

# A Critical Discourse Analysis of *Back to the Future*: Applications in the EFL Classroom

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## Introduction

Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) stars in this adventure/comedy/science fiction film as a typical American teenager of the 1980s who is accidentally sent back to 1955 in a plutonium-powered DeLorean time machine invented by his eccentric scientist friend Dr. "Doc" Emmett Brown (Christopher Lloyd). Unfortunately, Dr. Brown got the plutonium from Libyan terrorists who want him to build a nuclear bomb, and when they find Doc, they shoot and kill him. Thus, Marty finds himself in his hometown of Hill Valley in 1955 where he enlists the aid of Dr. Brown to find a way to get back to the future. The only way to power the time machine, which has depleted all of its plutonium fuel, is to harness the power from a bolt of lightning that hits the clock tower in the town square. However, before doing so, Marty must also make sure that his teenage parents, George McFly (Crispin Glover) and Lorraine Baines McFly (Lea Thompson) fall in love so that they will eventually get married and have children, thereby ensuring his own existence. This paper will first examine the textual, discoursal, and sociocultural aspects of *Back to the Future* and then discuss ways in which the film can be used to teach both American culture and English as a foreign language.

## A Critical Discourse Analysis of *Back to the Future*

Films work as texts on multiple levels: linguistically, they are both a written work (screenplay and script) as well as a spoken discourse (dialog). In addition, films act as cultural artifacts, with the characters, settings, soundtracks, etc. acting as texts as well. They are multi-semiotic since they combine "language with visual images, music and sound effects." They are also extremely textual and "extraordinarily sensitive indicators of sociocultural processes, relations, and change." Furthermore, what is "absent" from movie texts is "significant from the perspective of sociocultural analysis" (Fairclough, 1995: 4-5). For example, in *Back to the Future*, there is a hidden ideological agenda that is not overtly apparent in what is seen in the film.

According to Belton (2005), during the 1980s the U.S. witnessed "a nostalgia craze for the 1950s in the form of revivals of 1950s music, fashion, and lifestyles," and *Back to the Future* "exploited the

nostalgia craze" by returning Marty McFly back "to the innocence of Eisenhower America in the 1950s" (365). Hollywood cinema of the 1980s was also greatly affected by the presidency of Ronald Reagan. And as Belton asserts, the "'Reaganite' entertainment, as the films of this period have been dubbed, is, in part, a cinema of reassurance, optimism, and nostalgia—qualities embodied in the political persona of Ronald Reagan." In short, Hollywood reacted to the turmoil of the 1970s, namely the Vietnam War and Watergate, which, as Belton cites Robin Wood, "served to undermine public confidence in the nation's leaders. Reagan attempted to restore this lost confidence...by encouraging Americans to forget Watergate and to view Vietnam less as a national defeat than as a failure in American resolve to win, caused by a loss of faith in traditional American values. Reagan represented a restoration of those values" (ibid. 375). Belton goes on to state:

More often than not, new beginnings in Reaganite Cinema involved a nostalgic return to the past. The magic of the movies enabled audiences to go back in time in an attempt to recover the small-town, affluent American paradise of the Eisenhower era, before poverty, crime, homelessness, and the demise of both the family and the community began to erode the American dream...a number of films, in particular the highly successful *Back to the Future* series (1985, 1989, 1990) and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), feature characters who return to the golden age of the 1950s...and come back to the present full of the promise and spirit of this idyllic past, reenergized and ready to confront the future (ibid. 378).

Palmer (1993) asserts that "American society in the eighties consistently employed an intertextuality with the past as a means of understanding and dealing with the issues of the present" and "in film, this...self-reflexivity took the form of a consistent examination of eighties issues in terms of past history." In trying to overcome the Vietnam-related, "postmodernist confusion, paranoia, and alienation within both eighties society and film," Palmer claims that "perhaps the best example of this self-reflexive consciousness in both the social history and the film history of the eighties can be found in a cluster of futuristic films, all of which turn on the premise that in order for the future to exist and continue, the past must be understood and even revised." Thus, in *Back to the Future*, Marty, as a time traveler, finds "the answers to the human and political puzzles of the future written in the critical act of reinterpreting and even reshaping history." This film, then, examines "the self-reflexive need to reexamine our...human attitudes toward materialism" (12-13).

We can also view *Back to the Future* as both a reaffirmation and a critique of the American family. Neale (2002) states: "If 'home' is a place that can only be realized by going somewhere else, then cinema becomes an important site in the 1980s for fashioning a relationship between baby boomers and their children, for *re-embodiment* youth" (232). Of particular interest is Marty's relationship with his father, George. Susan Jeffords (1994) claims that the "key issue for manhood in

the 1980s” was “the relationship between fathers and sons...whether actual...or symbolic” (64). Marty’s main goal in this film is to reunite his father and mother and make them fall in love. According to Jeffords, “while he is successful as a matchmaker, Marty alters their relationship by enabling George McFly to come to Lorraine’s rescue...as she is being attacked by the brutish Biff Tannen (Thomas F. Wilson). Consequently, the George McFly who became a doormat for Biff, a failure at his job, and a weak role model for his children, now, in the alternate future that Marty has created, becomes Biff’s superior, a best-selling author and community leader, a loving husband, and a well-rounded father” (69). In short, all is well in the McFly family at the end of the film, just as Reagan asked us to believe that all was well with American family values. Jeffords claims that this was “one of the strategies of Reagan America—to rewrite the recent past so that the charge, ‘You’re too much like your father,’ is turned from an insult—‘America in the 1980s is too much like the 1970s and doesn’t have a chance’—to a compliment.” In short, from “the man/country who gave his children/citizens only shame, George McFly and the America he figures is turned into a father who can give his children just what they want—a well-rounded family and material success” (ibid. 70-71).

Elsaesser and Buckland (2002) devote a whole chapter to a Freudian analysis of *Back to the Future*, focusing on the Oedipal aspects of the narrative. They claim that the film “presents an initial situation in which the ‘normal’ Oedipal trajectory has been doubly blocked, making the purpose of the narrative evident: to restore ‘proper,’ i.e. heterosexual, Oedipal identity.” For Elsaesser and Buckland, Marty’s time travel “becomes the (generically motivated) means of restaging the Oedipus complex as a ‘deferred action’ which is also a therapeutic anticipation. By traveling to the circumstances preceding his own birth, Marty both realizes the incest fantasy at the heart of Oedipus and engineers what in Freudian terminology is called the ‘primal scene,’ the fantasy of witnessing the moment of one’s own conception, i.e. the act of parental lovemaking. Finding himself back in 1955 allows Marty...to use his hindsight knowledge not to change history, but to make (his) history possible.” The film, “having posed the problem of Oedipus in terms of a lack of a credible father figure...is the perfect wish-fulfilling fantasy.” Why? Because now that Marty “has ‘ordinary’ parents,” he “can face up to the Oedipal challenge” and “emerge as a fully constituted male...and proceed with the heterosexual bond, eventually founding his own family” (228-229).

However, Sarah Harwood (1997) examines the symbolic father/son relationships in *Back to the Future*, taking a more pessimistic view by claiming that the film “posits an omnipresent, omnipotent proto-father, Marty, who is able to intervene across generations, thus creating a timeless, and therefore ‘permanent’ solution” as well as “a metafather in the figure of Dr. Emmet Brown, a magical mentor, who gives Marty access to his omnipotent status.” However, she sees a contradiction in the fact that “Marty has transformed his inadequate father but was sired by him in his incompetent incarnation.” In addition, “Marty’s mother attempts to seduce him. Latent punishments lie liter-

ally below the surface, buried in the unconscious, as psychic triggers.” As a “proto-father,” Marty “cannot simply create a new family” because his family is “scarred by generational history, which cannot be relinquished and the sins of the fathers may be revisited upon the sons” (75). Harwood believes that despite Marty’s “ability to recreate his parental family,” he is “less successful at creating his own” because at the end of the film, Marty must make a “desperate race into the future to resolve the problems of his own offspring. Undermining his apparent omnipotence, the child is represented as repeating the mistakes of the past in creating the family of the future” (ibid. 138).

As these examples show, there are many different ways in which to interpret a film, and all of these interpretations can be used in the EFL classroom to expose students to a new way of thinking about the films that they watch. In short, a fantasy film like *Back to the Future* becomes much more than a form of escapist entertainment—it reflects American ideology and culture in numerous ways, all of which enhance a students’ understanding of the English language.

### Applications in the EFL Classroom

*Back to the Future* was, and still remains, immensely popular in Japan, often appearing on television broadcasts despite the fact that it is 20 years old. In addition, Universal Studios Japan, located in Osaka, offers the popular Back to the Future-The Ride attraction with the following advertisement: “Rocket from the future to the past on the greatest ride of all time! Blasting into the past for an encounter with avalanches, dinosaurs, and a molten volcano. Then rocketing you into Hill Valley 2015. Over mountains, to the bottom of the sea, to the midst of the Ice Age. It’s a 21 million jigowatt Sensuround™ that features thrills and excitement like nothing you’ve possibly imagined before” ([www.usj.co.jp](http://www.usj.co.jp)). Perhaps it is the Japanese affinity for science fiction, seen in popular animated characters such as the futuristic *Doraemon*, that continues to make *Back to the Future* an appealing and popular film in Japan. In addition, its cultural and linguistic richness makes it an excellent choice for teaching American culture and EFL to Japanese university students.

Films act as texts which are very much “social spaces in which fundamental social processes simultaneously occur: cognition and representation of the world, and social interaction.” As such, they require a “multifunctional view of text.” Thus, a systemic linguistic approach can be taken with any given film because the language in movies almost “always simultaneously functions ideationally in the representation of experience and the world, interpersonally in constituting social interaction between participants, and textually...tying texts to situational contexts” (Fairclough, 1995: 6). For Japanese EFL learners, the situational context is just as important as the language in which it is used, and one of the benefits of film-based EFL instruction is the variety of social situations found in any given film—situations that often dictate how, what and why a character says something. In addition, in their interpersonal function, films “negotiate social relations between people”

(Billig et al., 1988). Indeed, the characters in movies offer students the “given conventions of language and orders of discourse...generating...new configurations of genre and discourses” (Fairclough, 1995: 7-8). Such conventions are essential to improving Japanese university students’ EFL competency.

In teaching *Back to the Future*, I divide the film into five lessons. Students are provided a scene-by-scene transcript of the dialog and are asked to answer both comprehension and discussion questions individually and in small groups. Much emphasis is given to the cultural aspects of the film as well as the colloquial, idiomatic, and slang expressions found in the dialog. The following is a sample lesson.

### Lesson 1 (Scenes 1-10)

The film begins with Scene 1 in which Marty visits Doc’s house in the morning and with Doc reminding Marty that he needs his assistance later that evening with his experiment. We also see some of Doc’s inventions at work, including an automatic coffee making machine and a dog food opener and dispenser. However, we see that the coffee maker is missing a coffee pot, so boiling water pours down onto the heating element. And while the dog food machine does work, we see that Einstein’s dog bowl is already full of food. Therefore, the first comprehension question to ask students is:

- **Comprehension Question #1:** What two inventions do you see in this opening scene? Describe what they do. What is strange or wrong about both of them? *First, we see an automatic coffee maker. However, it is missing the coffee pot, so the hot water is pouring down onto the heating element. Second, we see an automatic dog food opener and dispenser which seem to work. However, the dog’s bowl is already full of food, so it overflows onto the floor.*

This also leads to the first discussion question:

- **Discussion Question #1:** What invention would you find very useful in the morning? Describe it in detail. What does it do? Why do you need it?

As Marty enters Doc’s house, we see him put the door key under the front door mat, a once common practice in America. This can also be used as a comprehension question as well as a “Culture Awareness” point.

- **Comprehension Question #2:** How was Marty able to enter Doc’s house? *He used the key that Doc keeps under the mat on the front doorstep.*

- **Culture Point:** It was once common for Americans to keep a spare house key under the front door mat, especially in a small town where there is little crime. Today, however, this is no longer a common practice.

After Marty enters the house, he plugs his electric guitar into Doc's very large amplifier, and sets the volume as loud as it will go. When Marty attempts to play his guitar, the speaker blows up, sending him crashing across the room. This leads us to the third comprehension question:

- **Comprehension Question #3:** Explain what just happened to Marty. *He plugged his guitar into an extremely large amplifier, but when he tried to play his guitar, the speaker blew up and sent him crashing across the room.*

After Marty realizes that he is late for school, he hangs up the phone and rushes out of the house. We notice a container under the bed which reads: "PLUTONIUM HANDLE WITH CARE." Thus, a fourth comprehension question to ask students is:

- **Comprehension Question #4:** What is under Doc's bed? What is significant about this? *There is a box of plutonium under Doc's bed. It is significant because the TV news reported: "In other news, officials at The Pacific Nuclear Research Facility have denied the rumor that a case of missing plutonium was in fact stolen from their vault two weeks ago. A Libyan terrorist group had claimed responsibility for the alleged theft, however, the officials now attribute the discrepancy to a simple clerical error."*

David Wood (1995) in *Film Communication Theory and Practice in Teaching English as a Foreign Language* recommends this scene for beginning level students under the heading "Conversations for Communication Practice":

The telephone conversation between Marty, the hero, and Doctor Brown, his friend, can be divided into two parts for students to exchange before they listen, and then watch. Omitting the promised time and location for meeting from both is effective as it is key information that the students will hear repeated in the actual conversation, giving them two chances to catch the right lines (75).

In addition, under "Naturally Occurring Numbers, Calculations and Information," Wood suggests the following for beginner level students:

The telephone conversation between Marty and Doctor Brown also contains different times providing practice in distinguishing several numbers (ibid. 87).

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Wood also offers a “Character Study” in which students construct a “character tree” by “writing the names of the main characters around that of the central character, Marty. Forenames can be used except where title or social status suggests otherwise.” Wood suggests writing this tree on the board for students to copy, drawing lines “between characters where obvious relationships exist. The relationship can then be entered in pairs to indicate the two-way nature of each.” After this has been completed, Wood suggests the following:

Students first practice the pronunciation of the names. Next, the meanings of the words that explain the relationships between characters are explained. Finally, a communication pattern to explain the relationships is practiced: “Who is Marty to Lorraine?” “He is her son.” Students then practice once more with the aim of remembering as much of the information from the character tree as possible. They next cover the character trees and quiz each other before the teacher tests them on what they have learned. If students show enough competence at this pre-intermediate level, more challenging study points can be added to extend their practice. Thus, less obvious relationships involving apostrophe s chains can be explained and then quizzed...Also, where less direct relationships can be expressed using additional vocabulary, new language can be taught and practiced...Finally, students construct their own family trees to exchange with each other (ibid. 120-122).

Second, Wood explains a “Key Conversations” activity for Scene 1 in which Marty talks to Doc on the phone. In this activity, “students work in pairs or groups, with half of them able to see Brown’s complete lines and the other half, Marty’s. Key words are missing from the other character’s lines.” With this mind, Wood suggests:

Using simple control language (“Can you tell me what Marty says first/next/last” and so on), students exchange the necessary information. If they are unable to complete, they can swap papers, and ask the questions in reverse. The key information, however (the time Brown wants Marty to meet him at), is missing from both parts, so that students are eager to watch the actual scene to both confirm the information that they exchanged is accurate, and to complete the final piece of missing information. Before they are allowed to watch, first they must listen only with the picture cable disconnected or the screen physically blocked, until they complete everything on their papers. This approach creates maximum listening motivation (ibid. 122-123).

Linguistically, the following words and phrases are heard:

- **Hello, anybody home?** A very common expression used when knocking on the door or entering someone’s house.

- **What's going on?** A very common way of asking: "What's happening here/now?"
- **Oh, God! Oh, Jesus!** Very common expressions used to express surprise.
- **What is it with him?** The expression, "What...is it with," means "What is wrong with" someone?
- **Whoa!** A very common expression used to express excitement about something.
- **Yo!** A somewhat common expression used mostly by young people to get someone's attention. Similar in meaning and usage as "Hey."
- **Wait, wait a minute.** It is very common for native speakers of English to repeat words when they are confused, concerned, or excited about something.
- **Yeah.** A very common way of saying, "Yes."
- **Uh, it's uh, it's...** A very common interjection used to express hesitation or uncertainty.
- **Are you tellin' me...** It is very common to shorten the "ing" to "in" so that "telling" becomes "tellin'."
- **(God) Damn (it)!** A very common interjection used to express anger, irritation, contempt or disappointment.

This gives you some idea of the linguistic richness of the dialog in *Back to the Future*: eleven colloquial/idiomatic phrases in the first scene alone! As such, the first scene offers a good opportunity for a cloze exercise in which students fill in the blanks with the words and phrases above.

Scene 2 opens with Marty hitching a ride on the back of cars to get to school on his skateboard, an extremely unusual (not to mention dangerous) mode of transportation. Since this scene is very impressive to students, the fifth comprehension question is:

- **Comprehension Question #5:** What is unusual about the way Marty gets to school?  
*Marty rides to school on his skateboard. However, by grabbing onto the backs of cars, he hitches a ride to school.*

Marty meets his girlfriend, Jennifer (Claudia Wells), in front of Hill Valley High School and we learn that Marty has a history of being late to school and is disliked by the school principal, Mr. Strickland. We also learn that Marty's band is auditioning for the school dance and that not only Marty, but also the McFly's which have preceded him at school, namely his father George, are failures in the eyes of Mr. Strickland: "No McFly ever amounted to anything in the history of Hill Valley!"

Wood (1995) suggests the following activity to "reinforce key-conversation study at the pre-intermediate level:



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The confrontation...can be given in its entirety, listed line by line, but with individual speeches unattributed to either speaker. Students have to deduce which line they think which speaker is most likely to say. They then listen only to the interchange to confirm their original ideas...In this way, interest and proficiency in listening can be built up exposing students to several similarly controlled practices (122-123).

Linguistically, students will hear:

- **...it'll be four tardies in a row.** The phrase "tardies" is plural for "tardy," which means that Marty has been late to school four consecutive times.
- **hanging around with.** A commonly used colloquial expression which means to spend time with an individual or a group of people—usually a friend or friends.
- **Tsk, ts, ts, ts, ts, ts.** A common sound one makes when they are disappointed in someone else who has done something wrong.
- **a nickel's worth of free advice.** This is not a common expression. It's another way of saying, "a little advice."
- **nut case.** One of many slang expressions used to describe someone considered mentally unbalanced or "crazy."
- **gonna.** A commonly used shortened form of "going to."
- **slacker.** A slang expression which refers to someone who avoids work or responsibilities. In other words, a lazy person.
- **old man.** A commonly used slang expression which means one's father or in some cases, it is used by women to refer to their boyfriend or husband.

These words and phrases can be discussed after watching the scene, at the end of the lesson, or again in a cloze exercise.

In Scene 3, Marty and his band are auditioning to play at the upcoming school dance. Before watching this scene as well as Scene 4, Wood suggests the following:

The instructor can point out that Marty's hopes and fears are in a precarious balance, and...students should count the number of hopeful versus desperate speeches that he makes in his next conversation with Jennifer. It is too much to expect pre-intermediate students to catch every word of the conversation, so after they watch once, copies of the dialogue can be distributed for them to read, practice and study (ibid. 123-124).

Interestingly, singer/songwriter Huey Lewis plays a teacher who is in charge of the auditions. Lewis's songs, "The Power of Love" and "Back in Time," feature prominently in the film and appear

in Alan Silvestri's 1985 soundtrack album. The lyrics from both songs can be used as a listening/cloze exercise for students. Marty's band is called the Pinheads and is rejected by Huey who tells them: "Thank you, fellas. Hold it. Hold it, fellas. I'm afraid you're just too darn loud. Therefore, the following linguistic points can be made:

- **pinhead.** A slang expression used mostly by junior or senior high school students which means a "stupid" person.
- **fella.** An informal way of referring to a "boy" or "man"; a shortened form of "fellow."
- **darn.** A commonly used interjection to express dissatisfaction or annoyance, and also used as a "nice" way to say "damn."

A simple comprehension question is:

- **Comprehension Question #6:** Why was Marty's band rejected to play at the school dance? *Because they play rock 'n roll music that is too loud.*

Scene 4 opens with a campaign car making the following announcement over a loudspeaker: "Reelect Mayor Goldie Wilson. Progress is his middle name." After explaining to the students what this expression means, the following discussion question can be posed:

- **Discussion Question #2:** If someone were describing you in this way, how would they complete the following sentence: "\_\_\_\_\_ is his/her middle name." Why is this true about you?

Jennifer tries to encourage Marty to send his band's demo tape to a record company. When she reminds Marty of what Doc always says, "If you put your mind to it, you can accomplish anything," Marty suddenly turns his head to watch two young women dressed in exercise clothes walk by. Instead of getting angry, Jennifer gently turns his face back towards her and says, "That's good advice, Marty." At this point, the instructor can ask the students the following comprehension question:

- **Comprehension Question #7:** Why does Marty turn his head away from Jennifer? How does she respond? *He turns because he notices two attractive young women dressed in exercise clothes walking by. Jennifer doesn't get angry with him. Instead, she gently turns his face back towards her.*

As Marty continues to express doubts about his musical talent and future, we see two women soliciting donations to "save the clock tower." Here, the instructor can discuss the following culture point:

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- **Culture Point:** It was very common for small towns in America to have a clock tower in the town square.

When Jennifer asks Marty if his mother knows he is using the family car to take Jennifer to the lake, Marty exclaims, "My mother would freak out if she knew I was goin' up there with you, and I'd get the standard lecture about...how she never did that kind of stuff when she was a kid. I mean, look, I think the woman was born a nun." Therefore, Marty is telling his mother a lie—he is going camping with his male friends. We also learn that Marty's mother is a very "proper" woman, hence Marty's comparison of her with a "nun." At this point, the instructor can explain the following culture point:

- **Culture Point:** It is very common for American teenagers to tell a lie to their parents in order to see their boyfriend or girlfriend.

In addition, the students can ask and answer the following discussion question:

- **Discussion Question #3:** Do you think it is okay to tell a lie to your parents so that you can see your boyfriend or girlfriend? Why/Why not?

Linguistically, this scene is also rich in the following words, phrases and expressions:

- **Progress is his middle name.** The expression, "\_\_\_\_\_ is his/her middle name," is used to indicate that something is very important to someone, such as an issue that a politician supports and believes in.
- **the end of the world.** A commonly used expression which means something that is very bad or serious. Therefore, "\_\_\_\_\_ isn't the end of the world," means that it is not that bad/serious.
- **Nah.** A very common interjection/informal way of saying "No."
- **cut out for.** A common colloquial expression which means to be "qualified," "skilled enough" or "meant" to do something.
- **gotta.** A commonly used shortened form of "got to."
- **If you put your mind to it...** To "put your mind" to something means to try really hard and not give up.
- **outta.** A commonly used shortened form of "out of."
- **Jesus (Christ).** A commonly used interjection, as well as "God," to express concern or surprise about something.
- **Check it out.** A very commonly used expression which means "Look at" someone or something.

- **four by four.** A four-wheel drive vehicle.
- **hot.** A common slang expression with many different meanings. In this case, it means something that is very good or impressive.
- **Get outta town.** A common idiomatic expression which means, “be serious” or “stop joking/kidding around.”
- **freak out.** A common slang expression which means to get “excited” or very “angry” or “upset” about something.
- **stuff.** One of the most commonly used, versatile words in the English language that refers to any unspecified things or actions.
- **born a nun.** Marty is describing his mother as a woman who is very pure and like a virgin.
- **tryin.’** A shortened form of “trying.”
- **a quarter.** Twenty-five cents. We also say “two-bits.”
- **flier.** A pamphlet or circular for mass distribution.
- **Where were we?** A common way to ask, “What were we talking about/doing?”
- **lemme.** A blended form of “let me.”

As the scene ends, Jennifer writes her grandmother’s phone number on a piece of paper for Marty with the message, “I love you!” and we hear Huey Lewis and the News sing “Power of Love.” Thus, the instructor could stop the movie and do a cloze exercise with this song.

In Scene 5, Marty returns home and finds that not only has the family car been wrecked, but his father’s nemesis, Biff, is responsible for the damage. Biff blames the accident on the car’s “blind spot,” and we get a good sense of what kind of man both Biff and Marty’s father are: Biff is a pig-headed bully and George is a nerdy weakling. Marty is upset because he wanted to borrow the car to take Jennifer to the lake. The instructor can pose the following comprehension question to the students:

- **Comprehension Question #8:** What happened to George’s car? How does Biff explain what happened? Why is Marty upset about what happened? *George’s car was wrecked by Biff, who had borrowed it. Biff blames the accident on the car’s “blind spot.” Marty is upset because he wanted to borrow his father’s car to take Jennifer to the lake.*

In addition, since George and Biff are extremely different characters, the students can discuss the following question:

- **Discussion Question #4:** What is your first impression of Biff? What is your first impression of George? How are they different? Are they alike in any way?

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Focusing on the conversation that Marty has with George in which he expresses his disappointment about not being able to use the car for his date with Jennifer, Wood (1995) suggests the following activity:

To reinforce the importance of stressed words, students can be given copies of the conversation minus key words for them to try to catch by listening only to the scene with the picture hidden (124).

In Scene 6, we find Marty sitting at the kitchen table with his extremely dysfunctional family: his alcoholic mother, Lorraine, his loser brother, David (Marc McClure), his hopelessly introverted sister, Linda (Wendie Jo Sperber), and of course, his pathetically weak father, George. We also find out that Marty's Uncle Joey, Lorraine's brother, is a convicted felon spending time in prison who once again, did not make parole. In short, Marty seems the most "normal" of the entire McFly family and one has to wonder how he can survive socially living in such a family of misfits. We also learn how Lorraine and George met (her father hit him with the car), and their first date at the "Enchantment Under the Sea Dance," foreshadowing what will happen to Marty when he suddenly returns to 1955.

Wood further suggests focusing on the dialog between Lorraine and Linda "in which the former discourages the latter (and thus, indirectly, Marty) from building relationships on the basis of the female protagonist." Thus, he explains the following activity:

As a variation, students can be given copies of the conversation with blanks to be completed and the missing words in random order to choose from. With all of these mind, students can summarize Marty's home and school life from the perspective of his dissatisfactions (ibid. 124).

Once again, this scene is linguistically rich in slang and idiomatic expressions:

- **make parole.** Be released from jail while remaining under the supervision of a parole officer.
- **dropped him a line.** To "drop" someone "a line" means to write them a letter/make contact with them.
- **Goddamn it!** A very common, "bad" interjection used to express extreme displeasure, anger or surprise.
- **Watch your mouth!** A very common expression which means to be careful about saying "bad" or "dirty" words.
- **Pop.** An informal way of saying "Dad" or "Father."

- **pouting over.** Showing disappointment about something, often while protruding the lips.
- **It was meant to be.** A common way of saying that something was the result of “fate.”
- **woulda.** A shortened form of “would have.”
- **And my heart just went out to him.** A common expression which means that you sympathize or feel sorry for someone.
- **A million times.** A common, colloquial expression which means “a lot.”

At the end of the scene, students can discuss the following question:

- **Discussion Question #5:** What is your impression of Marty’s family? How would you describe your family to someone who has never met them? Is there anything “unusual” or “different” about your family? Why? \*An alternate discussion question can be: “How did your parents meet?” However, this may be a sensitive issue if the student’s parents are divorced.

In Scene 7, Doc wakes Marty and asks him to bring the video camera to the mall, where they had agreed to meet earlier. In Scene 8, Marty arrives in front of the Twin Pines Mall and it is here that we get our first glimpse of the DeLorean time machine that Doc has invented, and thus the following cultural point can be explained to the students:

- **Culture Point:** The “DeLorean” was an expensive sports car developed and produced by John Z. DeLorean in Northern Ireland between 1981 and 1993 before going out of business.

This is a crucial scene in the movie because not only does Doc discover that his time machine works by sending his dog Einstein one minute into the future, we also learn that the DeLorean time machine is powered by plutonium which Doc stole from Libyan terrorists who wanted him to build them a bomb. The fact that they are Libyan terrorists cannot be overlooked because it reflects the socio-political climate of the mid-eighties in which this film was made. More importantly, the influence of Ronald Reagan’s presidency can be seen here in a film that, for the most part, does not seem to contain any political message. However, as Palmer (1993) points out, “the eighties is also a decade of strong political consciousness especially on an international state. The intrusion of worldwide terrorism exported from Iran, Libya, South America, even Russia, within the always perceived safe boundaries of the continental United States planted seeds of paranoia in American society” (14). As such, even in a film that seems to be as politically benign as *Back to the Future*, the generally white, middle-class community of Twin Pines is suddenly intruded upon by gun-wielding Libyan terrorists who are portrayed as simple killing machines who murder Doc in cold blood. However, Doc did, in fact, steal plutonium from them, but the American audience will focus on the fact that the Libyans wanted Doc to build them a bomb so that they could stage a nuclear attack on

American soil.

William Palmer (1993), in his book, *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History*, devotes a whole chapter to “The Terrorism Film Texts.” Citing the popularity of disaster films in the 1970s, which focused on natural disasters: “In the eighties on film, disasters still occur, but they are no longer natural disasters that symbolize social disorder.” Instead, “they are man-made and politically motivated disasters. The new villain of the eighties...is the terrorist.” According to Palmer: “Terrorism became ‘government terrorism,’ violent acts against the innocent populace of a country or the world sponsored by governments such as Iran, Libya, or a number of South and Central American ‘death squad’ governments. In fact, the history of America’s foreign policy in the eighties is more often than not a history of reactions to international terrorism” (114-115).

Thus, the 1980s marks the beginning of Middle East terrorism. Palmer cites a 1983 *New York Times* article, “What’s behind Mideast Terrorism,” in which Thomas L. Friedman claims that this new form of terrorism is “part of a regional campaign by Iranian-sponsored groups to strike at American interests, disrupt moderate Arab regimes and create fertile ground for the spread of the Islamic Revolution that began in Iran.” As a result, “a whole new form of terrorism seems to be brewing in the Middle East, with the U.S. and its allies the main targets” (ibid. 115). In addition, Palmer argues: “What the eighties saw on the evening news was not only an escalation of terrorists attacks but an increased openness of state terrorism. Iran, Syria, and Libya seemed to want the world to know they were responsible for sponsoring terrorist attacks against the West” (ibid. 116).

After the terrorist shoot and kill Doc, and then proceed to chase Marty who is now trying to escape in the DeLorean (itself a symbol of the 1980s yuppie syndrome), one can safely assume that none of the American audience members were thinking to themselves, “Doc got what he deserved. He had no business stealing plutonium from Libyan terrorists after agreeing to build a bomb for them.” More than likely they are thinking, “My God, the Twin Pines Mall looks just like the mall near my house. And now there are Libyan terrorists firing automatic weapons at a typical American teenager, Marty McFly.” What this scene reflects is Palmer’s assertion that “in the...eighties terrorist gangs and even armies begin penetrating the hitherto secure borders of the United States and attacking the institutional cornerstones of American society.” This new terrorist threat, “no longer satisfied with creating isolated international incidents...decide to strike at the very symbol of American society” (ibid. 128). And what better symbolizes 1980s American society than the shopping mall?

Ultimately, Marty escapes the Libyan terrorists by literally speeding his way back in time to 1955. And while the Libyans were successful in assassinating Doc, their Volkswagen van (note, *foreign* car) is no match for the DeLorean (also a foreign car, but one that exemplifies 1980s American

materialism. Furthermore, the terrorists are given no voice, simply yelling at one another in garbled Arabic, “Go! Go!” This making of the enemy faceless and voiceless killing machines has been common practice in American cinema, from the World War II films of the 1940s, 50s, 60s and 70s, to the Vietnam War films of the 1970s and 80s. Hollywood has long reflected both ethnocentrism and Amerocentrism in its portrayal of foreign enemies to the point of being overtly racist at times. Thus, these Libyan terrorists become like the American Indians in Hollywood Westerns-as Palmer puts it: “targets to be shot down” (18). In addition, there are some factual errors in the portrayal of the Libyans. According to the Internet Movie Database (IMD): “The Libyan Terrorist with the gun is not speaking the Libyan dialect of Arabic, or indeed any dialect of Arabic at all. What he is speaking is an exaggerated series of guttural noises that bear no resemblance to anything people speak in Libya.” In addition, “the ‘Libyan’ driver is actually wearing a Saudi headdress.” However, for the audience, the message is clear: the terrorists are Arabs and they are bad men, period.

Because this scene is so crucial to the plot in the rest of the movie, it is a good place to stop and have students summarize what has occurred. One excellent way of doing this is to have the students work in pairs, with one facing the screen and viewing the scene, and the other with his/her back to the screen. The scene can be watched silently at first, then explained to the student who wasn’t watching, and then viewed by the whole class with sound. Or, it can simply be posited as the following comprehension question:

- **Comprehension Question #9:** Describe, in detail, what has occurred in this scene to your partner. *Marty meets Doc in front of the mall. Doc successfully sends his dog, Einstein, one minute into the future in his time machine DeLorean. Doc explains to Marty how the time machine works, including the fact that is nuclear powered using plutonium that Doc stole from Libyan terrorists. Just as Doc is preparing to enter the time machine and travel 25 years into the future, a group of Libyan terrorists drive up in a van and shoot and kill Doc, then proceed to chase Marty who escapes in the time machine.*

In addition, Wood (1995) suggests the following under “Guesswork, Observation and Confirmation” for beginner level students:

From the moment the hero, Marty, finds out about the time machine, to the point in the action where he discovers how different things were in the past, he has many surprises, the simpler ones of which students can count and explain, as a basic observation activity (80-81).

Linguistically, we are again offered a treasure trove of idiomatic/slang expressions:



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- **Stay with me.** A common way of telling someone to “pay attention” to what you are trying to say or explain.
- **Attaboy.** A blended form of “that a boy,” often said to dogs who have behaved properly.
- **Serious shit.** A slang expression meaning something very serious and/or exciting.
- **where the hell.** A common form of “where” used when one is very upset and/or excited about something.
- **Ow!** A shortened form of “ouch,” which means that something is painful.
- **You little devil!** We often use this expression to refer to someone mischievous, such as a child or a pet.
- **red letter.** Another way of saying “important” or “memorable.”
- **I don’t get it.** A common way of saying, “I don’t understand.”
- **came to.** Awoke from being unconscious.
- **heavy duty.** A slang expression which means “very serious.”
- **something with a little more kick.** A colloquial expression which means “something stronger.”
- **sucker.** A slang expression referring to an unspecified thing. Used as a generalized term of reference, often as an intensive.
- **rip off.** Slang for “steal” something or from someone.
- **look me up.** A common way to say, “Call (phone) me” or “Come visit me.”
- **Run for it.** A common expression which means “to escape” something, usually something or someone dangerous.
- **Holy shit!** A common, “bad” interjection used to express surprise.
- **bastard.** A slang, “bad” expression which refers to a person, especially one who is thought to be mean or disagreeable.

Culturally, aside from the significance of the Libyan terrorists in this scene, which in itself can lead to a class discussion, the following culture point can be explained:

- **Culture Point:** “Devo” was an alternative rock band that was popular in the seventies and eighties.

In Scenes 9 and 10, Marty “crash lands” into a barn on a farm in Hill Valley and realizes that it is 1955, not 1985. The country farmer’s (Pa) first reaction is to shoot Marty whom he assumes to be a space alien because his son holds up his *Tales from Space* comic which shows a picture of a flying saucer that has just landed on Earth. In addition, Marty climbs out of the DeLorean wearing the Devo suit which looks very much like a space suit. Here, the instructor can ask the students the following comprehension question:

- **Comprehension Question #10:** Why do the farming family think Marty is a space alien?  
*Because Sherman shows his father the Tales from Space comic book he's been reading and it has a picture of a flying saucer and an alien that has just landed on Earth. And when Marty gets out of the DeLorean, he is dressed in a Devo suit that looks like a space suit.*

As Marty is trying to reassure himself that "it's all a dream," he sees the gates to a yet to be built Lyon Estates where he lives with his family 30 years in the future. After realizing that it is 1955, he also discovers that the DeLorean is out of plutonium, and thus undrivable, so he hides it behind the billboard advertising the Lyon Estates.

Linguistically, Scenes 9 and 10 offer the following:

- **Pa.** "Ma" and "Pa" are short for "Momma" (mother) and "Papa" (father).
- **ain't.** A nonstandard (improper) contraction of "am not" which is also used as a contraction for "are not," "is not," "has not" and "have not."
- **son of a bitch.** A vulgar expression referring to a person regarded as being mean or disagreeable. Also used as an interjection to express annoyance, disgust, disappointment, or amazement.
- **Get a grip on yourself.** A common colloquial expression which means "calm down" or "control yourself."
- **This is nuts!** Another way of saying, "This is crazy" or "This can't be true/happening."

Lesson 1 ends with Scene 10 and at this point, the students can be put into groups to ask and answer the five discussion questions, or be assigned a specific question/s to answer with their partner. In addition, the students can practice Scenes 2, 4, 5, 6 or 8 and be asked to act one of these scenes in front of the class. Furthermore, the students will have written their own dialog based on one of the following situations:

- **Situation #1:** In Scene 2, Mr. Strickland insults Marty's family, particularly his father George, and tells Marty, "No McFly ever amounted to anything in the history of Hill Valley!" Marty responds with: "Yeah, well, history is gonna change." **Write a dialog in which someone insults you and your family (You decide how and why) and you defend your family's honor by saying \_\_\_\_ (You decide what).**
- **Situation #2:** In Scene 4, Jennifer tries to encourage Marty to send his band's demo tape to a record company, but Marty questions his musical ability. **Write a dialog in which someone (You decide who) tries to convince you to do something (You decide what) but you don't think you can do it (You decide why).**

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- **Situation #3:** In Scene 5, Biff returns the car that he borrowed from George, but he has wrecked the car. However, Biff refuses to accept responsibility for the accident, blaming it on the car's "blind spot." **Write a dialog in which someone has done something wrong or bad to you (You decide what) and tries to place the blame on you. How do you defend yourself?**
- **Situation #4:** In Scene 6, Lorraine tells Marty that she doesn't like Jennifer because "Any girl who calls a boy is just asking for trouble." **Write a dialog in which your mother (or father) is telling you why they don't like your boyfriend or girlfriend (You decide why). You try to convince your mother/father that your boyfriend/girlfriend is a good person (You decide how).**
- **Situation #5:** In Scene 8, Doc explains to Marty that he will travel 25 years into the future (2010) because "I've always dreamed of seeing the future, looking beyond my years. Seeing the progress of mankind." **Write a dialog in which you explain to your friend that you are going to travel into the past or the future (You decide when) and why you want to travel to that time (You decide why). Your friend tries to convince you not to go (You decide why).**

**Oral Presentation for *Back to the Future***

After watching the entire movie and completing the lessons, all of the students can be asked to prepare and give an oral presentation on a theme related to *Back to the Future*. First, the major theme in *Back to the Future* is time travel, both to the past and to the future. Marty is sent back to 1955 by mistake and he is forced to manipulate the future in order for his teenage parents, George and Lorraine, to meet and fall in love so that they will eventually get married and have children, thus ensuring Marty's existence. In addition, after Marty is successfully sent back to 1985, Doc decides to travel 30 years into the future, the year 2015. When Doc returns to 1985 at the end of the movie, he asks Marty and Jennifer to travel with him to 2015 because their future children are in trouble. For this oral presentation, students are given a random date from the past and pretend that they are a time traveler who has traveled to that date and stayed for one week before returning to the present. Their job is to present to the class, using detailed examples and appropriate visual aids, what they saw and learned from their time travel experience. Finally, they will report to the class which time they would prefer to live in, the past or the present, and explain why they feel this way.

This topic is particularly interesting for students because Japan has such a long history, spanning several thousands of years compared to few hundred years in the United States. Therefore, the instructor can randomly choose dates from the distant to the not so distant past. For example:

Early Japan (until 710); The Nara and Heian Periods (710-1192); Kamakura Period (1192-1333); Muromachi Period (1333-1573); Azuchi-Momoyama Period (1573-1603); Edo Period (1603-1868); Meiji Period (1868-1912); The Taisho and Early Showa Periods (1912-1945); and the Postwar Period (since 1945). Because they have studied about history extensively in elementary, junior and senior high school, Japanese students tend to be quite knowledgeable about these different historical periods, and this assignment gives them an opportunity to approach history in a creative/communicative way.

Next, the students prepare three note cards in outline format (one side only) on which they write notes to help them remember the important points of their presentation. The students are instructed not to write out their entire presentation in complete sentences on their note cards—just words and phrases to help them remember. The first note card is the introduction in which the student introduces herself and her topic (in this case, the year to which she time traveled). Next, the student explains when she left, where she went, how long she stayed, and when she returned (To make this seem more realistic, the student can use actual dates and times). Finally, the student briefly outlines what she experienced during this time travel trip. The second note card is the body of the presentation in which the student describes, using detailed examples and visual aids (pictures, photos, posters, etc.) her trip to the past. This should include where she went, where she stayed, what she saw and experienced, and what were the positive and negative aspects of this time. The third note card is the conclusion in which the student explains which time she would prefer to live (in the past or in the present) and why. Finally, the student thanks the audience for listening.

After preparing her three note cards and appropriate visual aids, the student must practice and time herself (two to three minutes or longer depending on the size of the class) until she can speak with confidence and maintain eye contact with her audience. She should not try to memorize every word and recite a speech to the class. Instead, she should try to communicate her thoughts clearly to the audience in natural sounding English. During each student presentation, the instructor sits in the back of the classroom and listens, records (optional but recommended), times (essential) and writes comments on what each student did both successfully and unsuccessfully. In addition, the instructor fills out a score sheet on which students are assigned a maximum of five points for each element of their presentation (for a total of 50 points possible).

First, the student is evaluated on how well she followed directions. For example, did she write her note cards in outline format on one side only? Second, the student is evaluated on how well she could speak with confidence and maintain eye contact with her audience. Third, did the student speak with enthusiasm and in a loud enough voice for the entire class to hear? Fourth, did the student organize her presentation correctly (introduction, body and conclusion) and use detailed exam-

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ples to illustrate the main points of her presentation? Fifth, did the student use appropriate visual aids to illustrate her main points? Sixth, the student is evaluated on her ability to speak clearly (pronunciation and enunciation). Seventh, could the student speak with natural rhythm, pace and intonation? Eighth, how accurate and correct was the student's spoken grammar (sentence structure, word choice, tense, etc.)? Ninth, the student is evaluated on her overall fluency, meaning her overall ability to express herself clearly. Finally, the student is evaluated on her ability to stay within the two to three minute time limit. It is essential for the instructor to strictly enforce this time limit for two important reasons: first, following the time limit ensures that everyone will get to speak in one class period (This of course can be adjusted according to the size and time constraints of a particular class); second, it forces the student to practice several times outside of class so that she can stay within the time limit.

In evaluating the students using this five-point (50 max) system, it is suggested that the instructor be lenient when students make a mistake, such as in grammar and pronunciation, but be more strict about maintaining eye contact with the audience and adhering to the time limit. After all, the point of this oral presentation is to give students a forum in which to present their thoughts on a given topic to their classmates, as well as serving as a formal means for evaluation (a "test" so to speak). It should also be remembered that the oral presentation is only one part of the students' final grade, which can also include class participation, their ability to answer comprehension and discussion questions, their written and acted dialogs, and their ability to ask questions about and/or related to the film. In addition, it gives the instructor a chance to make written comments on the students' oral English skills, pointing out not only mistakes, but also successes.

There are several variations that can be used as topics for this oral presentation. First, the students could be assigned different dates and countries as well, instead of having all students report on Japan. Second, students can be assigned random dates from the future, instead of the past, and try to predict what the future will be like (in Japan or in a different country). Third, the students can be asked to report on a time in their life when they wish they could go back and "change" the outcome, focusing on what happened in the past, its outcome, why they want to change what happened, and how they would go about doing this. Finally, the instructor could give the students a choice of all of the above topics, thereby creating a variety of different presentations that the whole class will enjoy hearing.

## Conclusion

I believe that teaching English as a foreign language through films such as *Back to the Future* raises what Fairclough (1995) calls, "critical language awareness (CLA)." This is very important because first, we now live in a world "in which power is predominately exercised through the generation of consent rather than through coercion, through ideology rather than through physical

force..It is an age in which the production and reproduction of the social order depend increasingly upon practices and processes of a broadly cultural nature. Part of this development is an enhanced role for language in the exercise of power: it is mainly in discourse that consent is achieved, ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values and identities are taught and learned." Second, we live in a world "of great change and instability in which the forms of power and domination are being radically reshaped, in which changing cultural practices are a major constituent of social change, which in many cases means to a significant degree changing discursive practices, changing practices of language use." In short, raising students' CLA also raises their awareness of "the sociolinguistic order they live in." Fairclough goes so far as to say that CLA is crucial because "of the enhanced social and cultural role of language and because of the technologization of discourse." Therefore, having CLA becomes "an essential prerequisite for effective democratic citizenship; the capacity for critique of language." Furthermore, Japanese university students are faced with an ever-shrinking global community in which there "is an emphasis on the future worker as 'multiskilled,' on work as exploiting talents...seen as 'life skills' rather than occupational skills, including conversational forms of talk." Fairclough points out that because of this new global work environment, there is a "new official interest in spoken language education" (217-221). Thus, my film-based approach to EFL instruction aids in the ability of Japanese university students to become global citizens since English remains the language of international discourse.

More importantly, in my view, is the ability of film-based EFL instruction to develop students' "insight into pattern" and "learning to listen" which are now seen as "conditions for success in foreign language education." These skills are crucial for enabling my students to cope "with the particular linguistic demands arising from rapid social change, where 'many more events require interpretation,' especially interpretation of linguistic signals" (ibid. 223-224). In addition, Fairclough cites Hawkins (1984: 73-74) who claims: "'awareness' affects 'competence'-or ...awareness affects language capabilities." Thus, it is my goal to enhance EFL instruction to Japanese university students by raising their critical awareness of language through the medium of film, thereby creating a link "between...the development of language awareness and the language practice of the learner." I find this essential in improving my students' English language ability because, as Fairclough puts it, "...there is an intimate relationship between the development of people's critical awareness of language and the development of their own language capabilities and practices" (ibid. 225-227).

In using film texts as a language resource and teaching tool, I am attempting to equip my students with the communicative competence they need in a world that is not only becoming socioculturally smaller, but one in which "the conversationalization of public discourse" is becoming more and more common. As Fairclough states: "...it is part of a general rejection in contemporary societies of elite, professional, bureaucratic...practices, and a valorization of ordinariness, naturalness, 'being oneself'...in discourse...and it ties in with the informalization of contemporary society and its

post-traditional properties" (ibid. 230-231). In other words, the very "informal" nature of film text discourse makes it an excellent choice for improving Japanese university students' ability to comprehend and effectively communicate in today's post-modern/traditional global society.

One of the challenges for Japanese university students trying to learn English as a foreign language is knowing what to say in a particular situation. In other words, what is appropriate vs. inappropriate English? This is important because inappropriate language is "on the one hand...a source of humour, and on the other hand" can possibly lead to "adverse social judgments (that the speaker or writer is 'inept,' 'rude,' etc.)." Therefore, "we need both accurate descriptions of language that are related to situation, purpose and mode...and prescriptions that take account of context, appropriateness and the expression of meaning" (ibid. 236). Thus, films provide an accurate resource for recognizing appropriate and inappropriate English discourse based on contextual and situational factors. Indeed, in almost any film, examples of both the appropriate and inappropriate use of English can be found. Thus, film-based EFL instruction enables Japanese university students to understand "how language variation is governed by principles of appropriateness" and fosters their ability to "assess the speech and writing of others in terms of appropriateness" (ibid. 237).

However, "appropriate" English does not always mean "standard" English, and while having the ability to comprehend and use standard English is a worthy goal of EFL education, it is just as important for students to understand the many varieties of English used in the world today, particularly the many forms of colloquial, idiomatic, and slang expressions. *Back to the Future*, as well as most American films, provide students with English as it is used in everyday life in a variety of contexts and situations. For example, in just one scene from *Back to the Future*, the following expressions are used: "Nah," "cut out for," "put your mind to it," "check out," "hot," "get outta town," and "freak out." While these are clearly not examples of standard English, they are words and phrases that are commonly used in conversational English. Standard English often implies what Levinson (1983: 24-27) calls "a culturally homogeneous speech community, whereas real speech communities manifest cultural heterogeneity." In addition, speakers "do not always comport themselves in the manner recommended by the prevailing mores-they can be outrageous, and otherwise inappropriate." Finally, speakers often "exploit (and violate) conventions to communicate particular meanings-ironic meanings, for example" (Fairclough, 1995: 245-246). In short, films offer much more of the nuances native speakers use in speaking English than can be found in any EFL textbook.

For most Japanese university students, learning English through films is quite a novel approach because their past experiences have been "primarily textbook-oriented and test-driven, with the focus on form rather than meaning and accuracy rather than communication." As a result, the material they have studied lacks "a meaningful context" and fails "to deal with contemporary issues that are relevant to their lives" (King, 2002: Online). As Shea (1995) points out: "English has few moor-

ings in the social nature of communication. Language study is more than anchored in a berth of alienating frustration” (3). Because Japanese students have been trained “to analyze the fine points of English, students still struggle in comprehending the main ideas in listening and reading.” Therefore, they often lack the strategies used by effective language learners, such as guessing, following hunches, enduring ambiguity, and absorbing language input. However, “learning English by use of films compensates for all the shortcomings in the EFL learning experience by bringing language to life.” Furthermore, film-based EFL instruction becomes “a refreshing learning experience for students who need to take a break from rote learning of endless English vocabulary and drill practices, and replace it with something realistic, a dimension that is missing in textbook-oriented teaching” (King, 2002: Online). My teaching experience in Japanese universities has proven this to be true.

Finally, what I have found most promising about film-based English language instruction is that watching movies makes students want to talk. Phillips calls this phenomenon “film talk.” After watching and experiencing a film, we “want to share impressions, sort out our own reactions, debate what happened and what it all meant, and then make some sort of judgment...We want to talk about how convincing we found the story—the twists in the plot, the motivation of the characters and the extent to which the ending brought the story and the issues it raised to a satisfactory close...We refer to heightened moments in the film—moments of spectacle or suspense, or emotional intensity—and may use them as the basis for talking about the film’s overall capacity to engage our interest...We bring to the conversation an ability to place the film by type and explicitly or implicitly compare it with other films...We are able to describe the impact of certain roles and performances, usually in terms of believability or appropriateness, but also explicitly or implicitly by reference to other films” (Phillips, 2000: 1-2). This very human reaction to films makes them, in my opinion, one of the absolute best English language teaching tools available to Japanese university students today.

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