang or dialects. The real events depicted have significant historical value and thus students can learn a bit of American cultural history as well. Additionally, it was a very popular movie that sparked its own language of 'Gumpisms'. Other films that have been successfully used include *The Cider House Rules* and *A River Runs Through It*.

Selection of scenes appropriate for students is important for the understanding of the cultural points and storyline of the movie (Tatsuki, 2000). An appropriate scene is a simple short dialogue (no more than three speakers and under ten minutes) or narration with high cultural content and language and concepts that are accessible and understandable to the students. Leading and trailing portions that are silent or contain just a music track are edited out in the video capture process. In *Forrest Gump*, scenes were selected to present as much of the story as possible in a limited number of exercises, while pre-

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serving culturally and historically significant aspects of the movie.

When choosing scenes, it is important to consider the copyrights of the original work. The Consortium for Educational Technology for University Systems (CETUS), on their website (http://www.cetus.org/fairindex.html) covering the use of copyrighted materials for educational purposes under the Fair Use Act, explains that educators must weigh four factors when using copyrighted works: (1) the purpose and character of the use; (2) the nature of the copyrighted work; (3) the amount used; and (4) the effect upon the potential market. Considering each of these four factors, we believe our use of short, digitized clips in this project to fall under the Fair Use Act.

2.2 Preparation

2.2.1 Transcripts

In putting an exercise together, the first task is getting an accurate transcription of the language spoken. One could simply listen and transcribe the language, but there are more efficient methods. Some transcripts and even scripts are downloadable via the Web, the largest selection being available at Drew's Script-o-Rama (http://www.script-o-rama.com). Alternately, scripts can be extracted from a VHS tape via a computer video card such as the ATI VR series. The ATI video card has the ability to capture the Closed Captions (CC) that are embedded in nearly all commercial movies available on video cassette. Often the CC version leaves out unnecessary words so a careful check is needed, but this is still much easier than transcribing by hand. One advantage of using the scripts from Drew's Script-o-Rama is that speakers are identified, which can help the students follow the dialogue more easily.

2.2.2 Video capture

Canning-Wilson (2000) claims that "...language found in videos could help non-native speakers understand stress patterns. Videos allow the learner to see body rhythm and speech rhythm in second language discourse..." It was imperative that the quality of the digitized clip did not interfere with these positive aspects of film media. Therefore, quality took precedence over file size when digitizing the clips. After extensive testing of WindowsMedia, RealVideo, and QuickTime, QuickTime consistently delivered the best combination of picture and sound quality for a given file size. As an added benefit, the QuickTime format is cross-platform, has easy-to-manipulate intuitive controls, and is easily embedded directly into a web page, allowing for simple one-page exercises. Clips were imported from an S-VHS player via an ATI VR card, resulting in a slight loss of quality when compared to importing digital video (Godwin-Jones, 1998). Clips imported at 24 frames per second (fps) at the highest quality using Sorenson video for post-compression at 30fps did, however, produce a QuickTime video of quite impressive quality.

2.2.3 File distribution

The exercises needed to be accessible on campus both in the CALL lab and at other computer workstations, as well as from the students' homes. Therefore, a method of

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delivery that would cover all three locations was preferred. Ultimately, four methods of delivery were chosen. Local Area Network (LAN) distribution, the current method of choice for courseware applications, was found to be worthy of its build-up (Gaton, 1998). On campus, movie files loaded quickly, and serving them from a central location made file modification and maintenance effortless. Off campus, however, access was restricted due to the campus firewall. As a result, alternative methods of distribution were developed. An in-class poll concerning off-campus access to exercises found that students fell into one of three categories: (1) those who would like to view high-quality videos using a CD-ROM; (2) those who would rather not use a CD-ROM and access the campus server instead; and (3) those who would like to be able listen to the exercises on their train journeys to school. As a result, the following methods of file distribution were added to the movie files on the campus LAN system: (1) hybrid CD-ROMs were made that could hold huge high-quality video clips, and access the campus web server (LeLoup & Ponterio, 1998, Burton, 1998); (2) audio-only clips, later to be converted to QuickTime slide show clips, were placed on the campus web server; and (3) cassette tapes were distributed to those students who printed out the exercises and worked on them on the train before completing the exercises on campus.

Video streaming technology, with its appealing low bandwidth requirements (Chen, 1990; Godwin-Jones, 1997), was also tested but rejected due to: (1) the low quality of both the audio and video when compressed to the levels that would make streaming feasible; (2) the lack of immediate response when 'rewinding' the clip to listen to a word or phrase again; and (3) students would be required to be connected for long periods of time, resulting in unacceptably high telephone charges.

2.3 The exercises

Hot Potatoes, the now ubiquitous online exercise application produced by Half-Baked Software from the University of Victoria B.C. Canada, played a key role in the production of the exercises. The Hot Potatoes suite consists of six exercise formats. For these exercises mainly JCloze, the cloze test generator, and JBC, the multiple-choice exercise program, were used. With its intuitive interface, Hot Potatoes allows for rapid development of exercises.

After creating the exercises with Hot Potatoes, we then added a bit of JavaScript code to help track student progress. When students check their score, a JavaScript handler checks to see if the score has matched or exceeded a preset minimal acceptable score (70% for most of our exercises). If so, a button is presented to the student in the score-reporting window. If the exercise is multi-part, the button will take the student to the next task. Otherwise, the button submits a form that contains a token composed of the exercise number, the User ID, and the score to the database. The instructor can then access the scores of his students via a web-based administrative page, as shown in Figure 1.

After all of the code was thoroughly tested, we added it to the code template for Hot Potatoes. For each exercise made, the code is added automatically by the program, eliminating the need to cut and paste it into each exercise. Although JavaScript has many advantages (browser-based, small file size, relatively gentle learning curve) for use in academic exercises, one significant drawback is that all of the code is exposed. By put-

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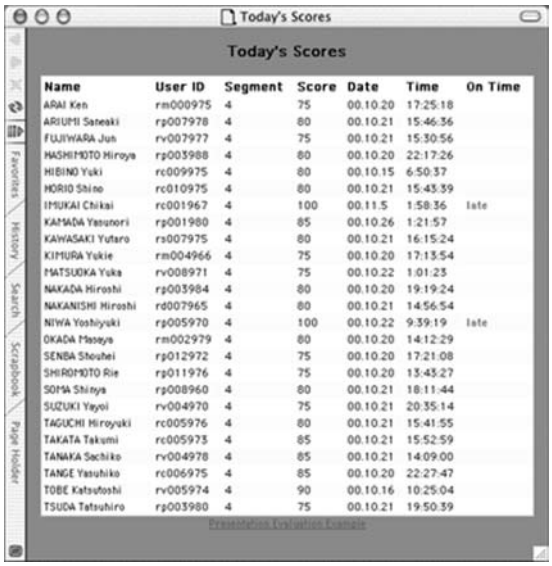


Fig. 1. Student scores for exercise 4

ting the entire code into a '.js' file, the code can be kept hidden from casual users who stumble across the 'view source' menu in their browser.

As Chen (1999) points out, when students are presented with digitalized video clips, they are quick to take advantage of the 'rewinding' capabilities to listen to the same portion over and over again. If the media file is not embedded in the web page, they must constantly switch back and forth between the exercise window and the media window – certainly not an elegant solution. Video clips are best viewed in a non-resizeable frame directly beside the exercise, as shown in Figure 2. This allows students to concentrate



Fig. 2. Online film studies exercise with QuickTime video.

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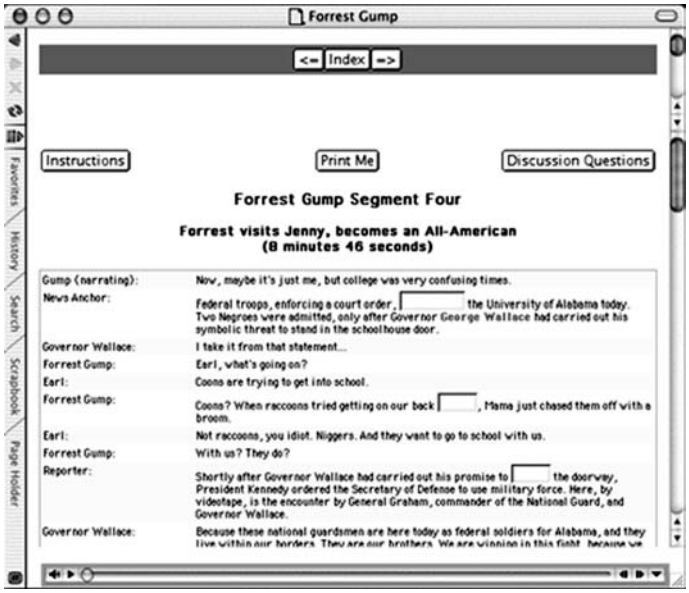


Fig. 3. Online film studies exercise with QuickTime audio.

more on the task and reduces superfluous movement of both eye and mouse, thus enhancing their user experience and acceptance of the media (Plass, 1998). For the audio clips, creating a non-resizeable frame directly below the exercise and embedding the clip at nearly the same width as the window allows for a longer slider bar and thus more precise control when 'rewinding' to listen to a section again, as shown in Figure 3.

3 The course

The course was a third year elective course, following two years of required English, that met once a week for 90 minutes during the 13-week semester. The number of students in each class ranged from 20 to 35 and their L2 competence varied from pre-intermediate to advanced, with a few students having experience of living abroad. As the goal of the course was a high-tech combination of CALL and A/V facilities, an entirely paperless approach was chosen, all materials being distributed and collected electronically.

3.1 Pre-instruction activities

The role of the online exercises in the course was to prepare students for the in-class discussions of the film content and to give the lower level students the confidence to express their opinions, having gained an understanding of the material. Students were assigned one segment each week to do as homework. Students logged into the course homepage to select their exercise. As the exercises were all browser-based, once the page loaded, students could then disconnect from the internet to perform the exercises, reconnecting when they were ready to report their score to the database. When selecting

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their exercises, students could choose their preferred method of delivery: LAN-based (on campus), CD-ROM (home), audio with still pictures (home), or no media at all (for those using cassettes).

Students listened to the clip and then filled in the cloze blanks, checking their answers as they went along. Any incorrect answers were blanked out. Although Hot Potatoes does have a 'hint' function which will add one letter at a time to the answer, it was disabled for these exercises. While students were performing the exercises, they were asked to pay particular attention to keywords color-coded in red. These words were chosen for their importance to the understanding of the segment or for their cultural significance. Additionally, words color-coded in green were concepts or people that would be the topic of in-class presentations. After finishing the exercise, students were then to preview the in-class discussion questions included in each exercise, as shown in Figure 4.

3.2 In-class activities

3.2.1 Discussions

At the beginning of each class, the segment was played using traditional A/V equipment, either a VCR or a DVD. This was followed by a short question and answer period, allowing the students to check the vocabulary that they were unable to catch in the homework exercise. Although some students performed the exercise as we discussed the segment, the database was set up to denote a 'late' for any student who submitted their score after the first class had begun, as shown in Figure 1. After the questions period, the instructor would lead a short discussion of the segment, covering the language, the storyline, and the cultural aspects. This then led directly to the in-class discussion questions the students had previewed on their homework exercises. If the students had any questions related to vocabulary, they were encouraged to ask the instructor or seek the



Fig. 4. In-class discussion questions.

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information from one of the online dictionary sites. Once the students had discussed the questions in pairs or small groups, the instructor would then wrap up the discussions with a few thoughts.

3.2.2 Presentations

Students were assigned presentations on concepts or people of cultural or historical significance found in the film; those from *Forrest Gump* include: The Ku Klux Klan, John F. Kennedy, George Wallace, Black Panthers, beatniks, and the space shuttle. They were to find four to five sites pertinent to the topic, consolidate and edit the information, and present the sites to the class. They were asked to submit the URLs of the sites they planned to use to their instructors a minimum of 48 hours before class. This served two purposes: (1) It ensured that students were on the right track with their searches; and (2) It allowed the instructor to preload the URLs in the instructor's browser the day of the presentation, thus avoiding the slow load times that can bring an internet-based CALL class to a standstill (Kluge, 1997). As Gitsaki & Taylor (1999) also found, students are attracted to glitzy multimedia-enhanced websites and were, therefore, very enthusiastic about showing the sites that they found to other

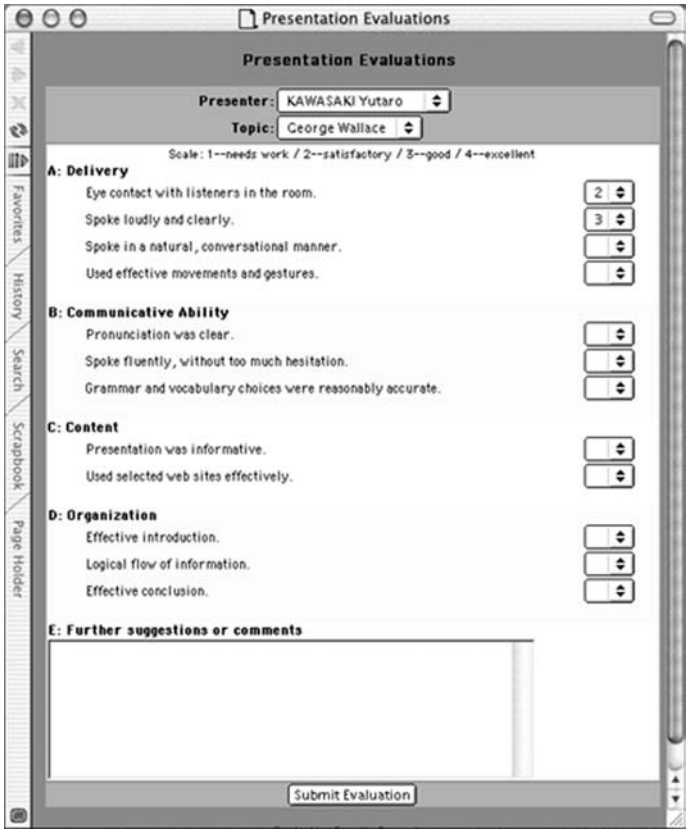


Fig. 5. Audience version of the presentation evaluation form.

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students. Because of this heavy multimedia content, preloading the sites was critical for a smooth presentation.

In order to boost the presenters' paraphrasing skills and to increase the audience's comprehension of the presentation material, presenters were not allowed to read from their notes. They were encouraged to make a detailed outline and to thoroughly rehearse the presentation so that it could be completed in the allotted time of approximately seven minutes. Upon completion of the presentation, the presenter would then field questions from the audience, including the instructor. The instructor would then wrap up the presentation by reviewing the key points. The final step was the online presentation evaluation form, as shown in Figure 5. The audience, including the instructor, was given a few minutes to fill out this form to provide feedback to the presenter, while still fresh in the mind. After the forms had been filled out, they were then sent to the database, along with a score from the instructor. The presenter could then access his or her record and view the results, as shown in Figure 6, which included the score, the instructor's evaluation and comments, and the average of the student evaluations along with each student's individual comments. Additionally, the instructor was able to access the database and view the evaluation that each member of the audience submitted.

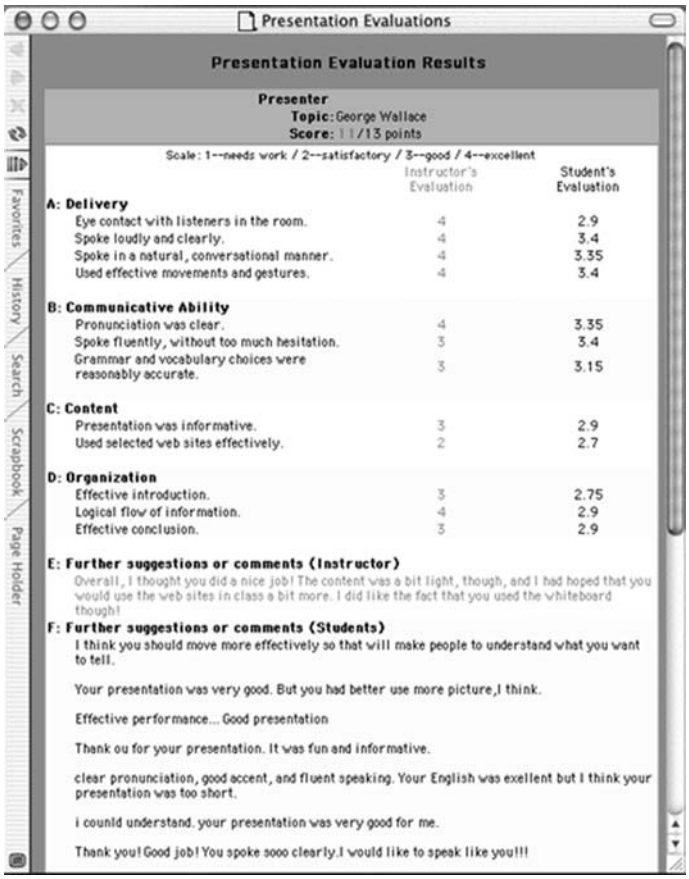


Fig. 6. Presenter version of the presentation evaluation form.

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3.2.3 Quizzes

During the course of the semester, several short quizzes, based on keywords and content from previous exercises and presentations, were administered online. The instructor would show the students the questions on their monitors and they would enter their answers into an online form to be submitted to the database. The instructor would then access these answers after class and mark them, providing comments where necessary. Since students were able to access their results at any time, no time was wasted in class going over the results of each quiz.

3.2.4 Previewing the next segment

The final activity for each class was previewing the next segment of the film. As Canning-Wilson (2000) points out, viewing the video can be a tremendous aid to grasping the gist of the storyline. For those students who chose to perform audio-only homework exercises, this previewing activity was crucial for their understanding of the segment. The instructor would also give pointers to guide them through any anticipated rough spots related to vocabulary or content. Finally, the presenters for the following week were assigned and then coached in the most efficient search methods for the topic.

3.3 Student reaction

The students' reactions to the materials and the design of the course were as expected: very enthusiastic. As others who have used the internet for language teaching have found (Gitsaki & Taylor, 1999), students are motivated to do their tasks and feel a sense of accomplishment upon completing the task. Due to the interactiveness of the exercises, the students were able to test their understanding and build their confidence before coming to class. This then allowed students to spend their classroom time in rich discussions about the content of the movie, rather than confirming their understanding of the language. They were able to improve their listening skills, reading skills (particularly skimming and scanning), presentation skills, and internet skills. Additionally, with the help of films, the students were able to learn about multiple aspects of the target culture. As learners' knowledge of the target culture and their skills within that culture increase, so does their linguistic competence (Dlaska, 2000). For many, it was the first time that they had viewed an English movie without subtitles, and the experience – as evidenced by the large increase in the number of English-only videos checked out of the language library – gave them the confidence to view others.

4 Conclusion

Although there are potential problems in a class such as this, including technical issues with hardware and software, the biggest problems we faced were related to bandwidth. However, producing multiple methods of distribution for the video clips and preloading the presentation sites into the instructor's browser can minimize the problems. As we enter further into the broadband age, these problems should fall by the wayside.

Using this class as a template the authors have successfully adapted the materials to

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suit other classes. Related methods and materials have also been used successfully with other movies and with CNN Newsroom videos in a current issues class. Video segments and exercises can be made or changed quickly each semester, once the code template in Hot Potatoes has been modified to suit the user's needs.

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