

The use of popular culture as a stimulus to motivate secondary students' English learning in Hong Kong

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Social and economic factors account for why Hong Kong students need to learn English in school. Schools are crucial to students' language learning, so all English teachers should feel responsible for promoting its effective teaching. However, too many of them rely on uninteresting textbooks that focus students' attention on grammatical structures, and on practice in isolation; too many of their classroom activities are based on teacher-talk and student-listen routines. These practices are unlikely to lead students to develop a genuine interest in learning English. This paper argues that English teachers' use of popular culture is a key to effective teaching and learning. If this method proves effective in motivating students to learn English, there will be a number of implications for how we cater for their needs in our choice of teaching strategies and learning materials.

Introduction

'Life would be marvellous for teachers if all students wanted to learn' (Biggs 1995: 83). According to Biggs, students are only motivated to learn things that are important and meaningful to them. However, most students in Hong Kong are demotivated by the emphasis placed on difficult and abstract declarative knowledge in school. As a result, they tend to find learning in school uninteresting, or irrelevant to their daily life, and so lack of attention, passivity, 'off-task' attitudes, and other disruptive forms of behaviour have become common place in Hong Kong classrooms.

The situation is particularly difficult in the English language classroom, where the learning activities are generally teacher-centred and form-accuracy-oriented. Mok (1990: 1) regards these as representing a type of 'classroom English' which does not help students to apply what they have learnt in real-life situations. Since this form of English does not function like a language for meaningful and purposeful communication, Chinese students see no need, and show little interest, in learning it. However, the government has made English language education in schools a priority, since it is seen as the key to communication with the rest of the world. The understanding of English enables Hong Kong people to engage with the way of life, values, and ideas of the West, in a form of

cultural exchange that involves the use of the Internet, for example, and the appreciation of western movies and songs, through the English medium. More importantly, since Hong Kong is an international centre of business, finance, and trade, English is crucial to its economic competitiveness. Within Hong Kong itself, English is essential for most businessmen and professionals. School-leavers with proficiency in English can count on having a wider range of job opportunities, and better working prospects. For these reasons, most parents consider that English will improve their children's chances of a bright future, and regardless of their wishes, send them to private tutorial schools for additional English lessons.

What can secondary school teachers do to enhance their students' motivation to learn English? After all, students are far from reluctant to learn the language of pop culture, which comes from the West. Music, songs, computer games, and movies are highly popular with young people in Hong Kong. The movie 'Titanic', in particular, was a big hit not only in the West, but also in Hong Kong, where it entered the fantasy world of most young people. Many of them still watch the movie again and again, remembering the lines spoken by the actors, and reciting the lyrics of the theme song. All of which seems to suggest that students can learn English through their encounters with popular culture.

This paper argues that since popular culture appeals to students, it motivates them to become responsive and active learners. The writer will first explain the relationship between popular culture and the various elements associated with teaching and learning, and then argue for the use of popular culture in language education.

Popular culture: bringing relevance to students' lives

The word 'popular' was originally a legal and political term, from *popularis*, which is Latin for 'belonging to the people'; 'culture' can be defined as the 'customs, values, laws, technology, artefacts and art of a particular time or people' (Westerhuis 1995).

Young people today are more exposed to popular culture than any other age group. Television, special-effect movies, highly stimulating music, gossip magazines, comics, fashion, computer games, and the Internet form a major psychological part of the lives and life styles of youngsters. In the process of growing up, students need to identify with something, and a large proportion of them choose the popular culture, which being readily accessible everywhere, and highly acceptable to young people, acts as a bond between them, providing meanings that are relevant to their lives. White (1985) claims that for most young people, popular culture serves as a valuable tool that helps them to cope with the difficult task of building and maintaining an identity. By subscribing to popular music, for instance, a person claims an identity with other listeners, and with performers and writers who share the same views about who they are or might be, and what the world is and might be.

Popular culture can often have a significant impact upon the lives and attitudes of young people around the world, partly by providing them with some form of meaning and insight in a relevant and concrete way. Just as the songs of Bruce Springsteen in the U.S. explore the dark side

of that society, a similar situation applies to the songs of Beyond in Hong Kong. The popular movies *Armageddon* and *Terminator 2* share a similar message of self-sacrifice: in order to save others, the captain in the first film, and the robot in the second, both sacrificed themselves. Contrary to what is often said about the evil nature of money, the message conveyed in *Schindler's List*—where Schindler wanted to earn more in order to save more Jews—is that it is all right to make money as long as you spend it in a correct manner. Teachers who are able to integrate this sort of popular culture into classroom sessions can provide a valuable bridge between formal and informal education, and help to bring people and places alive.

Another facet of popular culture is its power to influence people, and youngsters in particular, who learn many of the values of society through the media and popular culture. Society in Hong Kong in the fifties is reflected by the Cantonese movies, which showed that although Hong Kong was poor, its people were none the less willing to share with one another, to the point where it became the central belief of our society. Now that Hong Kong has become more affluent, and our life style and habits have changed, the movies show that pleasure-seeking has become the governing theme. Popular culture reflects what society is, who people are, and what they like. As society changes, so do our value systems, and our perceptions of many other things that affect our lives. Instead of blaming popular culture for the negative influence it often has on people, it may be better for us to keep pace with the wheels of life, and see life as it is.

Popular culture and effective teaching
Motivating students
—the choice of
teaching content

One day the writer was amazed to see the expertise of a student playing video games. What had the teacher done to equip him to play so well? The answer is that the teacher had done nothing to help him acquire this skill: the students all learnt it by themselves, through constant practice. Self-learning seems to be the key to this question, since students will use their time and energy to learn whatever they want. How much time does a teacher have to teach in a class? If he or she can motivate the students to learn by themselves, then the sky is the limit.

School learning, as described by Biggs and Watkins (1993: 6), 'does not often provide its own motivation for learning, except in the special case of intrinsic motivation' (p. 6). Unless they can see direct personal benefits and life relevancy in what they are taught in school, students have no clear goal to aim for. Since their learning depends on what happens in the classroom, teachers should aim to motivate students through their choice of teaching strategies and learning materials.

As learning is a goal-oriented activity, the teacher's task is to involve their students in a search for meaning and importance in learning materials, and to make that search a pleasurable experience. Furlong and Maynard (1995) mention that the teaching materials should be 'something that students can relate to', and 'within their interest level'. Students should also be able to see that the activity is 'useful' to them. As Domoney and Harris (1993) point out:

More time and attention to pop music in an English curriculum would

increase student motivation because classroom activities would use *their* knowledge, *their* music, and *their* language (p. 235).

Popular culture touches the lives of student, and grows out of their natural experience and interests. If teachers can make use of popular culture in a teaching context, in which students find a need to learn and have something to achieve, students' attention can be organized through desire rather than coercion. When they see that their own experience is reflected, and that the work they do can meet their needs, learning is more likely to occur.

The use of popular culture in teaching creates an environment that enhances learning. When teachers design lessons using examples drawn from popular culture, students will find them easy to follow. The classroom atmosphere will become more harmonious as learning takes place in a relaxed manner, more enjoyable as students are engaging in activities they like, and more achievement-oriented, as students become more willing to participate, since they can enjoy their success in answering correctly.

Teaching in novelty and variety

Effective teachers are enthusiastic, warm, understanding, stimulating, and imaginative. Since students who lack intrinsic motivation often desire variety, excitement, and novelty, effective teachers should choose different teaching methods and learning materials that will motivate their students. Using popular culture in class can be one way to add life and variety to lessons. Commercial movies and highly stimulating music, which are seldom used in the traditional classroom, can fulfil the students' psychological and social needs, and evoke their affective emotion and imagination. If teachers like their subjects, and take care to present them with a high level of interest, excitement, and importance, students are much more likely to like those subjects, too, and to be anxious to find out what is so interesting. As Biggs (1995) asserts: 'Enthusiasm is infectious'.

Level of learning materials

Furlong and Maynard (1995) consider that the best teaching 'centres on creating meaning' (p. 134). Teachers need to understand what students already know about the idea or concept to be learnt, to be able to 'connect' the learning to the students' present understanding. They should start teaching from what students already know, or what they are to some extent familiar with. According to Cheung (1998), there are two types of prior knowledge: subject knowledge, and encountered knowledge. The first is the students' previous knowledge of the subject, as learnt in school. Encountered knowledge is what students have learnt through their interactions with the world (e.g. from popular culture). However, teachers often neglect this second kind of knowledge. If they introduce new materials by drawing upon students' subject knowledge and encountered knowledge, the students will find it easier to make sense of their learning, and will be more willing to learn. Since students' encountered knowledge frequently comes from popular culture, it can be a useful aid for teachers to set the condition for learning. In doing this, teachers can thus create 'teachable moments' in class (Brophy 1986).

Popular culture and English language education

Learning content and activities

Since English is not the language used in ordinary social encounters among the Chinese students in Hong Kong, they need a high level of extrinsic motivation to learn it. To motivate them to learn the language, Nseendi (1984) suggests a balanced relationship, divided between motivation activities, and exercises for foreign language learning. Nseendi believes that activities and exercises should follow from a consideration of the students' interests. Meanwhile, to sustain and to increase their original motivation, the content of the activities and exercises should provide the students with some need to learn English. When English activities and exercises are meaningful and interesting to students, they will have an immediate goal to achieve, which will help to develop a longer-term desire to learn. The 1983 revised Syllabus for English (Forms I–V) reflects Nseendi's idea, and shifts its emphasis from the mastery of language forms to the ability to put the language to use, as a medium of purposeful communication in the classroom, and calls for greater attention to be paid to the needs and interests of the learners.

The instructional materials and the teaching techniques used in the classroom should be designed to stimulate the maximum degree of interest in the learner, to provide him with ample opportunities to do things with English, to experience the feeling of successful achievement that comes from putting the language to use for some purpose (p. 10).

(Curriculum Development Council 1983)

Students are more motivated when popular culture is used in the classroom, as they easily learn from things that they know. Teachers accused students of being naughty, inattentive, and incapable of learning. The truth is that many students can recite the lyrics of popular songs without difficulty, but find it hard to memorize a poem or a mathematical formula. They do not make particular efforts to memorize things like the TV schedule, the current number one song, or the faces of different movie stars, but these trivial facts seem to become imprinted on their minds without effort. When it comes to things they need to know in class, they find it difficult to remember, let alone understand, what is happening. To many youths, what Beavis & Butthead (the popular TV cartoon characters) have to say is more important than lessons taught by teachers using extracts from literature. By understanding what influences students, teachers could make use of popular culture to facilitate teaching. When learning content and activities centre on examples from popular culture, students will be more motivated to learn.

Teaching strategies

Teachers should present English in a way that allows students to interact with one another, and to exchange information, attitudes, and feelings. Meanwhile, students can be helped to feel good about themselves through recognition and identity. In addition, teachers need to understand what level of English their students have reached. Students are only motivated to learn when the linguistic features of comprehensible input are just a little beyond their current linguistic competence (Krashen 1982). The learning activity is demotivating if its level is either too high or too low for them.

Popular culture is essential to students' personal and social identities. It is ever-present in their daily lives, and gives them meaning and satisfaction. Its ready acceptability and accessibility provide students with frequent and meaningful exposure to English outside school, for example, especially in English-language pop songs and movies. Popular culture is a rich source of authentic materials, bridging the gap between formal and informal English learning, and developing learning based on students' daily experience, personal values, attitudes, and feelings. Presenting examples of popular culture in an enjoyable, linguistically competent and meaningful way, can help to generate a lot of affective responses and imagination from students during English lessons.

Many teachers have already employed popular culture in English teaching, and the results are promising. Domoney and Harris (1993) stated that popular culture is 'one way of involving young learners and their teachers in meaningful, enjoyable, and collaborative classroom tasks' in the EFL classroom. Research carried out in the UK shows that the great majority of English teachers thought that popular culture should be studied in the classroom alongside more traditional forms, and most disagreed with the idea that such study impairs the students' capacity to appreciate more valuable aspects of culture, such as literature and theatre (Williamson and Hardman 1994).

Conclusion

This paper argues the pedagogical value of popular culture, which Giroux and Simon (1989) have claimed 'raises important questions about the relevance of everyday life, student voice, and the investment of meaning and pleasure that structure and anchor the why and how of learning' (p. 221). This suggests that teachers should take note of their students' lives, and take their interests into account when designing and selecting teaching materials. They should incorporate popular culture into meaningful and communicative tasks/activities, so that students have a purpose to achieve something, and feel the need to speak and to use English in realistic situations. Teachers should establish a relaxing and pleasurable learning atmosphere, and let students actively participate in their learning process through the use of their own language and collaborative tasks/activities.

Harmer (1991) has said that 'language teaching is not just about teaching language'. Teachers should pick up this concept of professionalism and develop a professional awareness of the social needs, personal growth, and personality development of their students as individuals. Since adopting popular culture in English teaching provides extrinsic motivation to both students and teachers, it is suggested that the teachers set up a source bank of popular culture materials for English teaching.

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