Part A
I Video drama

Introduction

'Video drama' here means everything which tells a story about fictional characters. Part A suggests activities to exploit this kind of material. It deals with feature films, the film and the book, drama series, sitcoms, soaps, drama clips and comedy sketches. In each section all the relevant activities are listed at the beginning and given in brackets in **bold** type in the main text; you will find details of each activity in the bank of activities.

Why use authentic video?

The most obvious reason for using video drama is that language students want it. It is not an indulgence or a frill but central to language learning.

One reason why it is so important for language learning is that it is a window into culture. For instance, there are some settings which high-light particular sectors, e.g. American presidential elections, the stock exchange, criminal courts, Australian suburbia, army life, and these can be especially useful in ESP and project work (**Daily life, Organization man, Picture it**). Period settings, too, are now so well-researched that they are as good as a visit to a museum (**Place and period**). But more important are the minutiae of daily life – body language, styles of dress, table manners, gender roles, how people treat their children or talk to their bosses – and indeed the whole feeling of the social landscape, which is particularly strong in realistic soap operas (**Body language, Character network, Culture, Dossier, Fly on the wall, Lifestyle, Organization man**). The fact that this behaviour is unmarked and unremarked in film drama (just taken for granted), makes it particularly convincing. My Italian students, for example, refused to believe the English could be so eccentric as to eat biscuits with their cheese after a meal, but I showed them – in a sitcom!

Of course, much film drama is set in a fantasy world where the people are rich and white, the men are heroic and the women beautiful, boy-meets-girl ends in true love, and criminals are brought snarling to justice after elaborate car chases. But this set of formulas and clichés is also part of our general culture, copied and parodied by the media

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world, and can be explored with pleasure and profit in class (**Make a case, Oscar, Plan a chase, Plot idea 1, Schema, Sequel and prequel, Your movie**).

Video drama reflects major cultural movements (e.g. changing perceptions of women), but it also *creates* culture (witness icons like Mickey Mouse). Much of the popular knowledge shared by the English-speaking world comes from feature films on general release: many people would never have known about Karen Blixen or idiots savants without *Out of Africa* and *Rainman*. And this culture is now global. Many English-language soap operas and drama series have also found an international market. Thus understanding video drama is an entry ticket to the English-speaking world, on a par with reading newspapers and magazines, writing business letters, having conversations and other major language activities found in EFL coursebooks. It should, like them, be regarded as a language-learning goal in its own right.

There are equally strong arguments on the linguistic front. First, understanding is that much easier because the language is interpreted in full visual context. Events, setting, actions, expressions, gestures in a scene give a dense immediate context which highlights meaning, both literal and pragmatic. We see the angry face which says 'You'd better believe it' or the shrug that goes with 'I couldn't care less' (**Body language, Holophrases, Lipreading and mindreading, Speech acts**). Moreover, the language is directly linked to the feelings, situations and speakers which inspire it, and this full social context gives access to the full meaning (**Purrs and slurs, What's going on?**). As we watch, we also gradually accumulate an understanding of the whole story, the narrative context; this opens up the significance of the words in the action as a whole (**Jumbled statements** Variation, **Quotes, Speculations** Variation 3). This may seem obvious, but remember that language learners to some extent view life (and film) upside down. Expert speakers make use of the language to understand the action; learners frequently have to use the action to understand the language. Most listening comprehension exercises for language learners are brief, one-off and purely aural and don't provide these essential aids, the dense visual and social context and the in-depth experience of what has gone before, which make drama film the nearest thing most foreign-language students have to real-life experience of spoken meaning.

A second reason for using film drama in language learning is the *kind of language* that drama provides – interactive language, the language of daily conversational exchange (**Act along, Getting things done, Holophrases, Interactive language, Jumbled statements** Variation, **Lipreading and mindreading, Questions, Quotes, Script, Speculations** Variation 3, **Speech acts, Subtitles 1 and 2, Telephone conversations**).

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'Interaction' is now recognized in the European Language Framework as one of the four major areas of language competence, along with Production, Reception and Mediation, but it is relatively neglected in coursebooks above elementary level. One reason is that it is very difficult to bring a wide range of interactive language into the classroom, e.g. you cannot expect teachers or students to *gloat, needle, sound people out, beat about the bush, hint, probe, flatter, fawn, threaten, stall, scream blue murder* – at least not to order! As a result, learners who have not stayed in an English-speaking country or community are often unable to produce natural spoken English. When asked to role play or script a dialogue, they frequently produce strange scholastic language, inappropriate tone, distorted idioms, unlikely collocations and above all a limited repertoire of functional language and colloquial phraseology. Another result is that students lack the metalanguage for describing speech events and acts, and the reactions and manoeuvres of conversation (e.g. *Could I have a word?; you flatter yourself; that's blackmail; I was really taken aback; take me through that again*), a major vocabulary area essential to daily conversation (**Best scene, Diary, Favourite scene, Feeling flow, Fly on the wall, Gossip, Heard and seen** Variation, **Speech acts, What's going on**? See also Box 13 on page 52).

Only drama can provide this range of language, and students need such exposure because to learn to speak to people they must see and hear people speaking to each other. More limited, less contextualized input such as sets of functional phrases and mini-dialogues is not in fact the best way to help students produce appropriate language or remember it well. For one thing, our intuitions about how functions are expressed are unreliable, i.e. what we imagine we might say to express doubt or disagreement (for example) is often not what we actually do say, or what our students themselves would want to say. One of the reasons is that the appropriate choice of language depends on context, situation, roles and relationships, intention and feeling, which can only be appreciated – and only learnt well – in a whole and developing context.

Finally, drama provides not only interactive language input, but also a stimulus for activities which exercise interactive language *output* (**Advice, Gossip, Lipreading and mindreading, Missing scene, Soap write-out, Scenario, Telephone conversations, What's next?**). The virtue of such activities is that they are constrained in language terms by the context, but are also highly creative and enjoyable.

To sum up, language learners need video drama because they need to understand people speaking to each other and they need extensive exposure to realistic interaction as wide-range models for their own speech.

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What can we use?

But we have to go carefully. Watching drama that you don't understand is a very negative experience. You yourself may recall sitting out a foreign-language film to the bitter end after getting lost in the first half hour. If people are to learn through drama, they *must* understand it. And the fact is that, as normally viewed, most film drama is too difficult for most language students. Students need to have at least lower-intermediate level before they can cope with a full-length feature film without subtitles, and at this level it would still need to be a simple film.

What makes films easy or difficult?

What hinders comprehension is:
- high verbal density, i.e. a lot of speech with very little action (e.g. Woody Allen films)
- words which don't match the action, e.g. in smart dinner-table conversation; or words which are in conflict with the action or are an ironic commentary on it, as in send-ups and satires like *Indiana Jones* or *Monty Python*
- a high degree of naturalism in the speech, e.g. everyone talking at once, mumbled asides, actors with their backs to the camera, inconsequential dialogue
- cartoons – mouths, faces and body language are not as expressive as those of real people
- dialect and regional accents – local colour in the film generally means local confusion in the viewer, and many excellent soap operas are inaccessible to language learners as a result
- period language, e.g. Shakespeare remains difficult in spite of some wonderful adaptations; however, in film adaptations of classic novels (e.g. Jane Austen and Dickens) careful scriptwriting and clear drama-school enunciation often triumph over archaic language

What helps comprehension is:
- unambiguous action (westerns, crime), with plenty of action between speech and a close connection between speech and action, e.g. a cowboy spits out his chewing-gum, takes a long look at the saloon bar, and slowly drawls, 'I'm just gonna go in there and rearrange the furniture,' and then *goes and does it*
- clear conventional story lines: straightforward love stories aimed at adolescents (e.g. *Dirty Dancing*); children's film drama (e.g. *Babe*, the *Wallace and Grommit* series); epics (e.g. *Titanic*, *Jurassic Park*)

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and science-fiction drama (e.g. *Close Encounters, Star Wars*), which
have simple plot lines and time-consuming special effects which
lighten the verbal comprehension burden
- stylized acting: old 'canned drama' movies are acted like plays –
only one character speaks at a time, always clearly and always to
camera; classics like *High Noon*, *Mutiny on the Bounty, Casablanca,
Gone with the Wind* share this kind of clarity
- clearly enunciated speech in standard accents – this criterion rules
out a lot of excellent regional films
- anything which slows down the diction: films where one of the main
characters isn't able to communicate very well because he or she is
an alien, a foreigner, deaf, dumb, whatever it takes to produce slow
halting language which has to be interpreted both for the other
characters and for us, the audience, e.g. *Nell, Rainman, ET,
Children of a Lesser God, Regarding Henry, Down By Law,
Awakenings, Dances with Wolves, The Piano* and many episodes of
Star Trek

Students are the best judges of what is 'frustration level' in film drama.
If they are viewing on their own, suggest that they either look for
material which is easy enough to make the experience a pleasure
(**Grading**), or find ways of making the viewing easier. Give them advice
on what to start with and whether or how to use subtitles (see below).
A checklist for discussing the use of feature films with students is given
in the activity **Learning English with films**.

Subtitles and dubbing

Some films and drama series have built-in aids to comprehension in the
form of dubbing and subtitling. Captioned films are also available in
several languages if you have a decoder, and most DVDs give you a
choice of languages for both dubbing and subtitling. How useful are they
for language learners?

   When thinking whether or how to use these aids we must recognize
that the eye is more powerful than the ear, and (all other things being
equal) will dominate. If viewers are offered both reading and listening,
they will read in preference to listening, unless their aural skills are much
greater than their reading skills. Indeed, people will read subtitles even
if they have no need of them, e.g. when watching a film in their
own language with subtitles also in their own language (or another
language they know). If they are second-language learners with relatively
weak aural comprehension, they will tend to substitute reading for
listening.

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There are four possibilities:

- *English drama dubbed into the learners' language,* with the soundtrack in the learners' language, obviously does nothing for the learners' English. If you have the original English version, it is interesting to compare it with the dubbed translation, but this is usually too far from the original to act as a 'model translation'.
- *Drama in the learners' language subtitled in English* aimed at English native speakers, can be bought in England or through big video suppliers and may also be available on DVDs. It is clearly very little use for listening comprehension and is rarely used in language teaching, but it has great potential for vocabulary extension, especially the recognition of interactive language. Provided the viewer can read English, the eye is drawn to the subtitles; at the same time the viewer understands everything, fully contextualized, and can see how it's said in English. Thousands of students swear that this was how they learnt foreign languages.
- *English drama subtitled in the learners' language* is a fairly common resource and sometimes available on DVDs. Although the film provides a running translation, there is probably very little learning of English in this kind of viewing. The viewer tends to rely on the most accessible channel, the written text, and does not process both channels equally – and may indeed 'switch off' the *verbal* sound completely. However, these versions do introduce the film, and the L1 subtitles can be covered up and used to check comprehension when necessary. They are also useful for translation exercises (**Subtitles 1**).
- *English drama subtitled in English* is available from several sources (including DVDs) and is much appreciated by students; it is also very useful for transcribing the script of a scene. It certainly improves comprehension, but unless the students' aural comprehension is very good they will almost certainly improve their reading rather than their listening skills. If this is what is wanted, fine; if not, turn off the subtitles (for DVDs) or stick a newspaper over the bottom of the screen (for videotapes) and use the subtitles only if needed, as an on-line dictionary. Advise students working on their own to do the same. Such films can also be used for good close-focus listening activities matching speech and writing (**Subtitles 2**), since the subtitles are often only an approximation of the spoken words.

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1   Full-length feature films

Doing a film

At all levels we are looking for ways of *maximising comprehension*, but we also have a logistical problem with feature films: movies are long, teaching hours are short, so we also need to be able to *fit films into* a classroom schedule. How can we meet these two aims at the same time? Here are some possibilities.

Illustrated talk

Tell the story of the film yourself, illustrating it by showing three or four key scenes chosen for their comprehensibility and impact. Leave the story at a climactic point and don't tell the ending (**Film presentation**). Afterwards offer the video cassette to whoever wants to see the whole film;

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they should come back and report to the class on what happened in the end. This is a good way of doing a number of films in a short time; after one or two demonstrations by the teacher, groups of students can undertake to present a film of their choice in the same way (**Film presentation**).

Salami tactics

'Slice up' the film into five or six episodes and do it over several lessons. Start with a lead-in (**Lead-in**, **Plot idea 2**, **Schema**, **Seen it before**, **Voice 2**). After each section do:

- a recap activity (**Adopt a character, Before and after, Character network, Cross-cutting, Dossier** Variation 2**, Jumbled statements, Make a case, Make a case for character, Sequel and prequel** (Prequel)**, Schema, Summary, Why and How?**)
- a prediction/anticipation activity (**Advice, Decisions, Speculations**) for comprehension of the next section; other possibilities, depending on the film, are **Chases** Variation 1, **Fights**, **Missing character** and **Seen it before** Variation 2

This approach is time-consuming but worth it for a very good film which everyone badly wants to see.

Front loading

Concentrate on the introduction. The director normally uses the first 15–20 minutes of a film for 'exposition', i.e. to establish the setting and set up the characters, relationships, plot and themes. Working on this introductory part therefore really helps in understanding the whole film. Use one lesson to view the introduction only, do suitable recap activities (see *Salami tactics* above), then view the introduction again. Make sure that the recap activities are used to raise questions for the second viewing of the introduction – avoid the teacherly temptation to provide right answers. In the following lesson(s) view the rest of the film. This can be followed (or not) by activities on

- the whole film (**Before and after, Best scene, Climax, Dossier, Eye on the object, Film presentation, Issues, Lifestyle, Misapprehensions, Oscar, Place and period, Puff, Sequel and prequel** (Sequel)**, Turning points**)
- individual scenes for their action (**Act along, Body language, Cross-cutting, Feeling flow, Fights, Fly on the wall, Quotes, Speech acts, What's going on?, Writing the book**)
- individual scenes for their language (**Accents, Choose your words, Interactive language, Questions, Subtitles 1, Telephone conversations, Tenses, Transcript, Wordhunt**)

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Box 2 outlines a possible sequence. Alternatively, do a series of single lessons on film introductions and get students to select the one they would like to see to the end, either in class or on their own; or get groups to view the remainder of each film outside class and report back to the class.

Independent film study

If films are available for independent viewing, discuss strategies with students (**Learning English with feature films**). If students are enthusiastic, suggest a more extensive independent film study project, done individually or in small groups. The project in Box 2 has been done many times with students from 16 to 30. It is organized on the 'front loading' principle, with a break and recap activities after the introduction, then a viewing of the rest of the film and activities on the plot, characters and language. Mature advanced students can work on their own, but still need *models* of the type of product required (see page 9). One solution is to use previous students' projects as models. Younger or lower-level students need more support. Work through one film together in class, following the project outline, and together produce a set of model answers which students can refer to when working on their own. Then get students to work on their own films in groups, dividing up the activities between them. Finish with mini-presentations by each group to the class as a whole: they need this prospect to keep them going.

BOX 2   Independent film study project

Instructions for students

1 **Selection**: View a number of film beginnings to get an idea of
   what makes a film understandable and to help you choose your
   own film. Then view the introduction (the first 15–20 minutes) of
   your selected film and write a difficulty report (see **Grading**).
2 **Activities on the introduction**: View the introduction again, then
   do two of these activities: **Adopt a character, Character network,
   Lifestyle, Make a case for character, Summary.** (N.B. It is a
   temptation to go on viewing all the way through, but it will really
   improve your comprehension if you view the beginning twice.)
3 **Viewing break**: View the rest of the film right through.
4 **Nitty-gritty**: View the rest of the film again in order to prepare a
   quiz for other viewers. This helps you to become familiar with the
   film, and also produces exercises which can be used by other
   students. Choose one of these activities: **Dossier, Jumbled
   statements** Variation.
5 **Overview**: Review the plot or the themes of the film with one of
   the following activities: **Climax, Issues, Misapprehensions**.
6 **Close focus**: Select your own two scenes for a close focus on the
   action and the language. For the action, choose **Fly on the wall,
   What's going on?** or **Writing the book**; and for language study,
   Choose your words, Transcript or **Wordhunt**.
7 **Evaluation**: If you are working alone, you should do the activity
   Oscar; if in a group, do **Film presentation.**

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If your institution has a film library, self-access viewing facilities and an
active viewing population, you can get students to create material for
'film files' on individual movies which can be used by other students. Ask
them to grade the films for subsequent viewers (**Grading**) and include
this grading as the first document in the file. Other items in the file can
be quizzes on various aspects of the film (with keys) (**Dossier, Jumbled
statements** Variation), questions about behaviour or issues (**Issues**),
gapped dictations (**Transcript**) and critical reviews (**Oscar**).

Follow-up worksheets

Any film viewing, whether in class or independent, can be extended with
independent work on reactions and interactions or on language (use part
or all of the worksheets in Boxes 3 and 4).