## Movie-generated EFL writing: Discovering the act of writing through visual literacy practices

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The present article explores the idea of using movies in EFL classrooms to develop students' writing skill. In this qualitative study, 15 EFL learners were engaged in different writing activities in a contextualized form of movies, meaning that the films acted as text-books, and activities were designed based on the contexts of the films. Taking an action research design and by relying on different sources to enrich the class, the researchers took the role of learners-instructors to explore writing beyond its conventional practices in EFL classrooms. After 40 hours of instruction, it was shown that the students found a way to enrich their writings and to express their ideas through words and statements that resembled the way writers and directors of the movies dealt with pictures. Students were engaged in deciphering the pictures, inferring and expressing the meanings, and finding a framework for their writings based on the genres of the movies. Following these activities, learners learnt how to be visually literate and to move beyond the predetermined writing formats and discover their own through an artistic practice to give life to their texts, like movies.

**Keywords:** EFL Students; Language Teaching; Movies; Visual Literacy; Writing Skill

### 1. Introduction

Today by the invention of the camera and the increasing use of audio-visual technologies in the world, visual literacy and the need for it in learning (Dondis,1983) have become a visible or an invisible part of our daily lives. With no exaggerations, these pieces of technology, in their mushroom-like dissemination and quick maturation, are making the world smaller at a faster rate than ever before; they have traversed the assumed geographical and cultural boundaries and connected millions of people across the globe to each

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other. When learners experience the influence of new media, television, and films, little by little they enter a visual world which sometimes influences their learning. Prensky (2001) uses the label 'digital natives' to refer to a number of learners in the today's world who are now growing up with these technologies and argues that such learners cannot imagine the world without technology.

People may think that with the technological advances of today, students like to delve into the writing process while the previous studies showed that, because of their low competency in writing, students are not motivated enough to write (Bhatia & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Birjandi, Alavi & Salmani Nodoushan, 2004; Mason, Meadan, Hedin & Cramer, 2012; Salmani Nodoushan, 2007a,b; Salmani Nodoushan & Alavi, 2004). Simply, students do not have enough knowledge of the strategies of writing; they are not aware of planning during writing, and they are not successful in understanding such critical factors as the setting, time, climax, and ending of a story (Graham, 1990; MacArthur & Graham, 1987; Saddler, 2012; Salmani Nodoushan, 2009a; Salmani Nodoushan, 2011; Salmani Nodoushan, 2012a,b,c; Salmani Nodoushan, 2014; Salmani Nodoushan, 2015).

Regarding the intricacy and the obscurity of the act of writing for the learners and the importance of images in producing a written text, this study seeks to find the answers to the questions of how images (films and movies) can feed EFL writing, and how students can benefit from this process by integrating visual literacy and the writing practices along one route in learning the writing skill.

## 2. Background

Previous studies have also emphasized the difficulty of learning the writing skill for learners (Ahour & Mukundan, 2008; Baroudy, 2008; Elbow, 2000; Persky, Daane & Jin, 2003; Saddler, 2012; Salmani Nodoushan, 2011). In their study, Salmani Nodoushan and Khakbaz (2012) concluded that "most students, even those with high scores in English, often have difficulties in expressing themselves in writing" (p. 112). This difficulty is mainly because students should produce a foreign language in an organized way which is understandable for readers from different backgrounds and cultures (Salmani Nodoushan, 2011). A large number of external and internal factors that can influence EFL students' writing performance can also add to the complexity and difficulty of learning this skill (Anderson, Vanderhoff & Donovick, 2013; Chalak & Norouzi, 2013; Eghtesadi & Navidinia, 2009; Nilforooshan & Afghari, 2007; Samar, Navidinia & Mehrani, 2010).

In order to help students learn this difficult and at the same time very important language skill, different teaching approaches have been proposed

(Salmani Nodoushan & Khakbaz, 2011), although there have been controversies about the best way to teach this skill (Luchini & Roldán, 2007). Besides, some researchers have emphasized the importance of using techniques and strategies in EFL writing classes (Luchini & Roldán, 2007; Rezaee & Oladi, 2008). One strategy that can facilitate learning this skill can be the implementation of visual cues.

According to Horton (1983), visual literacy is "the ability to understand (read) and use (write) images and to think and learn in terms of images i.e. to think visually" (p. 99). Visualization, according to Bowkett (2009), is a form of "multi-sensory thinking" (p. 134). Ralph Ellis (1995) believed that thinking is shaped by images, and images are more important than thinking (See also Arnold, 2000). As a visual communication form, writing plays an important role in the literacy process although some languages do not have written forms, and communication is done through pictorial forms (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; See also Salmani Nodoushan & Khakbaz, 2011; Salmani Nodoushan & Khakbaz, 2012; Salmani Nodoushan & Montazeran, 2012).

Films in specific, and cinema in general, carry the flag of visual elements wherever they go. They are of great importance because they employ both images and the spoken language. There is an important similarity between cinema and writing in the sense that they both are ways for the inscription of signs (Ahmadi, 2005). It is believed that movies can help learners to cope with intricate texts and provide them with visual models of written language such as cause and effect, argumentation, and comparison and contrast (Kasper, 2000). Their implementation in writing classes may therefore be facilitative. Nevertheless, sometimes teachers are uncertain about the use of films in their classes mostly because of two reasons. First, they think that films cannot act as a text and tool for learning. Second, they hesitate to use methods in which they are not experts, or they do not have enough information about them (Fehlman, 1987). According to Fehlman (1987), films can be used as both texts and textbooks in English classes. If used appropriately, they have the potentiality of engaging all language skills—listening, reading, writing, and speaking. When students connect verbal and written explanations to visual demonstration, learning can be reinforced since this connection offers opportunities for the learners to reflect on language in a multilayered way and to write based on their own reflections and the connections they can find (Rivers & Brackett, 2010).

## 3. Method

This qualitative study with an action research design (cf., Farrell, 2015; Salmani Nodoushan, 2009b) was done in a private language institute in Birjand, Iran. 15 intermediate EFL students ($N$=15; $n_{\text{female}}$=7; $n_{\text{male}}$=8)

volunteered to participate in the study. They were at the same level of language proficiency and had an age range of 15 to 26 years. It was a voluntary class, so the students did not pay any fees for it. The class was held for twenty sessions, 2 hours each. As the course did not have a predefined textbook, movies replaced the conventional books and teaching materials of the course.

The class favored a variety of moving pictures which had their own language characteristics (i.e., words, pronunciation, genres, and themes), so the learners had many opportunities to write. The movies were chosen carefully based on their linguistic elements and features. For example, in the case of musicals, it was assumed that the poetic language and the music would intensify the artistic form of language and represent a new style of writing which would supposedly deviate from the routine practice of script writing. Moreover, the movies flourished the beauty of language in songs and rhythmic texts hand in hand with pictures that proliferated that beauty.

The students were introduced to the course in the first session. At this stage, the researchers felt the need to see how learners felt about language learning as a whole as well as about different parts of it—including writing. In order to achieve this goal, students were given an open-ended questionnaire about watching movies and learning language. The answers shed light on how to handle the learners' needs and the course objectives—i.e., movie-generated writing. Although the students loved discussing the movies, when it came to writing and jotting down their ideas on paper, they could not express their opinions correctly. They were also asked to write reflections on why they came to English classes. During the term, these reflections on different topics were really helpful for the researchers so that they could get to know the students' needs better in order to modify the syllabus. The researchers' taking of field notes during the class and after it helped them not to forget the details of classroom activities and students' learning process.

While discussing in the class and also individually through the reflections, it became clear that the idea of watching movies and learning how to write was totally a new concept for the learners as they mainly watched movies to learn new words, pronunciation, and to discern cultural issues. After learning about all of these ideas, the course was divided into three phases so that learners could go on step by step through the learning and get to know how films and language writing could be integrated. Each part had its own plans, but all of them were chained together.

*Phase I*: In the first phase, the students became familiar with rudimentary information and the instruction they needed for the rest of the course. They became familiar with a form of visual literacy including some technical terms of movies such as different genres or the effect of light or colors on expressing

information or the understanding of images. The technical terms introduced to the students were those which were related to language and were loaded with linguistic information. For example, getting to know different genres in films helped them to learn new words and vocabularies, and to categorize different genres. Students were familiarized with contextualization by learning daily words which were used in films with different genres such as adventure, comedy, horror, and so on. Next, they entered the world of writing in English by first writing:

- descriptive sentences,
- short creative descriptions with the use of metaphors and symbols, and
- longer statements that resembled simple reviews or even simple critiques about movies they had seen.

**Phase II**: In phase two which was a bridge between phases I and III, learners had adequate information to continue their voyage in this course. At this time, they were asked to be ready for an in-depth analysis of films, images and language through writing activities (e.g., reviews and critiques) about each part of the film—such as writing reviews to analyze the characters, plots, and settings.

**Phase III**: At this stage of the course, the learners became more prepared to produce more sophisticated writings; they wrote elaborate writings based on movie-generated topics. Moreover, they worked with images and words simultaneously to give presentations in the class.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Phase I - Raising the curtain: Moving writing out of the dark

In this phase, the students were asked to write descriptive sentences about the pictures and films. Here, the learners were shown pictures of nature, some episodes of the movies *2012*, *Bringing up Bobby*, and *The Kite Runner*. They also tried to complete some unfinished movies and conclude them based on their own understanding. In this way, they became familiar with writing based on pictures. For example, learners were asked to complete an unfinished short clip with no voice over based on their own perspectives. They were asked to write simple sentences that would comprise a short paragraph. Most of the students wrote in the form of script not screenplay, meaning that they wrote from the third person point of view who was narrating the story of the film. The episode that Mahtab (one of the learners) chose to write about began with the picture of a jungle, trees, and bushes. The camera ran as if somebody was searching or walking fast through the woods. Suddenly two feet were seen in the green pants but the feet-owner's face could not be seen. This marked the point from which the learners would continue the story. The

sample excerpts from the students' writings presented below show how they discovered language and the theme of the class, and the way they connected movies and language learning together. The excerpts may include students' errors and mistakes. To comply with confidentiality codes, the names given are pseudonyms. Here is what Mahtab wrote:

> *There was a man that go to the jungle and he is a hunter. And he knows something about mining. He wants to discover a gold mine in the jungle. He used special kind of machine for finding mine. But suddenly he saw a very big tiger that wanted to eat him for its lunch but he was a hunter and tried to rescue himself . . . .*

Finishing an incomplete story which was written by another writer and then turning it into a pictorial form engaged the learners as beginner writers in the practice of continuing an idea which was not theirs but could become part of their own design of the pictographic story. In this way the students were more involved in visual literacy forms of knowledge as they had to get the pictures, make meaning out of them, and transfer them into a written type which did not mean to become pictorial again. Therefore, the choice of words and sentences had to be in a way that the readers felt they were still watching the rest of the short film. In each section learners were asked to comment on each other's writings in order to find voice as writers and also tried to pay attention to the writings of others and also learn from them.

## 4.2. Phase II - Writing out of the dark allies of prescription

Gradually, the students entered the second phase which was learning about writing critiques and reviews and their importance. In fact these kinds of writing were more like descriptive and cause and effect styles; As such, learners could focus more on how and what to write. Here, they started writing simple reviews, critiques and reflections about the movies. Some of the (animated) movies shown in this phase of the study were *Sweeny Todd*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Avatar*, *The Hurt Locker*, *Freedom Writers*, and *9*.

At the beginning, they received some instructions on how to write reviews and critiques, and they were informed of the differences between the two genres. We also explained different genres of the films as they have their own wordings and styles of presenting their topics. In fact, they act like different forms of writing (e.g., cause and effect, narrative, comparison and contrast, and illustration). Knowing about the genres helped the learners to use more appropriate styles and words. For instance, writing about *Sweeney Todd*, which is a musical-horror movie, was different from writing about *Avatar,* which is a fantasy and adventure movie. These differences were mostly visible in the choice of words that come from the genre of the movie. Sara used such words as *kill, crying, died, poison,* and other similar words in her review of

*Sweeney Todd*. *Fight, humanity, war, weapon* and other similar words were more frequent in *Avatar* as it is a kind of fantasy and action movie about war and a new life. Therefore, the choice of words and sentences came from the genre of the movie being reviewed. As movies are multilayered in their scripts, different styles of writings are implemented in them. For example, Sara mentioned the cause and effect in her writing about *Sweeney Todd* in this way:

> *During this time, Sweeny pays attention to the beggar face, he understands that she is Loci, his wife, who he loved her very much. He is angry very much, he tries to embrace Love, and after a skirmish with her, he pushes him, to the oven.*

> *When Sweeny is staring at Loci's face, his adoption boy comes and kills Sweeny, with Sweeny's razor . . .*

Here she mentioned the causes of Sweeny's death and the consequences of his evil doings. By putting three dots at the end of her writing she showed the continuation of the story as the boy had the razor, so she invited the readers to complete the story. As for *Avatar*, Sara made a comparison between this movie and *Titanic* which were both directed by Cameron. Although *Avatar* is an action movie and *Titanic* is a romance-drama, she made a link between these two by comparing them:

> *The genre of this film is warlike, but maybe Cameron has mix it up with Titanic, because it is full of love.*

The learners themselves felt the need to write in a variety of forms. In other words, the scenes fed them with enough input to use in their writing as they were thinking about the movies and what they were going to write.

## 4.3. Phase III - Where do the movies come from? Where am I standing?

In the third phase of the course, learners acted as the directors of the class, presenting movies and discussing the themes of the movies based on what they had written and inferred about them. During this stage, they became prepared to produce more advanced forms of writing. They wrote elaborated pieces from movie generated topics and worked with images and pictures to give presentations about them in the class. After each presentation, they had rich discussion sessions to justify their work, and then they wrote movie reviews and critiques.

Presenting the movies and being responsible for what they said about them gave the students awareness of what to say and write. In fact they understood the responsibility of writers as they wrote. Also they found out the fact that movies aimed to satisfy their viewers' expectations. It should be mentioned

here that the practices in these three phases were not static and had the flexibility for adding or omitting some activities. During the course, the learners went online and found critiques and reviews, studied related articles in movie magazines and newspapers, and also worked on movie scripts. Sharing information, searching for it, and listening to others' ideas became important for the learners. The students also worked in groups to talk about movies and their effects on language learning.

The writing activities that were given to the learners were related to what happened around and inside a movie, namely the theme, characters, story, opening and closing, vocabulary and idioms, its awards and prizes, and interview clips with the cast. For example, after watching a film or an episode, the learners talked together, shared and wrote comments, or they wrote reviews and critiques according to the procedure they had been taught in advance. The students also did a variety of in-depth analyses of themes regarding different film episodes in class and at home. These activities engaged students more on perceiving movies and their influence on language learning and writing in English. The learners themselves wrote reviews and critiques on the movies they watched in the class or at home and shared them with each other. They also invited their friends to give their views about what they had written.

Gradually, by watching movies, writing reviews and critiques, presenting movies by the learners, and discussing issues in the class, taking stances in students' writings became more and more visible. It was not just the writings but also the presentations that ignited the process of choosing a stance, and finding voices in the class toward what they had watched and what they had written. Taking part in a process like presenting a subject and directing the class was not just saying something and flipping the class to the other member. It was an important process for them as they felt responsibility for every word they uttered in the class and to their classmates. They wanted to be sure that what they said was perfect and informative for all.

For getting a closer view of presentations, the students were given a leaflet which provided them with brief explanations of the film presentation and the things the presenters were expected to consider while presenting. Ali noticed in his reflection that he searched for the movie he was going to present in the class (i.e., *Alice in Wonderland*), cut some parts of it, and made a clip to be shown in the class.

> *I think the best part of the film is talking about … You should let us to be teacher not just the presenter of the film. We can make some searches and prepare some educational clips . . .*

As there was not enough time to watch all parts of the movies in the class, and

since the students had watched the movies at home, making a clip out of the movie was in fact a kind of rewriting of the story through pictures although all of the students had to write about the movies in review form or as critiques as well. The occurrence of new exercises such as making clips, handouts, and pattern drawings on the board were considered as other forms of writing with new means (pictures) rather than using words. One of the boys who was responsible for giving a presentation about the animated movie *9* decided to present his work to others through short clips and handouts which contained information about the movie cast.

What stood out about his writing through pictures was the variety of clips he had made decorated with different pieces of music as well as still and moving pictures such as short parts of the movie *9*. He also used pictures and the photos of characters and the director to enrich his presentation. In fact he was trying different kinds of writings by arranging pictures and scenes in special orders and with his own grammar. For example, in one clip he brought images first and the pictures of the characters with a sad sound track while in another one he arranged the cast in the order of importance (e.g., director, producer, and actors) with solid colors in the background and a cheerful music.

Movies were not solely considered entertainment anymore, as learners had understood that a writer or director aimed to convince the readers or viewers that what was written or shown was good and acceptable. Zohre established a relationship between what she saw in the movies and the way writers write.

> *They say their ideas in their films and we can accept it but when I read the critique and now that I am older I think that my ideas are important too and I should not accept everything… When someone writes something or make a movie for sure he/ she wants to say something to the readers I myself want to say something to my readers too.*

She believed that both a writer and a director want to persuade their audiences, no matter whether they were right or wrong. In her idea about the writing skill, especially writing reviews, she found that this skill helped her to talk to the readers. Like a director choosing the actors, she was choosing words carefully to play a good role in the text. Here taking stances became more and more vivid as the students carried out many pieces of writing including one review and one critique for each film besides writing practices such as story writings on short films, student made clips, reflections, and leaflets. In fact, the students had introduced themselves and their ideas in their own critiques and reflections.

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed at opening a new window on the world of integrating

movies in the English language classrooms and examining its efficiency for teaching writing to EFL learners. According to Kasper (2000), films can help the learners to think and find the relationships among events in texts that they read; they make them capable of producing organized essays. As writing is a demanding task for language learners, looking at it with the new glasses was interesting for the students. Besides, the learners in this study found a way to see writing not just as jotting down words on paper, but as transferring what they believed and accepting the responsibility for being a writer.

Like Hyland (2003) has said, the use of stimulus materials is crucial in writing classrooms because they encourage learners to write and provide content for them, and also enhance learners' creativity in generating topics for writing. The use of visual stimuli such as "video documentaries, movies, TV programs, photographs, pictures, and cartoons" can act as aids to support writing since they provide schemata for learners to write (Hyland, 2003, pp. 90-91). Through the integration of films in language learning, students can make meaning from the newly made information and integrate it to the previously learned concepts; they also learn how to analyze and synthesize what they know (Kasper, 2000). The idea of visual literacy gave the learners the ability to watch movies and infer from pictures the language they needed.

Throughout this experience, different kinds of writing practices were tackled and self-regulated by the learners. The process of students' writing took a cyclic form as the students watched movies, wrote texts based on or about the films, and wrote pictorial texts in the form of clips. This was actually a learner-directed act rooted in what the students gained from the meaning of visual literacy. In this regard, and based on the findings of this study, the value of writing and its potentiality in the English language classes gained a new identity when integrated with films. The voice of a responsible writer and hey way to make a written text richer with different elements such as good choice of words, descriptive sentences, and bringing images into the text were the counterparts of a movie which replaces words with pictures and images.

In this study, the act of writing took a new life for the learners, something enriched with ideas and pictures from the movies. The challenging task of writing based on some tough and prescriptive rules in language classes gave the floor to a sweet act of writing about what the learners owned. The idea of visual literacy through films and movies, together with writing, can act as a catalyst in language classes for those learners who have problems with writing. Also, at the beginning stages of writing for all language learners using visual cues may facilitate and sweeten the seemingly bitter act of writing (Elbow, 2000) into a rich and unforgettable experience. Another significant implication of visual literacy and writing is for deaf language learners because many abstract concepts are hard to be taught to them so these students can

benefit from this kind of learning to write as it is easy to remember and handle.

In sum, the present study tried to shed light on the potential contribution of movies and pictures for the improvement of EFL students' writing. Considering the importance of the writing skill for EFL learners, and the potential contribution of using multimedia devices for facilitating language learning (Hekmati & Navidinia, 2016; Navidinia, Bidaki & Hekmati, 2016), we hope this line of research continues and more researchers and teachers try to integrate movies in teaching EFL writing to examine its influence on students' learning.

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