

English Cartoons: Practical Approach to English Learning for Art Majors

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Abstract: Due to simple languages and informative contents, English cartoons, as is pointed out in this article, can be introduced into English learning for art majors. By means of these visual stimuli methods, English cartoons may enhance art students' initiative and awake their enthusiasm in English learning.

Key words: English cartoons; art majors; English learning

英语动画片：艺术院校学生英语学习的可实践方法

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摘要: 本研究提出由于英语动画片语言简单、内容丰富, 可以将其引入艺术院校的英语学习, 借助合理的方法, 以增强艺术专业学生英语学习的主动性和积极性。

关键词: 英语动画片; 艺术院校学生; 英语学习

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I Introduction

English learning in art colleges has always been difficult, as students' English foundations are relatively weak and much emphasis is laid on the students' professional courses. Therefore art students tend to display little enthusiasm in English. According to the author's years of teaching practice and the characteristics of art students in English learning, it is suggested that English cartoons should be introduced into English classrooms. The relative informality of cartoons as an introductory stimulus, in conjunction with more traditional classroom teaching methods will benefit student confidence in learning, increase vocabulary input, as well as act as an effective

approach for art majors to acquire the required subject content.

II Difficulties in Art Students' English Learning

Art majors are often faced with several problems in their English learning, which may block their English acquisition. Generally speaking, the difficulties are as follows.

1. Poor English Foundations

In College Entrance Examination, admission to art colleges mainly depends on the students' grades on artistic subjects. The profession-oriented policy

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drives students to pay much more attention to their professional courses than the basic ones, especially English. As a result, it is common that art students have relatively low English levels. In Shandong University of Arts, which the author works in, the total enrollment in 2009 is 1 635. However, these freshmen's average score of English in College Entrance Examination is only 78.61 (the total score is 150), and the proportion of those whose scores are below 60 is as high as 23.73%. In fact, the situation has always been like this in recent years and it's typical of most art colleges and universities as far as English foundations are concerned. Art majors' comparatively low English levels have become a common phenomenon, which concerns both teachers and students alike.

2. Mode of Thinking Unfit for Language Learning

Language is the basic means of expression and communication, and its acquisition needs the learners' logical thinking ability, emotional stability and evolutionary way of learning. However, most art majors are used to intuition and imagination in their thought processes and thus tend to have weak logical thinking abilities. Meanwhile, they are more psychologically sensitive and fragile. When art students learn languages, their psychological expectations are usually life and ideological tastes, and their receptive capabilities for English information are comparatively lower than those of other majors, which is not conducive to the English learning of art students^[1].

3. Lack of Confidence in English Learning

The traditional English teaching model pays close attention to the explanation of complex grammar and the boring vocabulary tests. For art students, that is another difficulty which may cause their fear and deepen their anxiety for English learning. In English classes, when art students are unable to understand, memorize or speak idiomatic English, they usually tend to doubt their learning ability and lose their interest in English studies. Even worse, if things go on like this, students will gradually get involved in a

vicious cycle: the less confident art students become, the more difficult they think English acquisition is.

4. Lack of Intrinsic Motivation

For art students, English is just a general compulsory course, whose importance is far less than that of professional courses. According to a survey on learning motivations, the majority of art students take English learning as an extrinsic challenge. For them, they have to study English because of the pressure from all kinds of exams and jobs interviews.^[2] Consequently, most art majors lose their learning initiative and consider English as an extra intolerable burden.

III Characteristics of English Cartoons

Aiming at the above problems, English movies are often recommended as a practical approach to help art majors to increase language input, stimulate their interest and improve their English learning ability. However, high language speed and complicated plot of common movies add some difficulties to art students, which fails to bring about the desired learning effects. In comparison, the English cartoons have their own specific merits.

1. Simple Languages

As most animated cartoons target teenagers are enthusiastic audience, dialogues between characters in these movies are usually easy to understand; meanwhile their speaking pace is comparatively low and pronunciation clear and standard.^[3] These characteristics of English cartoons are suitable for the needs of art majors so that the students with poor English levels are able to appreciate the movies in a relatively easy way. And what's more important, by this means, art students may build their confidence, stimulate their initiative and give full play to their potential in English learning.

2. Appropriate Plot

Generally speaking, English cartoons usually have simple plots and instructive contents in contrast

to other Hollywood movies with inappropriate content for the classroom environment. In this respect, English cartoons are more appropriate for English studies because they could help students to learn English in a relaxing atmosphere. While appreciating cartoon movies, students may learn the target language in real and natural circumstances, rather than watch the Hollywood films purely for curiosity and entertainment.

3. Moderate Length

In fact, many colleges have introduced English films in English classrooms. However, the learning effect is not always satisfactory because the selected movies are often so long that students may only finish one film in one two-hour class without enough time for discussion and practice. Even worse, some longer movies have to be divided into two parts due to the limited time in class. Compared with ordinary English movies, especially the Hollywood ones, the length of an English cartoon is often one hour or so. This feature is particularly appropriate for English classes because it is practicable in one class to appreciate one complete cartoon film and meanwhile to have enough time to develop the relevant class activities.

4. Rich Cultural Connotation

A lot of English cartoons are culturally informative and the rich cultural connotation may cater to students' tastes. The distinct characters in them often instill into students the concept of truth, goodness and beauty, and their positive attitude toward life, which reflects the value of Western culture, and may inspire the love for life in art majors. Take *Finding Nemo* for example. At first, the Clownfish Father Marlin was a coward known to all locals. In the journey of rescuing his son, the overly cautious father gradually learned how to overcome his inner fear with courage and love, and saw that there is indeed something in life that deserves one's adventure. Finally, Marlin became a real hero in his son's eyes. This kind of cartoon movies may enable students to have a more profound understanding of the Western cultures. For art majors, the appreciation of these

movies is just like a purification of their mind with such virtues as loyalty, courage, confidence and love.

IV Practical Approach of English Cartoons in English Learning

To make good use of English cartoons in English learning, it is essential for art students to formulate practicable learning methods.

1. Select Cartoons Based on Professional Interests

In the first place, art majors may select cartoon movies according to their professional interests. Compared with the traditional learning mode, the method of associating the students' professional characteristics with English learning may attract art students, to a certain degree, to learn English more willingly.

For instance, *The Prince of Egypt* is a good choice for the students majoring in cultures. This culturally informative cartoon movie may enable students to learn something about Moses' exodus in the Bible. For design majors, those filled with innovative ideas and departing from conventions are suggested to watch the *Shrek* series. In these movies, the traditional handsome Prince Charming was not the image of good virtue, while the ugly ogre Shrek, thanks to his bravery and sincerity, finally led a happy life. Some classical cartoon figures, such as Pinocchio, Puss in Boots, reappeared in this series of movies with a refreshing impression. All these films can inspire and activate the imagination of art majors, and in a way stimulates and motivates their needs for English learning.

English cartoon movies are often spiced with nice interlude songs, which is another attraction to art students, let alone the music majors. A good example is *the Lion King*, which won 1995 Oscar and Golden Globe Awards for best original music and best musical score. In this film, such impressive songs as *The Circle of Life* and *Can You Feel the Love Tonight* may instill into music majors the concept and value of sound and picture synchronization. The pleasant

melodies and vivid lyrics give full play to the charm of simple and fascinating music, and art students would likely want to learn and sing them. Actually, for art students, the process of learning to sing English songs leads them to acquire target language in a more relaxing way.

2. Important Group Work Practice

Group work, that is, learners working in groups of 3 or 4 to complete a task, is often used to prepare English learners for self-access language learning^[4]. When watching English cartoons, art majors may also adopt this learning strategy to steer them to learn English autonomously in a peer learning environment. After selecting an appropriate cartoon film, art students may engage in group work and complete a series of activities, thus enhancing their learning input.

(1) Lead-in Activities

For lead-in activities, one group member may give a brief introduction about the selected movie, while other students may search related material such as the historical backgrounds, theme music and film critics. For instance, before watching *The Prince of Egypt*, students may share with each other the cultural information about the Bible, Exodus and Mosaic Commandments. As for the Disney film *Pocahontas*, colonization is the key word. If possible, students may explore the true story of Pocahontas on the Internet. All this material will contribute to a mastery of the movie's contents and a profound understanding of Western culture and history.

(2) Watching Cartoons

In the process of watching movies, group members are suggested to focus on key words and phrases in the cartoons. Meanwhile, it is also significant for students to highlight those classical film clips with clear pronunciation and typical tones for them to repeat, discuss and imitate later. In *Shrek 3*, Arthur, the next king of Far Far Away said, "A good friend once told me just because people treat you like a villain or an ogre or just some loser doesn't mean

you are one. What matters most is what you think yourself. If there is something you really want, or someone you want to be, the only person standing in your way is you." Students may select clips which contain such classical lines and watch them as many times as they need. At the same time, they may try to memorize these scenes, the characters' facial expressions and their body languages in order to grasp the inner feelings of the characters, deepen the understanding of the lines, and appreciate the charm of language. It is also recommended to cut and edit these films and burn a disc of appropriate selected scenes for learning or download them into MP3 format, which would be far more convenient for post listening activities and further learning.

(3) After-class Activities

Watching cartoons is just the process of passive language input. What is more important is the outcomes and retention and use, that is, how to apply what has been learned to use, which is the real purpose of this learning approach. In the language environment which English cartoons provide, art majors may have many choices to use the films' material which they have learned by heart.

Soliloquizing—talking to oneself, may be the easiest and most convenient way. With so many classic movie lines, learners may have a rich reserve in mind. By reciting and imitating the monologues, asides and dialogues, students may experience the fun of language output.

Based on different films and different majors, there may also be some flexible extended activities. It may be welcomed by drama majors to extract some simple clips from *Beauty and Beast* to imitate, and even put on a short play. By role-playing, they could, in a relaxing atmosphere, learn English syntax and have a good practice of oral English. As for the classic film songs, such as *Colors of the Wind* in *Pocahontas*, students may search the lyrics on the Internet and learn to sing them with the help of multimedia players.

To sum up, by this cooperative learning, art majors can not only expand English knowledge

imperceptibly, but also train their social skills and group dynamics, which will be beneficial to their English language learning in the long run.

3. Relevant Findings

In Shandong University of Arts, English cartoons have been used as some supplementary material to enrich the audio-visual courses since 2009. *Appreciation and Analysis of English Cartoons*, an elective course, is also designed for art majors to learn English by means of animated movies. According to a survey of 1 635 students who were enrolled in 2009, 83.47% of them regard the introduction of English cartoons into classrooms as beneficial to their English studies. 62.91% of the students more or less attribute their rebuilt confidence and enthusiasm in English learning to English cartoons. A fourth-year student taking part in the Entrance Test of English for MA Candidates this year once wrote the following words on the answer sheet of the survey, "Thanks to English cartoons, luckily I will become a postgraduate student with a fairly high English score. The cartoons have ushered me into a wonderful world of language and I would not hesitate for a second to recommend them to any English learners."

V Conclusion

For art students, the introduction of English cartoons into English classrooms is superior to other

learning methods in such aspects as stimulating students' initiative and giving full play to their creative potential in English learning. The learning techniques of animated movies can be flexible and diverse. Besides group work, art students may adopt project work, extensive reading and listening, troubleshooting sessions and so on. It should be pointed out that as an auxiliary learning method, the application of English cartoons can by no means replace traditional methods of English class learning, but be used as a stimulus to motivate initial language learning. Art students should take advantage of cartoons as a way of focusing on acquiring target language. In this way satisfactory learning outcomes can be obtained and art students are able to benefit immensely from the use of this classroom material.

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