

神戸市外国語大学 学術情報リポジトリ

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メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2004-09-30 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: 立木, ドナ, Tatsuki, Donna メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://kobe-cufs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/751

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Constructing a film corpus for pragmatics research: Stage one — an internet poll*

Donna Tatsuki

The use of film in language teaching is a well-established practice (Allen, 1986, Stempleski & Tomalin, 1989; Cooper, Lavery, & Rinvoluceri, 1991; Sherman, 2003). In EFL learning environments the opportunities for authentic language exposure are limited, so films can be a rich source of information about interlocutors and the context of interactions. Many films offer plausible scenes of daily life, and screenplay writers strive to create dialogue that is "clear, and understandable the first time you hear it, yet also create the illusion of real conversation" (Cowgill, 1999, p.262). But how film data compares to naturally occurring language is still an open-ended question. With the exception of Rose (2001) and Tatsuki (1992) there has been virtually no research to assess the validity of film use as an authentic representation of actual language use although recently there have been a growing number of articles recommending the use of film for the teaching and research of pragmatics (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1991; Kumagai, 1993; Rose, 1994; Fernandez-Guerra & Martinez-Flor 2003; Fujioka, 2003).

Tatsuki and Kite (unpublished manuscript) yielded similar results in a replication of Rose's study using the film corpus selected via the internet poll that is being reported upon in this article. Their results

*This article reports on joint research conducted with Charles Kelly (Aichi Institute of Technology), Lawrence Kelly (Aichi Institute of Technology), and Yuriko Kite (Kansai University)

point to the robustness of film as a consistent model of pragmalinguistic behavior. However, like the Rose study, the results of the Tatsuki and Kite investigation indicated that sociolinguistic aspects such as gender distribution and compliment topic diverged significantly from the naturally occurring speech data cited extensively in pragmatics research. Such discrepancies between what the research literature reports as "natural speech" and the sources of speech models that are used as pedagogical material need to be examined and resolved to ensure that teachers are giving their learners reliable examples of interaction.

Yet despite the dearth of such research, teacher resource book authors frequently make their own commonsense recommendations for the selection of suitable films while they promote the use of feature films in language teaching. Just how reliable these recommendations are and whether teachers/learners actually pay them any heed, however, are another matter.

This paper reports on the results of an exploratory internet poll of language teachers and learners as well as the issues considered in preparation for the assembly of a corpus of spoken language from feature films for the purposes of descriptive and pedagogical research. To make final selection decisions about which films to include in a corpus, a variety of sociolinguistic variables, considerations about speech types and genres, issues relating to the pros and cons of representative, convenience and stratified (quota) sampling, not to mention the reliability issues related to excerpt length would all have to be taken into consideration (Meyer, 2002).

The poll itself was conceived as a first step in the assembly of a list to form a film corpus for researching issues of authenticity/ markedness in pragmatics, discourse and grammar as well as for research into patterns of teacher/learner film use. Previous film-based studies of various speech acts such as compliments (Rose, 2001) and apologies (Kumagai, 1993) have depended upon convenience samples or researcher selected films. In such cases, it could be argued that some

of the films chosen were not representative of teacher/student preferences and thus might be of questionable relevance to them. It was therefore deemed important to go directly to educators and learners themselves for some answers.

Method

An Internet-based poll was conducted in the spring of 2002. The Internet TESL Journal (ITESLJ), one of the world's most frequently accessed ELT websites, agreed to place the video poll link on its main page for a one-month period. A total of 302 language teachers and students answered the following questions: What are five favorite movies that you have used for teaching or studying English? Do you use short segments or the entire film? What do you focus on in a film? The respondents also indicated their country and whether they were teachers or students. Teachers were also asked to indicate the grade level with which they used these video materials.

Results

The 302 respondents from 52 countries suggested 1225 film titles for use in language learning. A list of the 50 more frequently selected films was compiled (see Table 1.). Those 50 film titles accounted for 440 or about 36% of all the titles.

If one considers the films on this list in light of Sherman's (2003) comments regarding the characteristics that make films easy or difficult, it seems that teachers and learners do not always select films that will ensure or enhance comprehension.

For instance Sherman cautions against the use of cartoons because "mouths, faces and body language are not as expressive as those of real people" (p. 15). Yet in this top-50 list there were five cartoons (Lion King, Shrek, Beauty and the Beast, Chicken Run, and Wallace and Gromit). Sherman also expresses worry about films with "period

Table 1. Top 50 Films

Rank	Film Titles	Freq
1	Titanic	28
2	Dead Poets' Society	24
3	Sound of Music	21
4	Lion King	17
5	Forrest Gump	15
6	Gone with the Wind	14
7	You've Got Mail, Bean	13
8	Harry Potter	12
9	Ground Hog Day, Matrix, My Fair Lady, Pretty Woman, When Harry Met Sally	11
10	Shrek	10
11	Notting Hill	9
12	Mrs. Doubtfire, Sense and Sensibility, Shakespeare in Love, Sleepless in Seattle, Witness	8
13	As Good as it Gets, Dances with Wolves, Ghost, Raiders of the Lost Ark, The Wizard of Oz	7
14	Back to the Future, Beauty and the Beast, Casablanca, Chicken Run, E.T., Father of the Bride, Four Weddings and a Funeral, Home Alone I, Jane Eyre, My Best Friend's Wedding, Philadelphia, Stand and Deliver, The Truman Show, Wallace and Gromit	6
15	American Beauty, Braveheart, Gladiator, Lord of the Flies, October Sky, Of Mice and Men, Rain Man, Romeo and Juliet (Leonardo Di Caprio version), The Graduate, The Joy Luck Club	5

language, e.g., Shakespeare remains difficult in spite of some wonderful adaptations; however, in film adaptations of classic novels (e.g., Jane Austin and Dickens) careful script writing and clear drama-school enunciation often triumph over archaic language" (p.15). Among the top-50 list there were seven films that use period language (Titanic, Jane Eyre, Gladiator, Braveheart, Sense and Sensibility, Shakespeare in Love, and Romeo and Juliet).

Sherman also states "dialect and regional accents-local color of the film generally mean local confusion in the viewer..." (p. 15). The films that would fall into this category of course may depend upon which standard variety of English is being used in instruction (British, American, Australian, etc.). Nevertheless, from the perspective of a

Canadian speaker of General American English, among the top-50 films listed, eight could be considered to contain substantial amounts of dialectal variation or regional accents (Harry Potter, My Fair Lady, Gone with the Wind, Notting Hill, Four Weddings and a Funeral, Forrest Gump, Of Mice and Men, The Joy Luck Club).

Sherman also cautions that films with "a high degree of naturalism in the speech, e.g., everyone talking at once, mumbling asides, actors with their backs to the camera, inconsequential dialogue" hinder comprehension but it may also be argued that learners especially need to be exposed to exactly such realistically difficult-to-comprehend scenes in order to build coping strategies that they can transfer to real situations. Thus, according to Sherman's recommendations, nearly half of the films on the teacher selected top-50 list would be considered difficult to comprehend.

On the other hand, according to Sherman, features of films that help comprehension include: "unambiguous action...clear conventional story lines...straightforward love stories aimed at adolescents (18 films: Raiders of the Lost Ark, Sound of Music, You've Got Mail, Bean, Ground Hog Day, My Fair Lady, Pretty Woman, When Harry Met Sally, Notting Hill, Mrs. Doubtfire, Sleepless in Seattle, Witness, As Good as it Gets, Ghost, Father of the Bride, Home Alone, My Best Friend's Wedding) as well as "science fiction dramas...with simple plot lines" (two films: E.T., Matrix) and films with "stylized acting...like plays—only one character speaks at a time, always clearly and always on camera (two films: Casablanca, Gone with the Wind). Figure 1 shows the distribution of genre types among the 1225 film titles. Drama, comedy and romance were by far the most popular choices accounting for more than half of the films and that quite neatly corresponds to Sherman's recommendations.

When asked about the lengths of film segments they preferred to use, of the 302 poll respondents, 290 indicated some preferences for use of either segments or entire films (see Figure 2). There does not seem to be any strong tendency either towards the use of short segments or

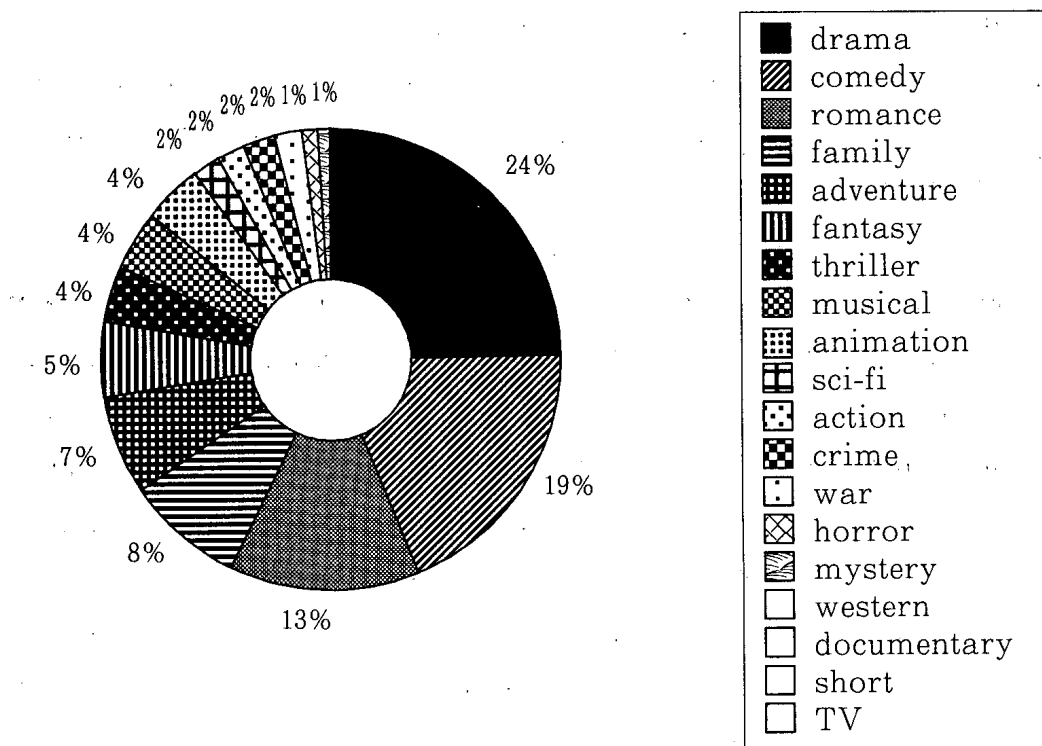


Figure 1. Teacher/Learner Film Choice by Genre (percentages)

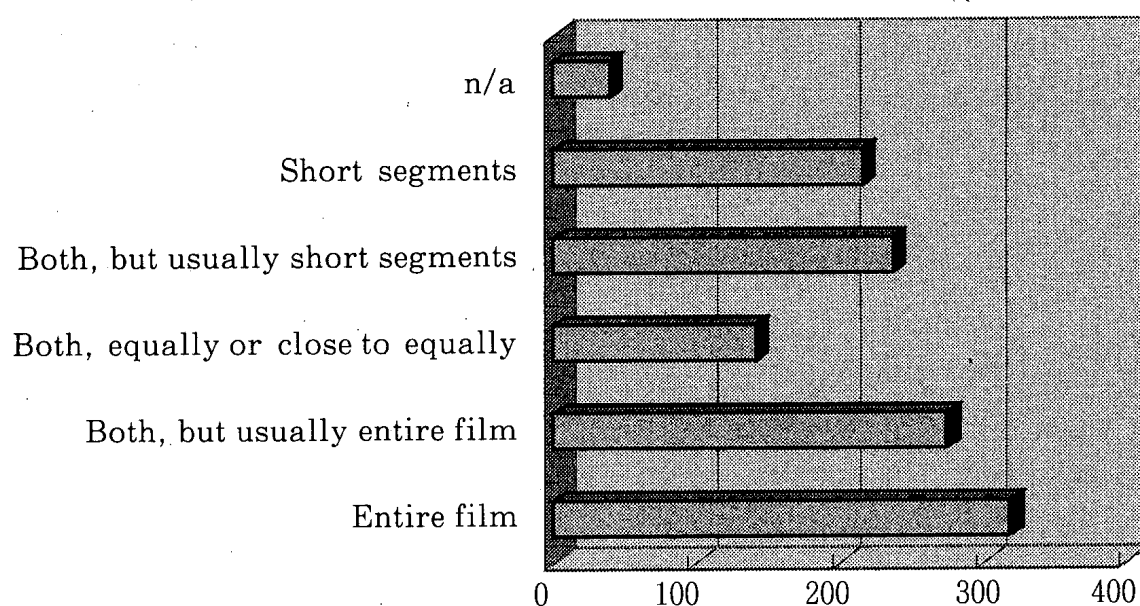


Figure 2. Lengths of Segments Used

towards a reliance on the entire film. The lack of clarity here may be a reflection of the vaguely worded choices offered. Nevertheless, that so many respondents would claim to use the entire film is quite surprising because as Sherman rightly notes, "movies are long and

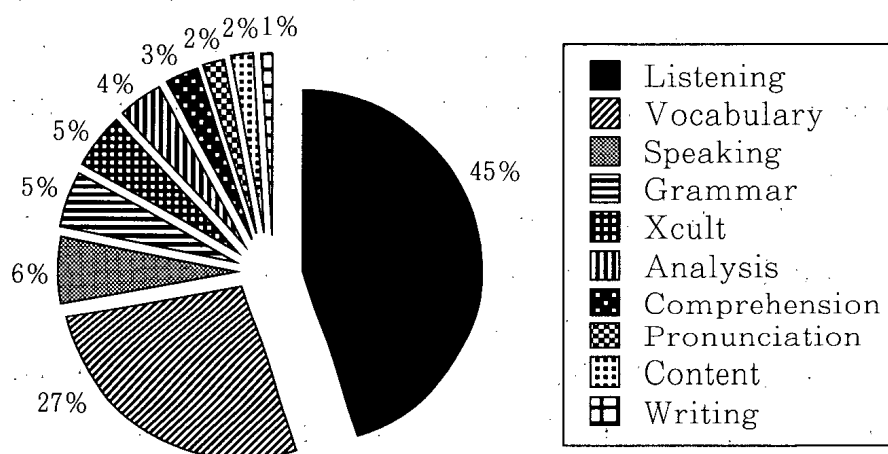


Figure 3. Focus of Instruction/Learning in Films

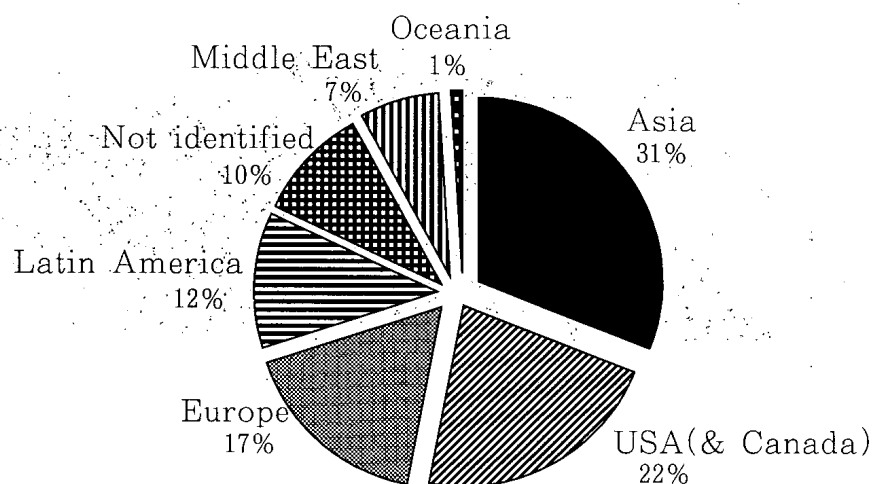


Figure 4. Poll Response Regions

teaching hours are short" (p.18).

The focus of instruction or learning was predominated by listening (45%) followed by vocabulary (27%), speaking (6%), grammar (5%) and cross-cultural issues (5%). This makes sense because the main concern when using authentic materials is "maximizing comprehension" (Sherman, p.18).

All together respondents from 52 countries participated in the poll. Twelve countries (USA; Japan, China, Iran, Canada, Brazil, Malaysia, Mexico, France, Italy, Taiwan, and Spain) accounted for 73% of the responses, yet no single world region was a dominant majority.

Japan (9%) and China (8%) lead the large number of Asian region responses (total of 31%) while USA and Canada combined make up 22% of the poll responses. Figure 4 depicts the response distribution by region.

As might be expected, the largest group of respondents claimed that they used films for language teaching or learning in college or university classes (137) followed by junior/senior high school (119) and conversation schools (96). Only six respondents reported using films in an elementary school setting and 71 respondents did not indicate where they used films for teaching or learning at all although it might be assumed that some of those respondents viewed films at home or privately for independent study.

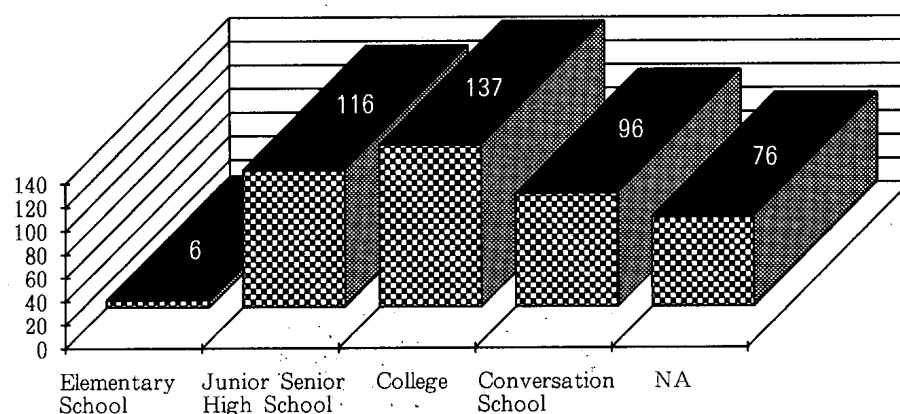


Figure 5. Site of Film Use for Language Learning

Discussion and Conclusions

Although there was a substantial response to this internet based poll, there is a danger of bias in the results. For example, it may well be that not all teachers or learners who habitually use films also regularly use the internet. Therefore the people who had access to the video poll and chose to answer it might have traits/patterns of response that non-internet users do not. Also, the poll did not give demographic information such as the gender, age, education, or income level of the respondent. Despite these shortcomings, the results do offer some concrete information on film choice, focus of instruction

and sites of use.

Because it is as yet unclear to what extent teachers can rely on films as an authentic model of spoken interaction, it can be argued that this corpus may provide data in sufficient quantity to make statistical comparisons and may represent a wider range of situations than would normally be collected through field observations alone. Therefore, this project is the starting point for an extensive series of future projects to examine the linguistic properties (e.g., syntactic complexity, vocabulary) and pragmatic features (e.g., other speech acts, indirectness, conversational implicature) of films in a pedagogically representative corpus.

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