Multiple Intelligences Theory and the English Classroom

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Introduction

For a long time, educators have discussed the validity of paper examinations at school and the issue of a number of students feeling they are "failures" who do not fit into formal education's criteria. The number of children in Japan who choose not to attend even their compulsory years of education is growing. Also, the educational system here is developing quite a number of high school dropouts, some of whom are turning into recluses (the so-called "hikikomori"). It seems that school surroundings for learning are not altogether desirable in present day Japan.

Howard Gardner published his well-known book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* in 1983. I believe that the basic ideas of his theory hold true in any classroom environment. They have well-validated proposals for changing school curriculum. The purpose of this paper is to explore the possibility of applying this theory (henceforth M I Theory) to foreign language teaching and changing teachers' perspective as well as that of students. In the sections to follow, I will illustrate how the learning activities I choose correspond to Gardner's model, and how students' reaction.

The Eight Intelligences Model

Briefly speaking, the eight intelligences that Gardner proposes are Verbal-Linguistic, Logical-Mathematical, Visual-Spatial, Musical-Rhythmic, Bodily-Kinesthetic, Naturalist, Interpersonal and Intrapersonal. Kagan and Kagan, (1998) note that Gardner suggested a ninth, Existential Intelligence. He wants to wait, however, for more neurological research before he proclaims that it is the ninth. Existential Intelligence shows skills and preferences in philosophical issues such as meaning of life. Thinking about life, death, birth, pain, joy, compassion belongs to this Intelligence (ibid).

One thing that Gardner's model fails to include is the cultural type of intelligence. My students often enjoy discussing cultural differences they observe in foreign movies. It seems that some are good at perceiving them, while others are not. I have no answer, as of now, where this intelligence belongs to, but it could possibly be a tenth.

Problems in Typical College English Classrooms

One of Japan's biggest problems is that most high school education is oriented toward college entrance exams. Many students who do not fit into this kind of climate feel that they are failures and stop trying. Some or even most of those who survive lose interest in learning English because it was simply a tool for getting into college. Some feel negative about English and try to stay away from it. In order to "reframe" English (for "reframing", see O'Connor and Seymour, 1990), I started to use movies instead of a traditional textbook.

Another issue is that some of the students, especially the ones with low proficiency in English, strongly believe that they are not cut out for foreign-language learning. They constantly hear a negative inner voice that tells them, "I cannot do this" (refer to "submodalities" section in O'Connor and Seymour, 1990, pp.57-62). However, when they start to hear a confident voice, "Yes, I can do this", they develop a different self-image of themselves that leads to a higher self-esteem. This transformation can be accomplished through achieving a self-determined goal, such as being able to understand a movie scene.

The next section describes how I dealt with these problematical conditions by using movies as material on one hand, and applying M I Theory to the English classroom on the other.

The Effectiveness of M I Theory in My English Classroom

We teachers intuitively know that people learn in a variety of ways. There is no one method or one textbook that suits the needs of all learners. Therefore, "when learners are given some freedom to choose their preferred way of learning, they will do better than those who find themselves forced to learn in environments where a learning style which does not suit them is imposed as the only way to learn" (Lightbown and Spada, 1993). This seems to well describe the situation of Japanese high school English education. Using movies as class learning material provides the students with approaches that can stimulate all of the eight intelligences that Gardner theorizes. I will illustrate what teachers can do with movies applying M I Theory to the English classroom.

A number of movie activities stimulate Verbal-Linguistic Intelligence. A movie has spoken language in real-life situations and intrinsically motivates students to learn words, phrases and expressions in it. It is also a good idea to show a short section without sound. An example goes like this: students work in small groups. Each group devises their own dialogue. After having several rehearsals, they can add their own soundtrack in a live performance to the class. This project is the combination of Linguistic, Musical, Kinesthetic and Interpersonal Intelligences.

If the students are advanced, let them give a simultaneous description of what they see (for the details of "silent viewing" (p.4) and "projects" (p.12), see Carolyn Walker, at Penguin Readers web site). Teachers can provide higher-level students with such a challenging task as finding differences between the original script and the actual scene. Other activities that are related to Linguistic Intelligence include creating a dialogue similar to the one in the movie and practice in reading English subtitles without pausing. The latter activity is useful for turning students into faster readers of written material. My students and I agree that this is also useful for linking the linguistic knowledge and the context in which the language is actually being used. Movie classes are easily turned into writing classes simply by letting students describe what they have seen on the screen.

Using Logical-Mathematical Intelligence, students predict the end of the movie and make a film timeline. Writing can also be a prediction task. Each student writes a different ending for the film after watching half of it, for example. Discussing visual details including colors and images used in the movie engages the Visual-Spatial Intelligence. Listening to music and songs in the film or singing them stimulates Musical-Rhythmic Intelligence. Acting out the dialogue with one's partner using gestures and body language engages both Bodily-Kinesthetic and Interpersonal Intelligences. In this activity, teachers can encourage students to feel the emotions of the characters in the movie. Naturalist Intelligence is useful for observing nature-related details of a film. Obviously, it depends on the film; certain movies are not particularly oriented toward nature.

Interpersonal Intelligence plays an indispensable part in pair-work or group-work, such as role-play, doing exercises or working on projects cooperatively, teaching vocabulary to each other and so on. Intrapersonal Intelligence is activated through setting a realistic goal for oneself and self-assessment of checking progress on achieving that goal. Goal-setting and self-assessment are significant activities that lead to better self-esteem. Forming opinions and describing how one feels about the movie require skills in clarifying values and beliefs and knowing one's feelings, other areas of Intrapersonal Intelligence. Some movies are suitable for giving students an opportunity to think about life, stimulating the yet unclaimed ninth, Existential Intelligence.

An Example Teaching Plan for Listening Practice

This is one of the teaching plans I tried with a repeaters class where most were lower- level in proficiency. I chose listening as a task because it is something that most students feel that they are constantly making some progress in, at their own pace. At the beginning of each class, I give them a B6 size paper that I call a "task-sheet". Using both sides, they write new vocabulary, their self-determined goals, and self-assessment after the activity. The procedure for this practice goes as follows (Intelligences are in square brackets}:

1. Choose a good short scene from a movie (suggested scenes below)

2. Give the script to the students (sources outlined below)

3. Show it once with Japanese subtitles [Visual]

4. Looking at the script, students write down the words and phrases that are new to them. Then they turn to their partner (usually the person next to him or her) to see if they have gotten the answers. In case neither of them knows the meaning, they ask for the teacher's help. [Interpersonal and Linguistic]

5. Students set their own goals and write them down. Lower-level learners choose some ten easy words, phrases and short expressions that they plan to listen for in the second showing. The advanced choose longer and challenging expressions of the same number or more, preferably with functions such as meeting people for the

first time, making apologies, asking someone out and so on. [Intrapersonal and Linguistic]

6. Students pair up and act out the dialogue with their partners. The reason I put role-play here is based on students' feedback. They need to read the lines out loud before they recognize the progress in listening comprehension. They are encouraged to read the lines, adding the emotions of the characters in the movie, using gestures and body language as much as possible. I usually let them do this four times, so each person acts one character twice. If the scene is somewhat long, I let them do it only twice. [Bodily-kinesthetic and Interpersonal]

7. Students now see the same scene with English subtitles this time. I sometimes show the scene twice, if necessary. [Visual]

8. Students watch the same scene, this time without subtitles. [Visual]

9. Students write their self-assessment of their listening improvement. [Intrapersonal]

Notes for the Teaching Plan

This sample plan does not include Logical-Mathematical, Musical and Naturalist Intelligences. Predicting the end of the movie after watching half of it and making an event timeline stimulate Logical-Mathematical Intelligence. If a movie has a good song, such as "She" (Sung by Elvis Costello) or "When You Say Nothing At All" (Sung by Ronan Keating) in *Notting Hill*, students get a chance to appreciate the lyrics and enjoy singing, activating Musical Intelligences. Some movies are suitable for understanding environmental issues, discovering patterns in nature, training animals, and so forth, engaging Naturalist Intelligence (Kagan and Kagan, 1998).

I tried this sample plan first on part of *Notting Hill*, one of the most popular movies with my students. I chose this movie for a few reasons. First, Hugh Grant, who speaks British English, is relatively easy to understand. Second, the whole movie is filled with a good sense of humor. It also leaves us with a warm feeling of friendship and caring about others. The movie has two good songs that gave us a good musical

opportunity to appreciate the lyrics and sing them. One of my favorite scenes is the one where William is pretending to be a reporter from a magazine (26:13 – 30:40). His total ignorance of the famous actress Anna Scott he is interviewing produces some comedy-like effect. The press conference toward the end (113:58 – 116:41) is also very good.

The following are the movies that both my students and I enjoyed and some of the highlight scenes. The choice of the scenes is based on the student questionnaire when they first see the whole movie and my own preference as a language teacher. My criteria for a good scene are: good English, clear speaking, two people speaking (*Monsters, Inc.* is the exception) and the independence of the scene.

Sleepless in Seattle: Jonah talks to a psychiatrist on the phone (13:42 – 15:02),
    Annie and Walter part (89:53 – 89:58, 91:36 – 93:13)

Anastasia (animation): Anastasia and Empress meet again (69:05 – 71:40);
    Dimitri and Empress talk to each other (74:17 – 75:10)

Truman Show: Truman and Sylvia spend time together (23:20 – 26:38);
    Truman confronts Christof, the producer (92:06 – 95:00)

Monsters, Inc.: Sulley, the monster, put the girl Boo to sleep (32:30 – 34:00);
    Sulley and Boo part (77:50 – 79:40)

The Mighty: Kevin and Max first speak to each other (11:35 – 14:57);
    Kevin and Max talk after the Christmas party (81:42 – 83:22)

The easiest way to get the movie script is to get it in book form. In Japan there are three companies publishing bilingual transcripts,Screenplay, Arc and DHC. Aiikusha publishes original screenplays that are different from transcripts. It is also possible to look for a transcript on the web. One of the most comprehensive web sites for movie scripts is http://www.script-o-rama.com. The third possibility is typing off the DVD. I prepared the script of "Monsters, Inc." with DVD. Note the occasional gap between the

subtitle and what is being spoken. Another movie-site, All Movie Guide, available at http://www.allmovie.com, provides all the information about movies.

Examples of Student Feedback about Using Movies in the Classroom

The following data was taken from the reflection space that is voluntarily filled in on the other side of the task-sheet. Students turned in their task-sheets at the end of each class. I encouraged them to reflect on their attitude change toward English and their change in learner identity. Self-assessment and reflection were written in Japanese. Reflection was not required. I did not tell them explicitly about M I Theory.

The effect of using movies was most conspicuous with the repeaters class (economics and business majors) at Meijo University in Nagoya, Japan (1999). The repeaters are those who failed English once or more, so are often lower-level students with little motivation. One such student wrote, "Whenever an English class was on the schedule, I did not want to go to school". It was obvious that they did not like English. On the other hand, they liked watching foreign movies. Most of them used to rent an English movie with Japanese dubbed voices. If they were not able to find a certain film with Japanese, they rented the original English version and only read the Japanese subtitle without listening.

Change was rather fast. Students who initially felt negative about studying English began to feel all right about it. Most of them stopped renting Japanese-dubbed versions. Instead they spontaneously chose to try the English version. They were surprised to find themselves listening to English when they rented the original. One student wrote, " I do not believe what I am doing!"   Another wrote, "Now I feel close to English, from which I used to stay away as much as I could." "When I watch a movie, I almost forget that this is an English class until the bell rings" is one of the most memorable comments I have ever had. Movies motivated students unexpectedly well. Most people noticed that the Japanese subtitles do not convey all that is said in the original and that they would miss a lot by just reading them. Some realized it is important to pay attention to how the lines are delivered.

They also started to hear positive inner voices of their own telling them, "Yes, I can do this" by achieving small goals they themselves set in each class. They enjoyed learning many words and expressions successfully. They did much better on the paper test than I expected. One student wrote, "I do not believe that I am going to get an A in English! This never happened in my life." Some said that it is difficult to forget the words and expressions that they learned in movies, because they just stick to their minds easily. Most of them improved their listening comprehension as well. One wrote, "English sounds slower than before."

The activity they enjoyed most was acting out the dialogue. This was partly because the class had a lot of athletes, and also because it was something that they had not experienced in high school. Speaking English with emotions certainly does not help with the entrance exams. As is clearly stated in Kagan and Kagan, (1998), each person's intelligences can be stretched. It seems to me that students in this class improved their Interpersonal Intelligence and Intrapersonal Intelligence at the same time. My intuition is based partly on their positive attitude toward pair-work and partly on their reflective comments that kept evolving. Most students gradually developed their capacity to set realistic goals of their own, believe in their progress and motivate themselves in their own way.

I had been told not to expect much from repeaters and that they were really low-level and very low- motivated. Instead I found most of them eager to understand what was being spoken on the screen. I was able to see how concentrated they were when they watched a movie in class. In the semester-end questionnaire, about eighty percent said they wanted to continue studying English through movies. As M I Theory indicates, these were simply differently talented people.

Changes occurred not only in the students in my class but also in myself. Teaching this class made me more accepting of all kinds of students, including late-comers, even noisy ones, those with unusual hair-style or clothes, those who turn in incomplete assignments and so on. Teacher preparation for each movie class required a lot of time-consuming work such as getting the script ready. In the end, however, this turned out to be one of the most rewarding and eye-opening classes I have ever had.

Evaluation, or More Correctly, Assessment

This is an important issue since it has much to do with students' self-esteem and their expectations for themselves. M I Theory focuses on people's strengths rather than weaknesses. Many teachers have come to realize that students should be given academic records based on their versatile intelligences, not just on Linguistic and Mathematical-Logical Intelligences. It is about time more flexibility be introduced into the school grading system.

I strongly believe that everybody can make progress in learning a foreign language at his or her own pace. Therefore, I do my best to assess my students in terms of the efforts they made. A teacher who evaluates students by giving a regular normative test might not know how much a student improved or did not improve. Nor would he or she realize if those traditional intelligences are the strengths or the weaknesses for this particular student. Diverse abilities he or she may have will go unnoticed just like hidden treasures. Assessment is a serious issue that will require a whole new paper. I certainly would hope to explore it in a future study.

Conclusion

Flexibility and open-mindedness play an important role both in teachers and students. Just as teachers start to regard their students as multifaceted, students start to look at their peers from a wider perspective and have more respect for others who are different from them, thus creating a favorable school culture.

So far M I Theory has not had the chance to prove its worth in Japanese schools yet. A child is like a seed. As "The Rose" (sung by Bette Midler) goes:

> Just remember in the winter
> Far beneath the bitter snows
> Lies the seed that with the sun's love
> In the spring becomes the rose

I hope more teachers will study the theory and put it into practice, making our schools a better place where all kinds of children will be regarded not as smart or dumb but simply as differently talented.

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Monsters, Inc,   dir. Peter Docter, Lee Unkrich and David Silverman, 92min., Buena Vista, 2001, videocassette and DVD

Notting Hill,   dir. Roger Michell, 2hr. 3min., Universal, 1999, videocassette and DVD

Sleepless in Seattle,   dir. Nora Ephron, 1hr. 45min., Tristar, 1993, videocassette and DVD

Truman Sow,   dir. Peter Weir, 1hr. 42min., Paramount, 1998, videocassette and DVD