

**Advanced EFL Concepts: Teaching Double Entendre and
Euphemism Through Film**
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Of all the aspects of what we call "skill-specific" EFL instruction, listening comprehension is arguably the most needed yet most difficult to teach. EFL instructors have written at length regarding the relative value of everything from hours in the language lab to jazz chants, dictation to group story telling; however, it has been my experience that, short of immersing students in a culture and forcing them to survive, the best way to teach listening comprehension is by combining it with interactive, spontaneous conversation within the context of a film.

We are all aware of the controversy regarding the validity of teaching listening comprehension, or anything else for that matter, through film. And I agree that there is little or no educational value in putting on a video of an English language film with subtitles and having students watch it straight through; however, I strongly disagree with the notion that there is no place for video in the EFL classroom.

Over the last three years I have experienced remarkable success teaching listening comprehension combined with spontaneous speaking skills through the use of video to a wide range of university-aged students. The more than five hundred Japanese students with whom I have worked regularly with video for one academic year include three Junior College, eight Freshman English Level 5, and four Freshman English Level 1 classes at Asia University, four beginning classes at the Red Cross College in Musashi Sakai, and two beginning and two advanced classes at Musashino Art University.

Teaching effectively with film is demanding and time consuming, but the rewards are appreciable, particularly to students--who are quick to point out how it has helped their listening and spontaneous speaking abilities. After two years of receiving positive feedback from students and instructors alike, this last year I decided to incorporate more advanced aspects of language acquisition. I decided to teach double entendre and euphemism because there were ample opportunities in the films I taught. For example, in a film I have come to like to teach, *Big*, which I shall discuss at some length shortly, two pivotal and hilarious scenes are unintelligible without an understanding of double entendre and euphemism respectively. Of course, I do not teach double entendre and euphemism to the exclusion of all else, nor do I focus on these other except when an opportunity presents itself within the context of a film.

Word play is common to all languages and is often a fine reflection of a culture's idea of humor. Considering that there are essentially only two forms of humor, visual and lingual, opportunities to further an understanding of double entendre and euphemism abound in film. Both are used frequently in Japanese, so the concepts certainly aren't foreign for our students; I merely introduced these ideas within an accessible context and helped students achieve a rudimentary recognition of them in English. Interestingly, once students were introduced to these concepts, they not only remembered them but looked for them in other films.

To put this in perspective for native speakers of English, a classic example of unrealized contextual word play

is the myriad use of the word "handi"(handy) in "The Miller's Tale" from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Although required reading in most high school and university English curriculums, it was not until someone took the time to enlighten us that most of us realized the full range of punning, double entendre, and euphemism Chaucer employed, and it was not until that time that a fuller, richer understanding of the work could be derived. To a lesser degree, of course, how can we justify not attempting to share the same richness of English with our students?

With these ideas in mind, what follows is the general methodology I subscribe to in teaching listening comprehension and spontaneous speaking skills through the use of film/video. An understanding of these ideas is critical to the success of subsequent attempts to teach the more sophisticated ideas of double entendre and euphemism.

General Methodology

I find that when teaching listening comprehension and spontaneous speaking skills through video, there are a number of things to consider. The key factors are knowing your students, being patient, and tailoring your questions to the abilities of each student.

Something I recommend EFL teachers do before subjecting their Japanese students to instruction with an English language film is to experience it for themselves. Many universities in the United States and elsewhere require a minimum of three years of accumulated study of a foreign language at the university level before becoming eligible to earn an advanced degree. Find someone who is a native speaker

of the language you studied and ask him/her to watch an unsubtitled film in that language with you; ask him/her to fire questions at you at random in his/her native language regarding anything from the action of the film to set design, character motivation to scripting, or plot summary to prediction. You will quickly get a grasp of the pressure, frustration, and potential embarrassment inherent in teaching with video; more importantly, it will help you learn to be patient with your students.

Considering Japanese students' reticence, talking about film is something that an instructor must prepare extensively for, work up to gradually, and employ rarely. It has become my general habit over the last three years to use one film selection per semester, for I have learned that in order to explore a film thoroughly and solicit sufficient student response to ensure comprehension, I must dedicate seven to ten forty-five minute class sessions to each film, depending on the film. I also use the promise of viewing a film as bribery to motivate my students during the mid-semester blahs. Incidentally, mid-semester is an appropriate time to teach with video, particularly during the Spring semester, because by that time you have helped your students garner a modicum of confidence with English, you have learned your students' names, and they have become accustomed to being addressed directly by their instructor, which is something many of our students have not experienced before entering our classrooms.

I have successfully taught a wide variety of films. The most important considerations in choosing a film to show to an EFL class are that the subject matter is in an accessible

format relevant to other course work, and that the scenes are not so long that students are easily lost. The repertoire of films I choose from, which is entirely dependent upon my judgement of student ability, interest, and personality, include *Big*, *Stand By Me*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *On Golden Pond*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?*, *The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre*, *The Doctor*, *A River Runs Through It*, *The Old Man and The Sea*, and *Some Like It Hot*.

Before showing a film in an EFL class, clearly define the goals of the exercise. Explain that you understand the difficulty of the exercise and will accept "I don't know" or "I didn't understand that scene" as viable responses. Establish general parameters for the length of time students have to respond. Usually you can tell if a student is trying to formulate an answer, doesn't know, or simply doesn't feel like participating in that class session, and you should adjust response time accordingly.

I recommend that either you use a film without subtitles or that you cover the subtitles with paper. The purpose of the exercise is to improve your students' English listening and impromptu speaking skills, not their Japanese reading skills. Further, it is surprising how often subtitles are inaccurate, if not completely misleading, and serve only to provide an indication that your students are reading and not listening. If your students do not understand a scene, show it to them again and again as you ask leading questions until the visual cueing and context of the scene provide the clues necessary for them to deduce meaning. As a way to avoid doing your students' work for them, encourage guessing at all times.

When you begin showing a film, you must reconcile yourself to being extraordinarily patient. Teaching with video is difficult for students because the flow of the film is constantly being interrupted, they are being bombarded with questions they cannot prepare for, and speaking spontaneously in a foreign language is difficult, especially when they are being asked questions about something they are probably still in the process of digesting when questioned. Consequently, new vocabulary and slang expressions should be introduced in the context of the film as they arise, not previewed, and then reinforced as further examples present themselves.

Compared to a routine class, student response time to questions goes up dramatically, but a long pause before answering by no means indicates that the student being addressed does not know the answer. More frequently, it indicates that he/she is trying his/her level best to formulate an answer. Be patient and give students time to digest, formulate and respond: this is of particular importance when you consider that often times you may well be suffering through the tedium of showing the same approximate footage of film as many as four times in one day, and different students, and sometimes different classes, have different perceptions of the same material.

The most important aspect of teaching with film is the way you tailor your questions to the abilities of each student. This becomes of critical importance when you consider the range of abilities within each class, which is then compounded by the simple fact that each student has differing strengths and weaknesses with their English language

skills. The questions you should ask range from simple yes/no or vocabulary responses for your weaker students to help them gain confidence to thought-provoking, demanding questions to challenge your stronger students. As the film progresses and student confidence grows, ask more, and more challenging questions.

Start slowly in order to acclimate your students to this way of teaching and learning. Ask leading questions suited to individual students based upon your judgement of their abilities and willingness to respond. As much as possible, incorporate new vocabulary into the questions you ask. Simple examples of this technique might be the following:

- Who are the characters in this scene?
- When/where do you think this film takes place?
- How would you describe (a character)?
- What happened in this scene?
- How does his/her action effect the story?
- What are (they) talking about?
- Do you agree with what (student) said? Why/why not?
- What do you think will happen next? Why?

Although the questions listed above are mainly of the who-what-where-why-how variety, they are effective at drawing out students and often lead to the exploration of more interesting and demanding topics.

It has been my experience that progress through a film is slow initially but accelerates rapidly as students come to grips with what is expected of them--and then actually start to enjoy it. Any time students start to explore an idea, let the conversation go where it will, doing little more than soliciting other students' ideas. I believe that what students talk about is not nearly as important as the fact that they are speaking in English. I end each class by asking

various students to make predictions about what they will see during the next class and then to support their opinions.

Typically, I begin each class session by having students present a brief, chronological summary of what happened the day before in a movie. I employ leading questions to provoke a discussion of the major issues being explored in the film, for within that framework vocabulary becomes secondary to the expression of ideas, and often students use new vocabulary without realizing they've incorporated it into their speech pattern.

I usually contrive to watch the end of a film early in a class period. This provides myriad opportunities for cloze exercises on anything from plot twists to character interaction. I then assign students the task of making up five questions each about the movie for homework. The next day, to review for a test on the film, student peer-groups pool their questions and ask other groups questions. I play referee and keep track of the score, and the group with the highest number of points can leave ten minutes early. A pattern emerged to the questions students asked each other: they ask about things they themselves are not sure of, which is a devious but effective way of learning.

When it works, and once in a while it simply doesn't, there is something Japanese students find wonderfully nonthreatening about sitting in a darkened room and watching and discussing a film. As they become more absorbed in the film, they gradually overcome their fear of embarrassing themselves before their peers by making a mistake. Often, students are working so hard to digest what they have just

seen and heard, and then to formulate an answer, that they are simply too distracted to fear such embarrassment.

Teaching Double-Entendre and Euphemism

Briefly, *double entendre* is 1) "a word or expression used so that it can be understood in two ways, especially when one meaning is risqué, or 2) a double meaning; ambiguity" (Random House, 1992, p.401); and *euphemism* is "the substitution of a mild, indirect, or vague expression for one thought to be offensive, harsh or blunt" (Random House, 1992, p. 460). As such, double entendre and euphemism are contextually dependent concepts that simply must be taught within a larger framework in order to provide referents for the multiplicity of meanings; that is to say, out of context double entendre and euphemism cease to have either meaning or impact. Consequently, an ideal medium for teaching double entendre and euphemism to EFL students is film: it provides the context necessary for meaning and offers various visual clues to help students recognize double entendre and euphemism in action.

Double entendre and euphemism abound in comedies, but for the sake of brevity I shall refer to the movie *Big* for my examples and explanations. Briefly, the plot of the film is as follows:

A twelve year old boy named Josh has a crush on an older, and taller, classmate, Cynthia. At a carnival passing through their town, a combination of events leads Josh to embarrassing himself before Cynthia, and he wanders despondently about until he comes upon an old fashioned, somewhat sinister, arcade game, named Zoltar. Mistakenly placing the blame for his embarrassment on his short stature, Josh wishes to be big, and the next morning he awakens to find that he now has the body of a thirty-year-old man. Thus begins an entertaining, insightful and thoughtful romantic comedy entailing Josh's trials and tribulations as a boy trapped in a man's body and

his subsequent forays into New York, the working world, office politics, romance, sex, friendship and responsibility as he searches for the Zoltar machine which can again make him a child (Karn, 1994, p. 14).

As one might well imagine, the humor of the film revolves around Josh being a child in a man's body and the constant miscommunications and misunderstandings that result. Thanks to Josh's age and naive character, motivations and conflicts are readily accessible to students.

Although there are myriad opportunities to teach double entendre in the movie *Big*, perhaps the clearest example occurs midway through the film where one double entendre plays off another: the first intentional, the second unintentional. To set the scene, Josh, in the course of a week, has gone from a computer data entry clerk in a toy company to the Vice President in charge of Product Development based solely on his adolescent's knowledge of toys. With his newfound success and wealth, he has furnished a penthouse apartment exclusively with boyish accouterments, including innumerable toys, a pinball machine, a trampoline, and a bunkbed. Because he was uncomfortable with both the food and the company at a corporate party, where he was both envied and reviled as the rising star, Josh leaves with Susan, an executive who has a history of sleeping with men who can help advance her career. As they drive around New York in Susan's limosine, Josh eats junkfood and plays with the gadgets in the car while Susan makes an intial, obliquely amorous overture that Josh misses:

(Josh glances out the rear window of the limosine.)

Josh: "That was my apartment."

Susan: "Really? I'd love to see where you live."

(The limosine drops them off.)

Susan: "Have you always lived alone?"

(Josh acts childishly evasive as he opens the doors of the freight elevator.)
Josh: "No, not always."
Susan: "Oh, is it just recently, or"
Josh: "Yeah."
Susan: "Give yourself a couple days. It'll pass."
Josh: "They said it was going to take six weeks."
(Josh closes the doors and they ride up.)
Susan: "Well, it can be painful but... that's what they invented Xanax for, right?"
(Susan laughs hollowly because Josh doesn't get the joke; Josh opens the elevator doors.)
Josh: "Watch your step."
Susan: "Thank you."
(Josh goes to the door and fishes inside his dress shirt for the housekey he keeps on a string around his neck.)
Susan: (coyly) "I'm not sure we should do this yet."
Josh: "Do what?"
Susan: "Well, I mean... I like you, and I want to spend the night with you...."
Josh: "Do you mean sleep over?"
Susan: (somewhat surprised) "Well... yeah."
Josh: (considers this briefly) "Okay, but I get to be on top."
(Josh then opens the door and leaves a dumbfounded Susan standing in the hall.) [Ross & Spielberg, 1985, 55:05-56:20]

Students universally miss Susan's double entendre "spend the night with you," meaning she wishes to make love with Josh, and his unintentional double entendre, "Okay, but I get to be on top," which refers to the sleeping arrangements provided by his bunkbed. Through repeated viewing and directing questions to the students regarding both characters' facial expressions and body language, students realize that there has been a gross misunderstanding in the scene. Students soon grasp that Susan is being coy, but not why; it is not until they understand that by Josh referring to his bunkbed he has surprised Susan that they get an inkling that Susan has sex in mind.

Once students associate Susan's desire with Josh's innocent reference to his bunkbed, the humor becomes obvious. At this point, I replay the entire scene yet again so students can watch the entire exchange in its sexual context. Then I

briefly explain what double entendre involves and how word play is a natural part of humor in all languages, trying to spark a conversation about the use of double entendre in Japanese. Regardless of the success of the attempt to discuss sexual references in the Japanese language, I suggest that they watch for other examples in the film, and we move on. Pointing out the risqué aspect is enough initially, for each subsequent time students do not understand a scene, they consider double entendre as a possible explanation for their ignorance, and frequently they are correct.

Approximately twenty minutes later in the film an excellent example of euphemism occurs, but try as students might, double entendre does not explain why they do not understand what has transpired. Again to set the scene, Josh and Susan are now lovers who are working together at Susan's apartment on a project to develop a new toy for their company, Josh providing the ideas and Susan the marketing analysis and research:

(Josh is leaning against a column, holding a comic book as he explains his idea for a new toy.)

Josh: "...You see, it won't, it won't be like these where you just follow the story along..."

(Josh puts down the comic book and picks up a drawing on a legal pad.)

Josh: "...You would actually make a whole different story appear just by pressing these buttons."

Susan: "An electronic comic book? That's amazing."

Josh: (getting excited) "Yeah, yeah, like a living comic book. It's, it's gonna be different every time."

Susan: "This is incredible. You're brilliant, you know that?"

Josh: "If you like one you could see it, you know, over and over and over again."

Susan: "You're, you're wonderful."

Josh: "Do you really like it?"

(Susan nods)

Josh: "Really?"

Susan: "Really."

(Josh hugs Susan and gives her a kiss on the cheek.)

Josh: "Do you think Mac will like it?"

Susan: "Oh, I think he'll love it."

(Josh gets another pencil from his open briefcase.)

Josh: "You know what we could do...we could do, like, sports comic books where, like, if you're gonna, like, steal second or something like that...."

(Susan glances about seeming vulnerable and then sips her wine as if to brace herself.)

Josh: "...We could have sports books...baseball, football... really it would work for almost any sport there is...hockey."

Susan: "Wha-what, what is it we're doing?"

(Josh looks up, clearly not knowing that she's changed the subject of the conversation.)

Josh: "Huh?"

Susan: "What-what-what's going on here?"

Josh: "You know...we're...."

(Josh waves comic book in the air by way of explanation; Susan looks more vulnerable and shy.)

Josh: "Something wrong?"

(Susan looks away and then back at Josh.)

Josh: "You don't like it?"

Susan: "No-no...it's...I mean, if it's an affair, that's one thing."

(Josh blinks rapidly as if he's trying to understand her sudden change of subject.)

Susan: "But...if...if it's... it's something else...."

(Josh is clearly confused now.)

Susan: "I mean, not that we have to know right now, we don't. But if we think it could turn into something else...well...."

(Susan looks at Josh, who looks confused but trying hard to understand. She sips her wine for more courage.)

Susan: "How do you feel about all this?"

(Josh clearly hasn't understood a word Susan has said.)

Josh: (somewhat awkwardly) "How do I feel about what?"

Susan: "Well, how do you-how do you f-feel about me?"

(Josh looks happy and then acts like a child being forced to do something he finds uncomfortable; Susan sips her wine, and Josh uses her looking away to hit her childishly with a rolled up comic book.)

Josh: (laughing embarrassedly) "What's that supposed to mean?"

(Josh hits Susan again and then rests his elbows on the table as if he's answered her question to his satisfaction; in a moment, she hits him back with a comic book, and they laugh and start wrestling on the carpet like children.) [Ross and Spielberg, 1985, 77:19-79:40]

Like Josh, the reason students cannot understand the scene is because Susan, a career woman in the 1980's, uses the euphemism "something else" to refer to the uncomfortable idea of commitment, if not the dreaded "M-word", marriage-- something she has previously avoided. No matter how many times they watch the scene, usually it is impossible for

students to make the connection. So we stop and talk about Susan: her position within the company and as a single woman, her history of lovers who could help her career, her affection for Josh, and her appreciation of his genius with toys. Then we talk about how Josh must seem to Susan: kind, honest, loving, playful, successful, and a genius with toys. By asking the single question, "Do you think Josh would be a good catch for a husband?" you can virtually see the cartoonish symbolia of light bulbs going on in the air over the students' heads throughout the classroom. We watch the scene again, and I instruct students to mentally substitute the word "marriage" every time Susan uses the euphemism "something else," and the students understand perfectly.

I then briefly explain euphemism, pointing out that the reason Josh doesn't understand Susan is simply that, with the exception of the euphemisms forced on children by their parents referring to bodily functions, children generally don't use such linguistic constructions because they are innocently but notoriously direct. As a cloze exercise, I assign more advanced students the task of inventing their own euphemisms to refer to uncomfortable situations. Among the more memorable responses from my students, I have received the euphemisms, "something disagreed with me" for a hangover and "it's a work in progress" for not doing an assignment.

When employing video in an EFL classroom, it is often all too easy to either just explain, gloss over, or completely ignore scenes which seem difficult to teach due to the linguistic complexity involved, such as the case of double entendre or euphemism. This is because we tend to forget that

such constructions are common to all languages; in fact, a hallmark of conversational sophistication in any language is the understanding and use of double entendre and euphemism. Obviously our students understand and use double entendre and euphemism in their native tongue, so if we take the time to point out the commonalities between such disparate languages as English and Japanese, we actually make English more accessible to our students and help instill a better understanding of it.

References

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