A Study on Language Development through Movie Utterances:
On the basis of Desperate Housewives

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Abstract
This paper aims to reconsider the conventional idea that movies are rich repositories of ‘practical’ expressions. To figure out whether students use movie expressions practically, students’ actual conversations were analyzed. Before a conversation began, students had learned English using the scripts of American TV drama Desperate Housewives. The results show that students hardly utilized memorized expressions at first, but they slowly created sentences based on their understanding of grammar. Then they started to partially use chunks of expressions. Then they started to imitate structure patterns of the movie expressions. Finally they used the whole expressions whenever they met the same situations as in the movie. However, learned expressions are of no practical use at this point. This is rather a prerequisite stage for the final stage where movie expressions play a practical role. Finally, which is named ‘prefab + prefab’ in this paper, students created sentences with new meanings by combining the chunks of expressions. Although the results did not show a significant number of ‘prefab + prefab’ utterances, there was an indication of potentiality. This paper concludes that movies can be excellent materials with which students can develop remarkable abilities to express themselves if they use the expressions practically.

Keywords: practicality, Desperate Housewives, prefabrication, chunk, language development

1. Introduction

It is said that people study English using movies because the expressions in the movies are practical (Kim, 2010; Lee & Lee, 2009; Ryu, 2010; Ryu, 2011). Indeed, various situations in the movies are likely to happen and there are relevant and useful expressions relating to the real world in the movies. However, in terms of production, we face a lot of problems. Encountering the same situation is prerequisite to use the proper expressions we have learned, but it is hard to meet the same situations in the movies, therefore, we lose
chances to produce the expressions. Many expressions that are not used would be of no use. Then, can we say memorizing practical expressions in the movies is practical considering all the time and effort?

Moreover, it is misleading to say that the advantage of using movies in studying English is their practical expressions. Movies are not made for educational purposes but made to show how people live. Mostly, movies include memorable quotes rather than practical expressions. Take the movie Good Will Hunting (1997) for example, the psychologist Sean’s gemlike lines to help Will overcome his defensiveness are priceless. Those lines are not practical but touching and memorable. It would be a tragedy if this movie were neglected because it lacks what are considered to be 'practical expressions'.

It is ironic that a lot of people recommend using movies in studying English without basing this on any theoretical ground. A newspaper reporter Kim (2010) has noted that only movies and dramas reflecting daily life are suitable for studying English; therefore, a sitcom like Friends (1994) is appropriate ELT material. On the other hand, medical dramas in Grey's Anatomy (2005) or crime dramas like CSI (2000) and Prison Break (2005) include professional jargon which is not useful in everyday life so they are not appropriate ELT materials. That claim sounds plausible, but raises a question. If an expression which is learned under a particular situation is only applicable in that situation, unlimited expressions have to be memorized and it would take a whole life to learn a language. In my opinion, Kim (2010) might be underestimating the ability of the human brain. Human brains are effective enough to apply one rule to many fields. Likewise, learned expressions from movies should be applicable to many situations. Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2007) assert that human beings use a finite set of discrete sounds or gestures that are combined to form meaningful elements or words, which themselves may be combined to form an infinite set of possible sentences. The human brain has the ability to create infinite cases using finite resources.

The deputy director of the English language center of the British Council in Korea emphasized learning expressions based on situations, saying that we can learn the most frequently used words in various situations in the movies (Lee, 2012). However, this also implies that learned expressions are not utilized out of particular contexts.

Kim (2010) stresses that movies have ‘live’ English and we can learn English with pleasure by repeating authentic expressions in various situations. In the long run, accumulated expressions would help us to speak with fluency. Focusing on situational learning and memorizing expressions to build up fluency, she did not provide valid
theoretical evidence for her thesis. In short, all these claims agree that learners benefit from memorizing practical expressions found in the movies but none of them provide a theoretical framework for the connection of this with fluency. It is undesirable that we should recommend ELT materials to students without any theoretical basis for making this recommendation.

Due to the increasing popularity of learning English through movies it seems timely we contemplate the advantage of movie situations for language learning. Historically, Situational Language Teaching in 1930s to 1960s emphasized the importance of situations and supported this idea with a solid theoretical framework. Leaving the contribution of this method aside, it deserves respect as it had its own theoretical basis. Similarly, movies also stress the need of situations. In this paper, students’ actual usage of movie expressions will be observed. Through conversation analysis, this paper will show whether students use expressions practically or not and if so, how often they utilize the expressions.

1.1 Purposes and Research Questions

The foundation of STEM (The Society for Teaching English through Media) in 1998 has spurred the use of movies in English education in Korea. In this paper, a few of the theoretical frameworks that have appeared in the STEM journal will be reviewed.

An experimental class was formed to observe students’ actual utterances. Scripts of the American TV Desperate Housewives (DH) Season 3 Episode 3 and 4 were used. After having students memorize movie expressions, the teacher figured out whether they used the expressions during their natural conversation and what kinds of expressions students preferred. If students used some specific strategies to produce the learned expressions, the result will contribute to English education through movies.

The research questions were as follows.
1) What is meant by ‘practical’ in the movies?
2) What learning process do students go through when they learn movie expressions?

2. Literature Review

The word ‘situation’ was first mentioned in the academic field by Albert Sidney Hornby in 1950 to explain the Oral Approach, which was a popular method at that time. ELT
materials in the Oral Approach were based on the situational approach. When A. S. Hornby referred to 'situation', it meant 'situational approach.' Later the term was also called Structural-Situational Approach or Situational Language Teaching (SLT).

SLT was influenced by the prevailing theories of structuralism in the 1950s. Pittman (1963) noted that situations were needed to practice sentence pattern orally. Richards and Rodgers (2007) explain that in 1930 it was common for British linguists to connect sentence structures with the situations in which the particular sentence structures were used. In this sense, a ‘situation’ means a context in which a particular sentence structure was used.

Does the term ‘situation’ refer to the same thing in a movie? Does it have anything to do with language learning? The role of a situation in both fields seems different in that a situation in SLT is used to teach language structures but a situation in a movie is used to facilitate memorization.

Some scholars supported the idea that situations act as a catalyst to memorize expressions in movies. Sinclair (1991) asserts that formulas and routines play an important part in everyday language use by native speakers; when we talk, our everyday L1 utterances are a complex mix of creativity and prefabrication¹. Here ‘creative' refers to the production of novel utterances based on the grammatical rules and 'prefabrication' is an unanalyzed whole, which is stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use. It is obvious that the former requires more cognitive effort than the latter; therefore, people prefer using prefabricated expressions. And it is prefabrication that helps us produce native-like utterances and reduces the burden of effort in the exigencies of real-time conversation. Wray (2002) also proposes that the production of these units is holistic, and therefore bypasses the analytic process of construction.

Hymes (1968) claimed that a vast portion of human utterances consist of recurrent patterns and linguistic routines². According to Bolinger (1976), we can build a prefabricated house easily with prefabricated parts but not so easily with lumber, nails and a blueprint.

[O]ur language does not expect us to build everything starting with lumber, nails, and

¹ This paper will follow Wray's definition of 'prefabrication' (2002). He said prefabrication [formulaicity] is the expression used as a whole, regardless of grammatical analysis.
² “linguistic routines”, i.e. frequent contextualized expressions that are heard and pronounced within recurring situations (Daloiso, 2009)
blueprint, but provides us with an incredibly large number of prefabs.

In a similar way, using prefabricated expressions makes communication easier than creating new sentences based on grammatical understanding. Charles Fillmore (1979) also supports the idea that learning prefabricated expressions is a prerequisite to communicating effectively.

Michael Lewis (1993), who coined the term lexical approach, said that language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of multiword prefabricated chunks. Fluency is the result of acquisition of a large store of these fixed and semi-fixed prefabricated items which are available as the foundation for any linguistic novelty or creativity. (Lewis, 1997)

The lexical approach concentrates on developing learners’ proficiency with lexis. Therefore, using lexical phrases helps us to speak with fluency. In fact, prefabricated items represent a significant portion of a native speaker’s spoken and written output. Native speakers have a vast stock of lexical prefabricated items or chunks, and these are vital for fluent production. In summary, memorization of chunk from movie scripts should be preceded as movies are rich repositories of those chunks.

2.1 The Meaning of Being ‘Practical’

It is said that we study English using movies because the expressions in the movies are practical. But what is meant by ‘practical’? Below are the dictionary definitions of the word ‘practical’.

1) The practical aspects of something involve real situations and events, rather than just ideas and theories (Collins Cobuild English dictionary, 2001)

2) practical: concerned with real situations and events rather than ideas (Longman dictionary of contemporary English, 2003)

3) practical: involving or relating to real situations and events (Macmillan English dictionary, 2007)

Dictionaries agree that being practical is related to real situations and events. We feel that various situations in the movies are likely to happen and indeed they provide us with relevant and practical expressions to use. That’s why students memorize the expressions that they think are ‘practical’ for later use.
However, practicality is not the only advantage that movies have. Expressions which are not practical can be helpful for learning, too. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) note that expressions enable us to learn grammatical rules eventually, as they are utilized and analyzed whether they are practical or not. Ellis and Sinclair (1996) note that language learning is considered to be successful, if memorized expressions go into long-term memory. Nick and Ellis (1996) claim that once memorized expressions are stored in long-term memory, they would be analyzed and lead to grammar acquisition. In other words, creativity is achieved through prefabrication.

3. Design

3.1 Subjects and Period

5 University students who wanted to study English using TV dramas were gathered. Students A and B applied first and student C joined then student D and finally student E participated. The experimental class began in December of 2012 to inform students how to utilize American TV dramas in learning English. The class lasted one hour twice a week until February of 2013. After spring semester began in March, study was done once a week. There were 14 days break around the time of the midterm and final exams. All data analyzed in this paper was collected between March and June.

3.2 Material and Procedure

The scripts of American TV drama Desperate Housewives Season 3 and Episode 3 and 4 were used. Detailed procedures are presented below.

1) After watching the drama scene, students translated the script into Korean.

2) After class, students were required to record themselves reading the script using their smart phones for half an hour every day.

3) Students uploaded the recorded files on Kakao Talk. In order to encourage students to read the scripts on a daily basis, the teacher assigned this activity as a supplementary exercise as the class was done only once a week. In this way, students were aware of the expressions in the specific situations.

4) After uploading files, five students started a ‘conversation (chat)’ together on Kakao
talk with a teacher observing. There was no given topic. They were required to use the same or similar expressions as the expressions in the script. However this research was focused on using prefabricated expressions, they were not encouraged to create new English sentences. If they wanted to say the sentences which were not on the script, they were allowed to use Korean. Also, they could use a word, phrase, structure, or whole sentence from the script. Pawley and Syder (1983) note that even native speakers of English feel awkward when they speak relying on creativity. This could evidence of the frequent use of phrases, idioms and collocations in our utterances. Students did not necessarily memorize the expressions on the script as this required a huge cognitive effort. They could talk with the script aside. Although they relied on the script at first, this repeated exercise could help them to memorize the expressions unconsciously in the long run.

5) After the ‘conversation,’ their English utterances were analyzed. Students’ conversation on Kakao talk was printed out and scored based on the criteria\(^3\) to find out how the expressions on the script were actually used.

### 3.3 Criteria

The data will be reviewed based on two different criteria\(^4\).

First of all, the reason why each student chose the specific expressions is analyzed. There are five sub categories: practical, touched, fun, examination and etc. ‘Practical’ expressions mean students find the expressions useful and are likely to use them in the future. ‘Touched’ expressions are expressions that they are impressed by and want to memorize. ‘Fun’ expressions are expressions that they find witty, interesting or hilarious. Expressions for examination are those that are considered to be useful for job interviews or English proficiency tests. ‘etc.’ includes expressions that don’t belong to any of the four categories above.

Second, the degree of application of the expressions in the movies is analyzed in five ways: whole, substitution, structure pattern, prefab plus creativity, prefab plus prefab and etc. ‘Whole’ means students use the exact same expressions during their conversation on Kakao Talk. ‘Substitution’ means students change a small part of the expressions; for

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\(^3\) 3.3 Criterion presents the detail.

\(^4\) Each criterion didn’t set before the experimental class, but established after all data were collected.
example, substituting the subject, object or a word. ‘Structure pattern’ means students use
the same structure as the movie expressions but with different content words. ‘Prefab plus
creativity’ means students use a part of the chunk in the movie expressions. ‘Prefab plus
prefab’ refers to a combination of chunks in the different movie expressions. Etc. includes
all creative sentences made according to students’ grammatical understanding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>practical</th>
<th>touched</th>
<th>fun</th>
<th>examination</th>
<th>etc</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>14(17.3%)</td>
<td>15(18.5%)</td>
<td>43(53.1%)</td>
<td>5(6.2%)</td>
<td>4(4.9%)</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>34(36.6%)</td>
<td>5(5.2%)</td>
<td>48(51.6%)</td>
<td>6(6.5%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>8(57.1%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>4(28.6%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>2(14.3%)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>14(50.0%)</td>
<td>1(3.6%)</td>
<td>12(42.9%)</td>
<td>1(3.6%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>25(89.3%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>1(3.6%)</td>
<td>2(7.1%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>95(38.9%)</td>
<td>21(8.6%)</td>
<td>108(44.3%)</td>
<td>14(5.7%)</td>
<td>6(2.5%)</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and

Reason for the Specific
Expressions

TABLE 1

The reasons why students chose the specific expressions

Students A and B said they chose English expressions in the script because they were fun
and ‘intense.’ That means the expressions don’t look practical, but they were so funny that
student wanted to use them later. No movies are made for practical purposes. They reflect
our everyday life and show how people live. For some people practicality of expressions is
not the top priority as it depends on the situation. Student A and B added that those fun
expressions remained in their memory and were easy to retrieve from memory.

Students C, D, E chose the expressions for practical purposes. The data of student C doesn’t
look significant. She has the least number of total utterances as she didn’t actively participate
in the conversation. Student D chose the expressions for both practical and fun reasons.
Student E’s choice in particular almost completely depended on practicality. This result supports the view that movies and dramas include plenty of practical expressions. That is undeniable. However, there is something we should not miss. Student A and B had been studying the longest in this experimental group and E had been studying the shortest period of time. For A and B, ‘practicality’ was not a top priority for their choices. On the face of it, we might think practical expressions could be useful in real conversations, but they do not seem to remain in their long-term memories. Rather, fun and interesting expressions are intense and memorable enough to make students have an urge to use them. In short, the longer you study English using movies, the less you believe ‘practical’ expressions are really practical.

4.2 The Degree of Application

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>whole (37.0%)</th>
<th>substitution (31.2%)</th>
<th>Structure Pattern (21.4%)</th>
<th>prefab + creativity (14.8%)</th>
<th>prefab + prefab (9.7%)</th>
<th>etc. (8.6%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7(8.6%)</td>
<td>12(14.8%)</td>
<td>1(1.2%)</td>
<td>1(1.2%)</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9(9.7%)</td>
<td>17(18.3%)</td>
<td>8(8.6%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>4(28.6%)</td>
<td>1(7.1%)</td>
<td>3(21.4%)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>2(7.1%)</td>
<td>1(3.6%)</td>
<td>5(17.9%)</td>
<td>7(25.0%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>13(46.4%)</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>16(57.1%)</td>
<td>9(32.1%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>0(0.0%)</td>
<td>1(3.6%)</td>
<td>2(7.1%)</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>80(32.8%)</td>
<td>73(33.0%)</td>
<td>21(8.6%)</td>
<td>40(16.4%)</td>
<td>11(4.5%)</td>
<td>19(7.8%)</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

37% of Students A’s utterances were whole phrases. In other words, he used the same expressions in the same situation as the movie without any application. 37% were substitutions where he substituted a subject, object or word accordingly. It is assumed that student A used most of her utterances in similar situations as in the movie. The structure pattern involves a high degree of application where speakers try to convey different meanings based on the structure pattern of the sentence in the movie. This case may not necessarily be the same situation as in the movie. Student A used 14.8% of prefab plus
creativity structures where a higher degree of application was shown as he borrowed a part of the expressions in the movies and made the rest of sentence to create a new meaning. These sentences might be used indifferent situations compared to the movies. He used 1.2% of prefab plus prefab structure where the highest degree of application happened by combining chunks of different expressions. This research expected students to use the prefab plus prefab structure most. Earlier studies assert that memorizing prefabricated expressions eventually leads to their creative use. However, this paper anticipated creating new meaning utterances based on a combination of different prefabrications. Although students A and B used only 1.2% and 8.6% of this structure respectively, the percentage would be higher if this experiment had been conducted for a longer period of time. To sum up, student A mostly used expressions in the same situation as the movie, but he also showed a possibility to use modified expressions.

Student B’s results look similar to student A in that 63.5% of her utterances fell into the whole and substitution categories. Prefab plus prefab structures were 8.6%. This research is still on going and hopefully the figure will gradually increase. However, as the earlier research asserted, students used most of the expressions in the same situations as the movies. The degree of student B’s application of expressions is higher than A, so she appears to show more potential to make a creative use in the future than student A.

The total number of student C’s utterance is insignificant. However, it is remarkable that she used prefab plus creativity structures most where a higher degree of application was observed.

Student D’s results show a totally different pattern compared to the rest of the students. Most of student D's utterances fell into the etc. category. Etc. structures refer to the all creative utterances made according to students' grammatical understanding, which were forbidden to be used during conversations. She didn't utilize the movie expressions but created her own sentences based on her understanding of grammar rules. However, she shows a good example of how movie expressions are learned from a beginning level. The reason why she used the etc. structure most is her lack of memorization of the movie expressions; therefore, she couldn't recall the learned expressions but relied mostly on her grammatical understanding to participate in the conversation. The prefab plus creativity structure were the second most frequently used. This also supports the idea that she hadn’t reviewed the movie expressions thoroughly. She created most of her sentences and borrowed part of the movie expressions occasionally when possible. It seemed that it was hard for student D to utilize a whole structure or think of a substitute structure. She used 17.9% of the
structure patterns. It is interpreted that she was interested in sentence structures rather than sentence meanings. Based on the results, student D might be interested in grammar and have a great deal of grammatical understanding. Below is student D's learning process.

FIGURE 1
Student D's learning process

![Diagram](image)

Student D used Etc. structure the most (46.4%) and 25% of prefab plus creativity, 17.9% structure patterns, whole sentences twice, substitution once, and none of prefab plus prefab structures. It seems that student D was not used to utilizing movie expressions; however, student B went through a totally different process.

FIGURE 2
Student B's learning process

![Diagram](image)

What caused this difference? The answer might lie in the different learning period. Student B participated in this experimental class from the beginning; therefore, she read many more scripts than D, but student D joined the class later. Considering this, I concluded that using whole sentences from the movies was difficult for beginners who were new to the process.

However, student E, who joined the class after D, showed a totally different process compared to D. Most of student E's utterances fell into the whole and substitution category (89.2%). Through a personal interview, it was revealed that student D didn't have a good understanding of grammar so she had trouble making up sentences and had to use the same sentences as in the movie.

In conclusion, students who have grammatical ability to some degree go through a learning process similar to student D. On the contrary, students who have a low level of grammar
have no choice but to rely on the whole or substitution patterns. By studying movie expressions for a longer period of time, student D would most probably feel more comfortable utilizing whole and substitution patterns. She would create a prefab plus prefab structure based on chunks of expressions. From this experiment, it is assumed that utilizing movie expressions depends on grammatical knowledge rather than the learning period.

5. Conclusion

5.1 What is Meant by 'Practical' in the Movies?

We downplay movie expressions by simply saying that they are practical as they relate to real situations. Also, as noted in the literature review, the definitions of being practical were all related to real situations. In this point of view, movies are a practical medium as they reflect our everyday lives. However, the practicality of movie expressions refers to a different meaning. It means conveying various communication functions with a limited number of memorized expressions. This can be possible when combinations of different chunks of expressions are used regardless of the situation.

If one thing is applied in one just situation, it can't be said to be practical, but if it can be applied in many situations, it can be practical. In other words, we can say movie expressions are practical when they produce diverse combinations of chunks of expressions.

5.2 What Learning Process do Students Go through with Movie Expressions?

FIGURE 3

Students' learning process of movie expressions

First, they operate in the etc. stage in which memorized expressions are not utilized and students create sentences based on their understanding of grammar. Then they start to partially use chunks of expressions. Then they start to imitate the structure patterns of the
movie expressions. Finally they use the whole expression or substitution expressions whenever they experience the same situations as in the movie. It is at this stage that people consider movie expressions to be practical. However, as mentioned earlier, it is not easy to encounter the same situation, so this situational constraint disrupts the ability to utilize the expressions. Internalized whole movie expressions have to go through the final stage, which is ‘prefab + prefab’. In this stage, students create sentences with new meanings by combining chunks of the expressions. I believe this leads students not only to supplement their lack of expressions but also to strengthen their linguistic competence. As a result, students develop an urge to express their own opinions.

References


