

SCAFFOLDING THE HOLLYWOOD CONNECTION

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ABSTRACT

The following essay describes the applicability of teaching screenwriting in the ESL classroom. It explores the role of the ESL teacher within the four stages of the Teaching-Learning Cycle as learners are taught the creative elements involved in the process of writing a screenplay. The results indicate that skillful scaffolding of the key elements of the creative process well prepares student writers for the final phase of the Cycle; to produce their very own screenplays.

Teacher: What's the important event that propels us into the second act?

Sukanda: My protagonist's decision propels.

Yoshi: But maybe you don't have enough conflict there.

Dolores: Her family tries to make her sell the property, but she doesn't want to.

Teacher: Isn't it that very decision that propels us into the second act?

In this conversation students are learning to exercise ownership of what they create, examine, and then structure in their ESL writing class. When Sukanda and her classmates craft their very own movies, they are guided into formulating and evaluating their own creations in ways that promote intense levels of both analytical discussion and enthusiastic participation at every phase of this creative process.

The power of the visual image has never been greater as movies continue to be a big part of many of our lives. Movies are virtually universal in appeal, and if it is true that no other instructional media can be as realistic or captivating as movies, how then does one harness this power for genuinely constructive applications in the ESL classroom?

When we look at the use of film in the classroom now, the general approach usually focuses on intercultural communication or some combination of examining

language and culture through film; “How does this movie help you understand the American way of life?”

Although many films can serve as excellent indexes of American culture, and exploring thematic content is an enriching direction to lead an ESL class, a different path is open for teachers and students to explore. In recent ESL writing classes, my students have looked at, studied, and successfully employed, all of the essential elements that comprise good storytelling in five short film scripts that they *themselves* create. They are also able to finish the semester classes with presentation-like *pitches* of their very own feature-film proposals.

A Long Way With a Little Theory

It now appears that the act of writing involves more visual thinking than we recognized in traditional writing classes. Fox (1994a) says that, according to investigators of cognition, the mind largely perceives seeing and thinking in tandem; words can conjure up images, and images can arouse words in the mind. Though research is ongoing, if there is indeed some kind of cognitive link between images and words, what benefits might that hold for language learning?

Fleckenstein (2002) suggests that teaching approaches need to be more balanced so that we can better integrate imagery into our reading-writing pedagogy. She points out that language is not the primary means with which we create meaning, and that it is impossible to separate our development as a species from imagery, which has played an extremely influential role in the linguistic development of mankind. She cites the Lascaux Cave in Southern France, with its many images serving as the early forerunners to our shift into a written language. She offers imagery as a bridge joining orality and

literacy, urging the need to open the door to imagery so that, “we can better understand and teach the difficulties and exhilarations of writing, reading and literature” (p. 5).

Imagery does influence thinking and verbal literacy skills. Students construct meaning by interacting with images just as much as they do with language. Fox (1994b) contends that films can trigger emotions that actually strengthen the impact of the visual stimuli, adding an additional dynamic to films that serve the purpose of the classroom teacher well; the combination of words, images, and emotions has an affective power that we should indeed try to exploit to its fullest potential.

We need empowering procedures that enable more teacher-learner interaction. Shouldn't students first be allowed to *build up*, and then gradually *transition* into becoming confident, independent learners in an environment that is as conducive as possible to safe and creative classroom activities? But it is a huge challenge for teachers to reduce student anxiety so that these learners feel safe enough to enjoy the true creativity that opens to them.

Vygotsky (1986), in his seminal work on psychology and linguistics, suggests that instruction that is only concerned with existing independent functioning will not give a learner the chance to progress, and that a combination of imitation and instruction, “bring out the specifically human qualities of the mind and lead the child to new developmental levels.” (p. 188). Vygotsky says that instruction that supports the learner as she moves toward her potential level of performance makes genuine learning and progress possible.

Krashen's (1987) notion of “roughly-tuned” input, or caretaker speech, supports this theory in that learners acquire, “only when we understand language that contains structure that is a little beyond where we are now” (p. 21). Krashen posits that we not

only use our linguistic competence to reach the next level ($i + l$), but we also use *context* (our knowledge of the world) and our own extra-linguistic information to grasp structures we have not yet acquired.

Vygotsky, however, goes an important step further by asserting that learners will never reach their potential performance through input alone, but rather through an interactive process. Vygotsky models learning as a *collaboration* between teacher and learner, with the teacher taking on the authoritative role similar to that of an expert supporting an apprentice; “What the learner can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow.” (Vygotsky, p. 188). Vygotsky pointed out that this collaboration always involves language in the form of a dialog between teacher and learner, and which ultimately creates *microgenetic growth* in the learners L2 system.

Bruner (1986, p. 74) used the term scaffolding to describe the teacher’s role in the collaboration process, where the teacher contributes what learners are not yet able to do alone or do not yet know. Teachers must then adjust and strategically diminish their contribution, supporting learners as they progress towards their potential level of independent performance, “...aimed not so much at the *ripe* as at the *ripening* functions” (Vygotsky, p. 189).

Mitchell and Myles (1998) support the role of scaffolding, which they say has become one of the key achievements of sociocultural research, and that these Vygotskian constructs of regulation and microgenesis within the learner’s *zone of proximal development* have clear pedagogical relevance in the classroom today.

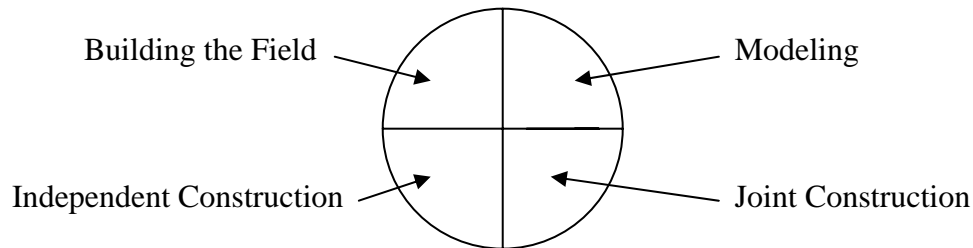
Film is a big part of our shared language and it taps deeply into what ESL students have within themselves: ideas, impression, feelings, hopes, and imagination.

They need skillful assistance expressing and structuring these gifts, though, and well-designed scaffolded collaboration puts learners in an excellent position to do both.

The Cycle

To what degree is scaffolded instruction successful when handing students the tools they will need to shape their own screenplays?

Genre pedagogy in Australia has built on those Vygotskian principles, stressing the need to scaffold within familiar routines, or *cycles*, of interaction.



In the Australian approach, classroom instruction is based on four quadrants, or phases, in a Teaching-Learning Cycle (Hammond, p. 17, adapted from Callaghan and Rothery, 1988). In the above diagram, the cycle is represented as a circle to indicate there are different points of entry for students according to their development. There is also the allowance for “recursion” (Rothery, 1996), which gives students the opportunity to do more work on a previous phase in the cycle. Work spins progressively within the cycle and revisits stage two, stage three, and stage four as learners develop their knowledge of the target material.

My classes undergo the phases of this cycle, which establish, and then scaffold, a shared context of the creative elements of a screenplay. Students implement these

elements into their own stories and finally demonstrate their knowledge of the field with a screenplay as their finished product.

A glimpse at the purpose of each phase of the cycle:

Building the Field: The teacher is responsible here for the *seed-laying* of the key elements that comprise good story telling. Though the extent of student progress through this initial phase varies slightly due to differing levels of prior film knowledge, the mission is for everyone to transition into the next phase of the cycle at roughly the same rate, while students establish and develop an increased awareness of the subject matter as well as a solid rapport with each other.

Modeling: Once is never enough: Teachers know we must present the target material in many different ways so that all are eventually able to forge their own unique avenues of understanding into aspects of story, character, and structure that they may then want to develop in their own creations. Effective modeling and elicitation here lays the groundwork for the tasking of the creative elements to come in the *Joint Construction* phase of the cycle.

Joint Construction: the big boost: Teachers surrender their dominating role here and step quietly into the role of *negotiator* as control of the field passes to the students. Whatever students are not yet able to do on their own, the teacher steps forward to contribute with subtle yet direct intervention.

But *peer response* plays an instrumental scaffolding role in the Joint Construction stage, as students have to seriously consider if their stories have met the basic guidelines. Partners are often thrust into the roles of scrutinizing each other's outlines to verify this, which really presses learners into serious reflection as to the potentiality of their

creations. This feedback at the peer level is a very valuable component of the cycle and illuminates Joint Construction as the most valuable phase of the scaffolding process, providing the guidance and support that really is necessary to build and shape these new creative screenwriting skills.

As a result, students become more confident, independent learners. And when the scaffolding is removed, everyone can undertake his or her own writing unassisted while moving into the final Independent Construction phase without recursive detours back into remedial phases of the cycle.

Independent Construction: Assessment needs to take place at each stage of the cycle to confirm that the learners are capable of producing the target material they have all, to varying degrees, absorbed. The five script assignments and final treatment neatly fill this role. When the students work on their Hollywood *pitch*, it involves a new set of oral presentation skills not practiced until then. Some students are also hampered by the phonetical challenges in their speech and require closer teacher assistance. Nevertheless, the students generally consider the final pitch presentation to be the highlight of the course and believe that it well represents the culmination of their newly acquired screenwriting skills. This three-minute presentation stresses story highlights over structure as the students *sell* their stories in a contest-like environment, *pitching* their ideas to another class, who pretend to be executives in a Hollywood film studio.

The student film posters served as the authentic and quite tangible manifestation of the student screenplay ideas, and their empowering abilities should not be diminished. The students are really quite proud of their movie posters and hold them high during their final movie *pitches*.

Short Screenplays that *Connect*

As shown below, each cycle has a name, which reflects its teaching focus. We concentrate on two primary creative elements in each cycle (which represents about three weeks of class time and work). You can find very inspiring classroom exercises from so many sources, but a fundamental precept of the class is that *we explore ourselves first*. The class text, Crafting Short Screenplays that Connect, by Johnson (2000), does an outstanding job here in drawing on the theme of “connecting” while gently leading student writers through carefully focused exercises that have proven very accessible to ESL classes.

The text also offers five heartfelt short films and their complete scripts, which we examine in class. The text also references key scenes in over thirty feature films. I bring many of these short clips in, too. Visuality is the focus; there is always plenty to watch in every class.

Like most screenplay books, parts are dense with literary allusions and with breezy references to other feature films; this can be daunting to L2 learners without some teacher guidance. In addition to the five short screenplay assignments drawn from the text, a three-minute *pitch* presentation, along with a two-page summary, or *treatment*, of a feature film proposal make up the core of class work.

A bare-bones look at the overall focus of each cycle follows:

Cycle 1 (the Discovery)

- 1) Exploring Connections (connections to audience; connections to self)
- 2) Introduction to Screenplay Format

Assignment #1: a 3-page script about a *significant discovery*

Cycle 2 (the Decision)

- 1) Exploring Theme
- 2) Screenplay Format (the finer points)

Assignment #2: a 3-5 page script about *making a decision*

Cycle 3 (the Conflict)

- 1) Exploring Conflict
- 2) Developing Character

Assignment #3: a 5-page script about a *character who wants something badly that another character doesn't want to give*

Cycle 4 (the Improbable Connection)

- 1) Developing Narrative Writing
- 2) Dialog techniques

Assignment #4: a 7-page script about *a connection, which at first seems improbable.*

Cycle 5 (the Change)

- 1) Exploring 3-act structure

Assignment #5: a 10–15 page script about *a pattern of human change that makes a difference to your character.*

Cycle 6 (the Feature)

- 1) Developing *the Hollywood Pitch*
- 2) The Feature-Length Treatment

Assignment #6: a *3-minute pitch presentation and treatment submission*

A Happy Ending?

Concern is expressed that it may not be appropriate to teach such a complex craft as screenwriting in ESL, even when broken up into what are both teachable and learnable pieces. I have found in my classes, however, that once students are given the chance to analyze the writing techniques a screenwriter must use to move the story forward, and if they try their own hands at these same techniques, they will absorb many of the traditional organizing strategies that students have so much trouble with in their writing. In addition, internalizing the basic steps of screenplay serves well as a working model for the composing process, as students will feel afterwards that they have a stronger ability to read and compose with greater attention to the structure, clarity, creativity, and momentum found in all good writing.

The Teaching-Learning Cycle infuses the ESL classroom with truly intrinsically motivating dynamics. Brown (2001) notes that learners need to develop autonomy in the classroom, not dependence. The learner-centered and cooperative teaching that the scaffolding component of the Teaching-Learning Cycle bestows gives these students the opportunity to engage both the instructor and their multicultural learning partners in new levels of development in both the critical analysis of current films and in the creative shaping of their own ideas for potential films.

More often than not, the effectiveness of the sources teachers use in class to stimulate student writing can depend on the students' reading comprehension, which is often way below that of their speaking and listening skills. Students also lack the confidence that what they have to say is of value in the classroom. No so in these screenwriting classes, as the students often sit in class and continue spirited discussions

about movies, in English, and well into the break. How often does this happen with the instructional material in an ESL writing class?

Though the culturally based nature of film studies sways students toward the factors that are considered significant within American culture, when students learn how to discuss, analyze and create their own ideas for films (which share common properties with books, music and art), they not only extend their control of the language, but they glean a much greater access to the English-speaking community. And the benefits from this increased involvement can be enormous for students.

Reid (1993, p.55) warns us with the caveat that, “there is a thin line between informing and influencing”, especially in the ESL classroom. As a gentle reminder, it might be wise to let students know that the course design in no way implies that the students should abandon their national origins. In fact, telling a story about one’s own culture is the surest way of maintaining one’s individual identity. Many of the most original screenplays submitted in class contain stories that reflect strong elements of the students’ home cultures.

Our ESL students face daunting challenges when it comes to their communicative systems, but a well-designed pedagogy that supports learners as they move toward their potential level of performance will go a long way towards preparing students for the higher order critical thinking skills that can increase their chances for academic success.

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Michael Greco has lived and taught English in Tokyo, Japan for 17 years. He recently received his MA in TESL from California State University, Dominguez Hills. He writes short-stories and screenplays and is very interested in the motivational qualities that the study of film can generate for students in the ESL classroom. He hopes to soon publish his first fictional novel: “The Adventures of Carl, the Multicultural Cat”.