

# Learning through watching: Streaming video in L2 English

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*This study considers the practicality of streaming video for use in L2 language education. It begins with a review of literature on the use of video within language learning, asserting that video has four main benefits for learners: (1) authentic language; (2) verbal language features; (3) paralinguistic features; (4) motivational appeal. Next, the study supplies critiques of video as a learning tool which are critically interpreted in light of the affordances of streaming video's digital format. Through a brief chronology of the use of video technologies in the classroom, this study contends that streaming video proffers advantages not presented by earlier physical technologies. In order to highlight the value of streaming video to L2 education, benefits and problems are explained and the Movieclips.com website ([www.movieclips.com](http://www.movieclips.com)) is outlined as an example of a streaming video platform that may be utilised within L2 English teaching.*

**Keywords:** streaming video; video; EFL; ESL; CALL;

## 1. Introduction

The technology of streaming video has attracted scholarly attention as a useful tool for L2 learning following its development over the last decade (Brooks, 2011; Duffy, 2007; Hamilton, 2010; Keddie, 2014; Muniandy & Veloo, 2011; Oddone, 2011; Wong et al., 2007; Watkins & Wilkins, 2011). Indeed, streaming video provides significant benefits given that it reduces the amount of equipment required to bring video into the classroom and grants a range of new options for how video can be accessed such as through personal devices or clips

embedded in Learning Management Systems (LMS). This study explains the affordances of streaming video and provides suggestions for using this technology in the classroom. Within this study, the term 'video' is taken as meaning any audio-visual material including feature films, documentaries, television programs and amateur web clips. Testifying as to the benefits of video for language learners, Loneragan (1984) has stated,

The outstanding feature of video films is their ability to present complete communicative situations...The speakers in dialogues can be seen and heard; other participants in the situation can be seen. The language learner can readily see the ages of the participants; their sex; perhaps their relationships one to another; their dress, social status and what they are doing; and perhaps their mood or feelings. Further, paralinguistic information, such as facial expressions or hand gestures, is available to accompany aural clues of information. (p.4)

As streaming video has only recently evolved as the latest iteration of audio-visual media, this paper seeks to consider its practicality for classroom use, particular in regards to its distinctiveness from earlier technologies. The impetus behind the researcher's interest in using streaming video as a classroom tool comes from personal experience using this method for language study, in combination with what the researcher feels is video's somewhat marginalised position as a learning tool. The teaching strategies outlined within this study draw upon the researcher's experience as an English instructor at several universities within Japan.

## 2. A review of video in L2 language education

There is a substantial body of work examining the use of video with L2 language education. Having made an extensive review of extant literature, this study concludes that most sources reflect positively on video's performance as a learning tool. Four main benefits to language learners are identified within the literature, these are: (1) authentic language; (2) verbal language features; (3) paralinguistic features, and; (4) motivational appeal. Despite these benefits, however, sources do also voice the opinion that the extra equipment necessary to implement video hampers its classroom potential. From here, this study will move on to discuss positive and negative perspectives in detail.

### 2.1 Authentic language

Videos (especially feature films) aim to provide believable stories to their audience and can thus be seen to demonstrate colloquial language in use (Bal-Gezina, 2014; King, 2002; Hwang & Huang, 2011; Ismaili, 2013). Carter and Miyauchi (2005) note that, "while settings may vary from the everyday to the exotic, scripts are always a reflection of how professional writers believe natural dialogue takes place." (p.30). This focus on realism is advantageous to students as videos demonstrate the authentic language which is actually used in English conversations as opposed to the oftentimes "sanitised" (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011, p.117) or "artificial" (Miura, 2003, p.43) language of language learning materials. Moreover, video provides a vivid display of the cultural norms implicit in conversation (Brown, 2010; Koike et al., 2001, Qiang et al., 2007). Moving images help to flesh out the different registers that accompany different social situations; things like the different tone and vocabulary that are involved in a conversation with a friend as opposed to those used with a figure of

authority such as a teacher or police officer. In this way video is a beneficial resource for teaching pragmatic language features like greetings, ice-breakers and slang (Boku, 2008; Ittzes Abrams, 2014).

## 2.2 Verbal language features

As the variety of content portrayed in video is virtually unlimited, so too the variety of different characters featured. Video showcases the cornucopia of English accents employed by different national, regional and cultural groups (Carter & Miyauchi, 2005; Hamilton, 2010; Whatley, 2012; Thaler, 2013). Watkins and Wilkins (2011) state “YouTube is an ideal vehicle to teach World Englishes and expose students to a variety of English dialects” (p.117). This exposure helps students prepare for conversations with different interlocutors. By combining visual and audio stimuli, video also helps to highlight the different prosodic features of the English language such as changes in stress or tone for emphasis (Seferoğlu, 2008; Suzuki & Ochi, 2006).

## 2.3 Paralinguistic features

In providing an audio-visual portrayal of a given scene, video proffers a particularly effective arena for displaying the paralinguistic features of English communication such as gesture, facial expressions and body language (Canning-Wilson, 2000; Lonergan, 1984). These language features are not present within paper and audio-only materials, however, they are an important part of communication processes. Witnessing these non-verbal actions helps learners understand the bodily movements employed in English communication and also supplies clues about what is happening on screen.

## 2.4 Motivational appeal

The most universally commented upon feature of video within the academic literature surveyed is its motivational benefits as a classroom resource (Amino, 2007; Brook, 2011; Hamilton, 2010; Flick, 2011; Rammal, 2006; Tuncay, 2014; Wong et al., 2007; Xiaoqiong & Xianxing, 2008). Miura (2003) has related that students, “enjoy the story itself and listen intently to the language in order to achieve tasks” (p.46). While Koike et al. (2001) explained how, “Videos help connect classroom content to students’ lives, giving textbooks real-life meaning and leaving students motivated to communicate in English” (pp.25–26). Finally, Oddone (2011) has stated “Videos have a compelling power in the language classroom, especially when the classroom activities are concentrated on short sequences” (p.105). The motivational benefit of video can perhaps be explained in the way the combination of audio and visual elements create a powerful sensory connection (Berk, 2009; Stern, 1968), thus stimulating students’ emotions and attention.

## 2.5 Critical perspectives on video

Critical perspectives assert that video watching can be a passive activity with little benefit to unengaged or distracted watchers (Lonergan, 1984; McKinnon, n.d; Ryan, 1998; Seferoğlu, 2008), or, worse, a “baby-sitting device” (Qiang et al., 2007, p.40) employed when teachers have not prepared any other lesson material. Indeed, the researcher contends that compared **201**

to paper books and audio resources, video holds a somewhat marginalised place within the language classroom. One likely reason why video has not received more regular use is because it has traditionally required a significant amount of equipment such as a television, VHS/DVD player and cables, which are not commonly stored within the classroom. Massi and Marino (1996) explain that “the use of films in foreign language teaching has been down-played because teachers felt they were time-consuming and too difficult to tackle.” Indeed, chapters given simply to the setup of television and VCR equipment within literature on video in L2 education attest to the trials involved in this activity (Lonergan, 1984). This lengthy set-up period might in turn be seen to contribute to a critique of passivity attached to video watching in class. After all, if the teacher had spent 15 minutes in locating a video, obtaining the television, player, remote controllers, and cables, and finally, plugging everything in and cueing it up – it wouldn’t be worth watching for only 5 to 10 minutes. The resultant protracted viewing times would likely be overwhelming to students as they struggled to keep up with a constant flow of material, with the end result being passive viewing. Thus, this paper argues that at least some of the critiques of video can be attributed to the characteristics of physical video technologies. In light of the shift to an online digital format, video deserves renewed attention as a classroom tool owing to the particular affordances of streaming video. From here, this study provides a short chronology of video use in L2 education in order to situate streaming video in relation to earlier technologies.

### 3. A chronology of video use within L2 education

Given the availability of literature from the 60s and early 70s outlining how video might be used in language learning classrooms (Morley & Lawrence, 1971; Stern, 1968), it can be stated that video has enjoyed more than 50 years of use as a language learning tool (Thaler, 2013). The widespread discussion on the use of video technologies within the classroom begins within the VHS era. VHS was the first video technology designed for home use and thus made it convenient to bring video into the classroom. However, as previously discussed, VHS did require a sizeable investment of time on the part teachers to locate all the required pieces of equipment, move these into the classroom and then cue up the feature for watching. VHS tapes themselves were also fairly fragile and the sound and audio quality were liable to degrade or stop working completely after extended periods of use. Moreover, the tapes had to be laboriously rewound after watching, and placed back within the proper location from the video library from which they came.

In the mid to late 90s the next iteration of video technology, the digital video disc (DVD), arrived on the block. DVDs amounted to a significant improvement over VHS with physically smaller equipment that allowed for more control over how a movie was viewed (King, 2002, Seferoğlu, 2008). The most significant affordances proffered by DVDs were the addition of scene selection, by which viewers could easily skip to the desired part of a movie through the main menu, and, the inclusion of different audio and subtitle tracks. This second affordance has considerable practical application within the language classroom by allowing various combinations of audio and subtitle languages during viewing.

While DVDs made it easier to show videos in class, they still relied upon a physical format and the constrictions of this, i.e. the necessity of possessing a hard copy of the material, the need for a TV and other equipment, and the need for viewers to be in the same place at the same time. From the mid 2000s video sharing websites were up and running and internet speeds increasing fast enough to make watching in the classroom a reality. Streaming

video offers change: it is very lightweight requiring only a device and internet connection, and because online video content is composed of data it can be distributed more efficiently than physical forms. As devices have gotten smaller and moved into our pockets, video can increasingly be accessed anywhere, anytime.

Some of the video streaming websites which have gained prominence include YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) and Vimeo ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com)) (Flick, 2011; Hamilton, 2010; Muniandy & Veloo, 2011). In addition to these amateur-focused platforms are a variety of professional video streaming websites (differing from the former in that the user can't upload content) such as Netflix ([www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com)) and Hulu ([www.hulu.com](http://www.hulu.com)). Collectively, the websites discussed in this paragraph contain billions of different videos representing every part of the entertainment spectrum from home-made to big budget, free to pay-per-view and from seconds long to hours in duration.

## 4. Benefits and problems of streaming video

Streaming video can be seen to have several key advantages for use in the classroom. These are: searchability, serviceability and shareability. This section will explain these benefits and why they are important to teachers before covering some of the technological problems that have been encountered using streaming video in class.

### 4.1 Searchability

While physical videos had to be located by hand, online streaming video has the advantage of being retrievable via keywords. This means that the teachers may locate material by entering the title or other appropriate information into a search engine. This search can be performed from the teacher's desk, and, once a suitable clip has been found, it is likely the case that all the teacher has to do is hit play. Moreover, if teachers do not have any particular material in mind, they are able to explore video libraries using search terms. The better an online video library catalogues its clips, the more power teachers have to find relevant material.

### 4.2 Serviceability

Previously most of the equipment required for video viewing (such as TVs and video players) were extraneous to the classroom. However, as descriptions of Japanese classrooms by Hamilton (2010) and Shawbank and Terhune (2002) highlight, computer compatible equipment is increasingly inbuilt into classroom layouts. Streaming video is also much easier to control than previous iterations of video technology as viewers may skip ahead or backwards intuitively and precisely by clicking the required place on a video timeline. After becoming a member of video hosting websites like YouTube, teachers are able to create playlists of different clips. Online applications such as TED-Ed and Google Forms may be used to create supplementary activities to accompany video material. Together, these affordances mean that streaming video is more convenient to use and can be deployed more flexibly than previous video technologies.

### 4.3 Shareability

The replicability of digital material means that it can be easily shared between different online platforms and physical devices. While the use of video materials in the analogue era largely relied on a single copy of material that was shown to students by the teacher, students are now able to access content on their own and do not necessarily have to watch at the same time and place as each other or the teacher. This opens up vast possibilities for the use of video as a supplementary material, such as the preview and review of lesson topics outside of class time; and the application of video into project-based and learner-centered tasks (Shawbank & Terhune, 2002). Moreover, by using their own device to view material, students are able to watch at their own pace, rewinding and repeating as necessary (Canning-Wilson, 2000).

### 4.4 Problems encountered using streaming video

One of the difficulties entailed in using streaming video in the classroom is the presence of video advertisements which break the mood in the classroom. Another issue is that of region specificity in which certain clips (or even whole websites) are not licensed, or are banned, from being played in certain countries. The most significant challenge encountered by the researcher is, however, the time-consuming nature of internet searches (Hamilton, 2010). As previously noted, there is an incredible amount of video content on the Internet. A significant percentage of online video content is not suitable for a language learning classroom for a variety of reasons including inappropriate content, poor recording quality and the difficulty of the language featured. Teachers necessarily have to preview all material before showing it to the class (Wong et al., 2007), and under these conditions finding appropriate material can be a time-consuming exercise. Thus, the researcher recommends that when searching a large site such as YouTube, teachers should find particular users or channels whose clips are consistently of the standard needed for the classroom in order to minimise the amount of time spent trawling through unsuitable content. Some examples include BBC's YouTube channel, the TED Talks series, and, the Movieclips.com website ([www.movieclips.com](http://www.movieclips.com)) which will be explained further in the next section.

## 5. Movieclips.com

Movieclips.com is a free, legal and easy to use website that features more than 50,000 clips from popular Hollywood movies. Most of the movies featured have around 10 different scenes with the clip length typically varying from 1 to 3 minutes. These clips have been made freely available via arrangement with 6 of the 7 major Hollywood studios and the website operates by providing these short bites alongside links through which full length content can be rented or purchased (Wilkerson, 2009). The creators of Movieclips.com have extensively catalogued the website's content into categories as typical as genre and director all the way through to things like prop, theme or costume-designer in order to facilitate searches (Warren, 2010). While the Movieclips.com address is the homepage of this website, it is worth noting that almost all Movieclips.com content is also hosted on YouTube. This second option is indeed the researcher's preferred platform for viewing this material given the ease of use offered by the YouTube player, the option of subtitles which

is only available from YouTube, and the simplicity with which YouTube content can be embedded within LMS.

From here, the researcher would like to elucidate the three main benefits that Movieclips.com provides for classroom use.

### 5.1 Catalogued

The Movieclips.com database has been catalogued extensively in order to facilitate the user's search for their favourite clips. This navigability is also a useful resource for teachers as it enables them to find audio-visual content which matches the themes and discussion points within their lessons. Teachers may use the search function to find clips that are related thematically to a word or grammar point, or to search for particular words or phrases within movie dialogue. This search function means teachers have more efficacy to locate and retrieve relevant material for supporting the specific points and explanations they are making in class (Jones & Cuthrell, 2011).

### 5.2 Professional

All content on Movieclips.com is professional movie studio content. This means that production quality is high and the delivery is suited to a learner audience. Moreover, students are often familiar with the movies and actors which are featured on the website. The vast majority of clips are available in High Definition and a minority of the clips have subtitles providing another means for intelligibility. Written summaries of the movie or clip are also available, providing a convenient source of information that can be used in pre-viewing activities.

### 5.3 Short

All content featured on Movieclips.com is short, typically between one and three minutes in length. The short length of content is advantageous as it means that students can more easily digest what is happening as compared to a larger flow of action (Amino, 2007; Canning-Wilson, 2000). With short clips viewers have a manageable amount of information to contend with, avoiding the confusion or boredom that can easily accompany "a dense input of L2 material" (Ryan, 1998). Numerous bites of video may be watched sequentially and viewing can be made more active through the use of worksheets which accompany video content.

## 6. How to use streaming video in the classroom

In a previous study, the researcher outlined two specific strategies for the use of streaming video in the classroom (Magasic, 2015). The first was that clips can be watched along with multiple choice questions in order to promote general vocabulary building. The second that Movieclips.com's search function can be utilised in order to find specific clips to help explain particular grammar or vocabulary points. Rather than reiterate these techniques this study will discuss general strategies for using streaming video in the classroom, including how to find and screen appropriate clips, produce supplementary materials and manage the classroom during watching.

Movieclips.com content is available both on its proprietary site and also via the YouTube platform. It is preferable to access Movieclips.com content via YouTube as the YouTube media player gives users greater control over how the clip is shown including access to subtitles on limited clips. However, it is easier to search for material on the Movieclips.com site itself because this website only has feature films as opposed to YouTube which hosts many kinds of video content. Thus, teachers should search for desired content on the Movieclips.com site using keywords, or by exploring the ready-made playlists such as “Classic Movie Moments” or “Greatest Chase Scenes”, and, after, access these scenes on YouTube. The researcher’s experience has shown that teen or family movies are the best received as the language is relatively simple and the story and humour are enjoyable (Berk, 2009; King, 2002). Anything students are familiar with is likely to be successful and similarly less-familiar material may be less well received. Naturally, it is recommended that teachers choose something that will not offend or alienate anybody in the class.

In regards to screening videos, the researcher generally uses projection equipment. This involves connecting his PC with projection equipment via a HDMI cable and also inserting the audio jack. Projection equipment generally consists of a projector, screen and speakers which can be manipulated either by remote or via a central console. Alternatively, with a small group, content may be watched straight from the screen of a laptop. Another fruitful approach to watching is to direct the students to video content via a link embedded in a LMS, or via search terms written on the board, and then have students watch content themselves using their personal devices (such as smartphones, tablets or laptops). In this last approach, students have the added benefit of working autonomously and thus may feel more comfortable to revisit the videos at home.

Once students are watching, the use of supplementary material can help students understand video content and remember new vocabulary (Xiaoqiong & Xianxing, 2008). The supplementary material which the researcher produces is composed of simple multiple choice questions that the students complete while watching, and some short answer questions through which to reflect on the events which transpired within the clip. This material may also include a short description of the content being shown or its main characters. Alternatively, this information may also be provided orally or by screening a trailer.

When the video is being shown it is important that it is buffered properly and that the quality is sufficient for students to enjoy. If internet connection speeds are low then teachers may want to load material in advance while doing a separate activity. If the video is to be shown on a projector, lights will need to be dimmed in order to watch the movie, however, it is important to provide enough light so that students can complete activities comfortably. Similarly, sound needs to be high enough so that students can hear, however, not so high that it disturbs nearby classrooms. It is the teacher’s responsibility to skip through advertisements that may appear and to cycle between different clips as needed. Creating a playlist of the different clips to be shown in class can help facilitate this.

## 7. Discussion

While this study has painted a positive picture of the potential of streaming video, it is important to recognise that it was written in one of the most highly technologized countries in the world and for this reason the technological and classroom situations discussed are far from universal. Indeed, even in the ideal location, streaming video is still a developing technology and its affordances are not always so easily implemented in real life as

they are on paper. While streaming video allows convenient in-video control by which the user may skip ahead at the click of a button (something that might have taken several minutes on a VCR), issues like buffering, connection drop-out and software crashes are all still an ever-present part of working online and have the potential to disrupt even the best prepared lessons.

This study has sought both to highlight the utility of streaming video and to expose its problems. The former in the hope that more teachers will begin experimenting with ways to use streaming video and later in the hope that these might be rectified by content hosts or new entities which enter into this sector. Watching a movie provides a refreshing break from textbook based work (King, 2002), furthermore, as students do generally like watching, they will hopefully be motivated to watch autonomously as they build up a familiarity with the medium. However, video watching should not be viewed as an end in itself. While topical clips can connect deeply and motivate students, conversely, a poor choice of movie or poorly managed classroom environment can produce the opposite result. It is thus of no surprise to learn that much of the material describing video use, including this study, stress the vital role that teachers play in preparing students to receive the video (Berk, 2009; Canning-Wilson, 2000, Seferoğlu, 2008).

## 8. Conclusion

Given the aforementioned four benefits to video within previous studies (authentic language, paralinguistic language features, verbal features, and motivational appeal), it would not be amiss to argue that video has been underutilized within the language classroom. Streaming video's digital format provides a revolution in control and access and offers the potential to overcome many of the traditional challenges that have been encountered when using video in the language classroom. The advantages of streaming video can be summed up within the three 's' terms: shareability, searchability and serviceability. In its wealth of free, legal, easily navigable and professional quality content, the Movieclips.com video streaming website represents a valuable resource for the L2 English classroom. It is, however, important to remember the teacher's role in sourcing, introducing, screening and explaining the displayed video material in order to maximize its educational benefit.

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