

Just in time for the Oscars: discussing movies

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Language learners enjoy discussing their experiences. Offering them structure and support for doing so will enhance their feeling of success in communication, especially if it is in the form of a formulaic sequence. A formulaic sequence describes words that are often found together such as *I see what you mean* or *put another way*. It also describes series of phrases that go together to help initiate communication or keep communication going in a conversation, such as *I really liked the film for three reasons. The actors were very believable. I really felt that I went back in time. Second the plot was engaging. The screen writers kept every minute suspenseful. Third, the special effects were amazing – so realistic.*

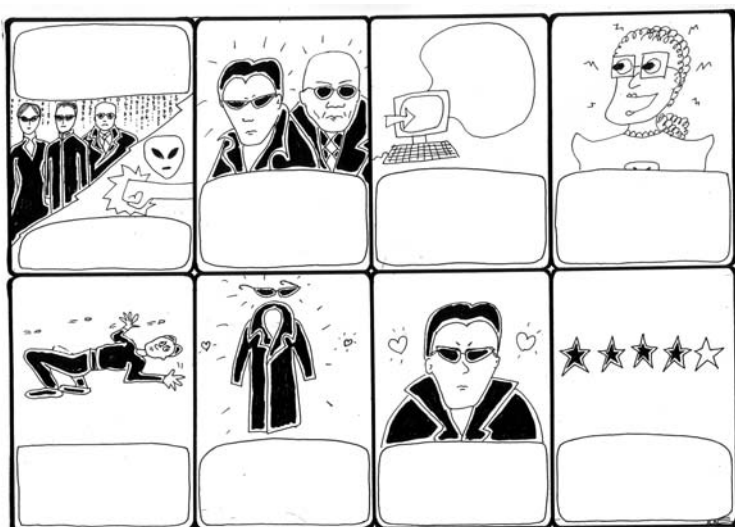
When discussing movies, people usually mention genre, actors, the setting, their opinions and the reasons they liked or did not like a movie. They also give it a rating and sometimes describe the plot. This article presents a formulaic sequence for discussing movies and describes four stages of activities that can help learners gain comfort and confidence when discussing films. It begins by offering picture cues for discussing movies and provides a good series of scaffolded steps toward writing movie reviews.

Visual cues prompt learners to think about the words they know and try to use them. Since there is no one prescribed sentence assigned to each picture the activity also promotes differentiation.

Stage 1 (learning to 'read' pictures)

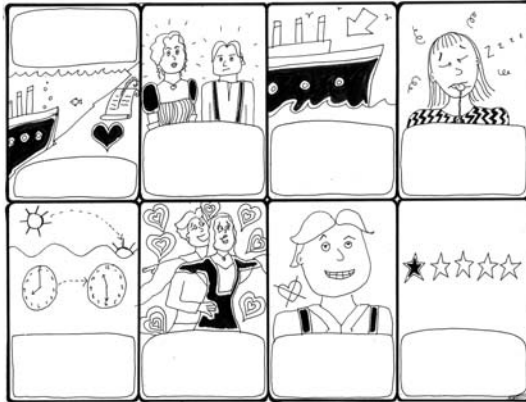
Show students Figure 1 and ask: *These pictures are about one movie. Can you guess the name of the movie?* (Answer: *The Matrix*) This will act not only as an anticipatory set but also help them realize that a collection of pictures without text can convey meaning.

Figure 1: Can you guess the name of the movie?



Show students Figure 2 and ask again: *These pictures are about one movie. Can you guess the name of the movie?* (Answer: *The Titanic*)

Figure 2: *Can you guess the name of the movie (2)*

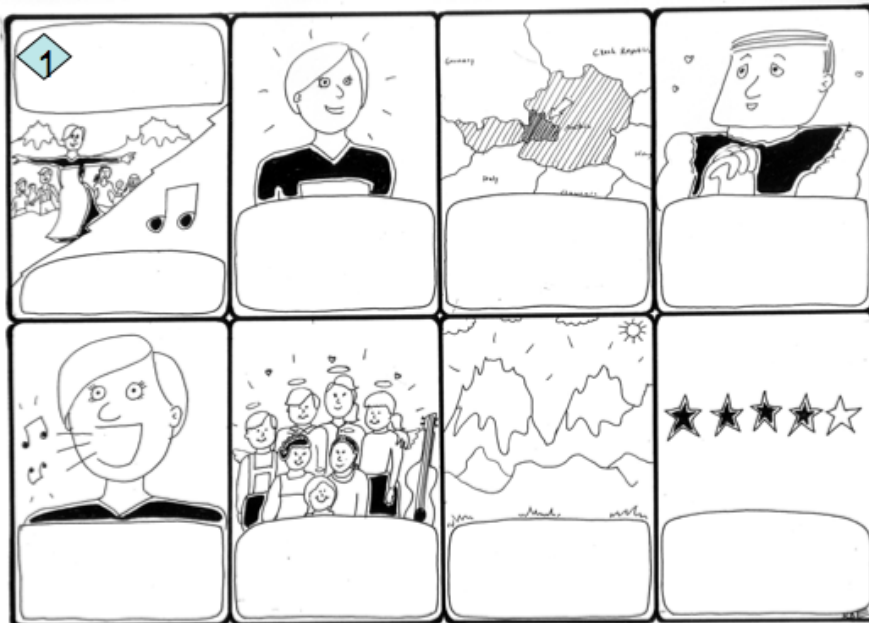


Stage 2 (Learning the formulaic sequence)

Show students Figure 3 and tell them that the picture of number 1 is for 'title'. Then using Figures 4 and 5 guide participants to label the other number pictures with a key word and discuss phrases that could be used to talk about each. See Figures 3-5.

Figure 3: *Title*

What information do you think # 1 guides you to say?



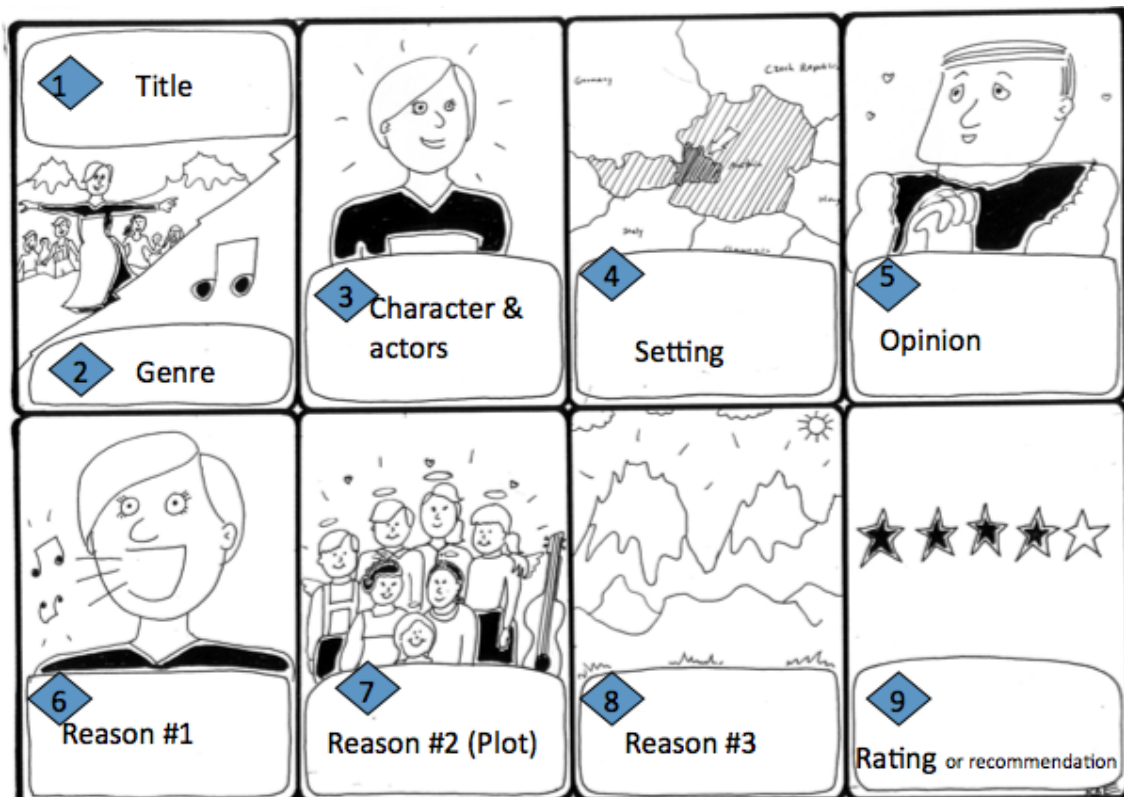
After the students guess 'genre' for number 2, ask them to guess the focus (theme or topic) for each visual.

Elaborate on each picture cue by discussing vocabulary and phrases that might be used. For example, after guessing *genre* for picture cue 2, learners might brainstorm for a list of genres such as action, animation, comedy, drama, romantic comedy, chick flick, horror, space, human interest, documentary, mystery, adventure. You might also ask learners to name titles of films or TV shows that fit each genre to confirm their understanding. For extra practice students can complete the following sentences (please translate them into your HL) using the words below. It is a good idea to have extra words so that students have to really understand each word and not use process of elimination.

1. The type of movie is the movie _____.
2. A film with cartoon characters is an _____.
3. A movie that is a love story is a _____.
4. A movie that makes you laugh is a _____.
5. A movie that makes you scream is a _____.
6. A movie that is exciting with lots of explosions is an _____ movie.
7. Movies about the future or space are called _____ films.
8. A movie about the story of someone's life is known as a _____.
9. A movie about real life is known as a _____.

animation documentary horror Sci-fi camera
 action romance genre drama comedy

Figure 5: Formulaic sequence for a movie presentation or discussion



Continue to brainstorm for words and phrases (using a key word) for each visual or key word, as described in Figure 5. For example, to discuss the **setting**, when and where the story takes place, the following phrases might be elicited from or taught to students:

The story movie film	takes place	in ___(city, province, country) during (the __ century) at ____ (time, night)
	occurs	

To stress the value western curriculum places on critical thinking, reasoning and the ability to defend an **opinion** it is useful to brainstorm for ways to express both an opinion and arguments. For example,

- I loved the movie
 - The movie was _____(great, OK, poor)
 - The film was ____ (riveting, engaging, scary, suspense-filled. . .)
- } because

Be sure to tell the students that three reasons is a convincing number of reasons: two arguments or reasons is not considered sufficiently persuasive and four can leave the reader thinking that there should have been five. Learners should also know that they should always select the **strongest arguments**. A comment about the plot or storyline is often valued as one of the reasons.

Defending an opinion with three reasons also offers an opportunity to stress the value of cohesive devices and transitional words such as *but, however, first, second, third, finally, in addition, in fact, in contrast, overall*. Research has confirmed that the use of cohesive devices makes writing and discussions more engaging. A beginner use of cohesive devices might sound like the following:

- I loved the movie for three reasons.
- First,_____.
- Second (or *and* or *in addition*), _____.
- Third (or Finally)_____.

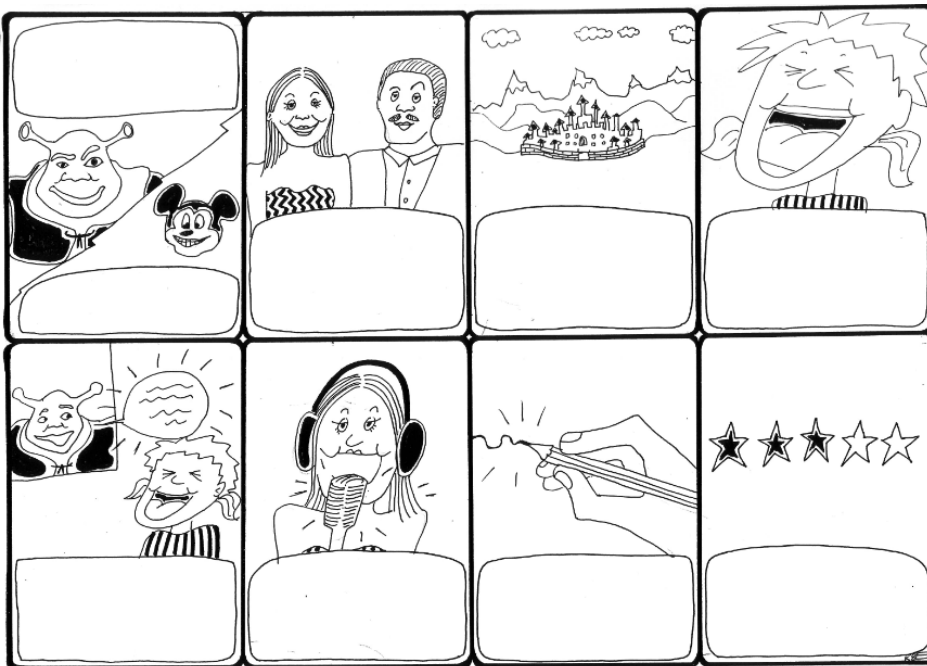
Typical **reasons** film lovers identify include: believability of the story and the acting, quality of the story, plot, special effects, music, costumes, and settings. The reasons must hint at the final rating or recommendation. For example, a lot of disappointment and criticism does not match a recommendation or ranking of 4 stars out of 5. Phrases that might help present a rating or recommendation include:

- I highly recommend it.
- I don't recommend it.
- I would recommend it.
- RATING
 - I give it thumbs up :-)
 - I give it thumbs down :-)
 - I give it 4 stars (out of 5)

Stage 3 (practice makes perfect)

The deliberate practice or 10,000 hour rule suggests that people only get better at something through practice. A teacher can contribute to those hours by including structured activities that review specific content. Use the visual cues for *The Matrix* (Figure 1), *The Titanic* (Figure 2), *The Sound of Music* (Figure 3) and *Shrek* (Figure 6) to let learners practice discussing movies in pairs. These can also be downloaded in a larger size free of charge on my website.

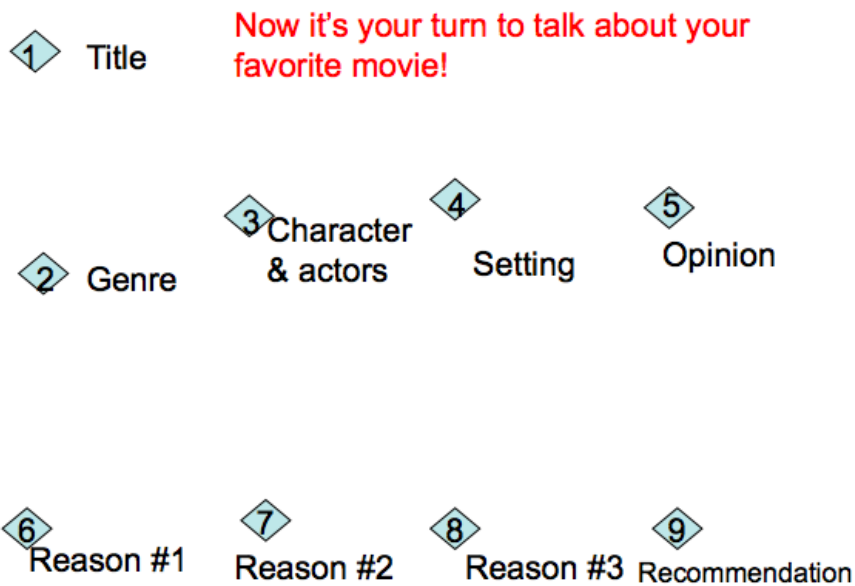
Figure 6: Can you guess the name of the movie and discuss it according to the 9 parts of a movie review?



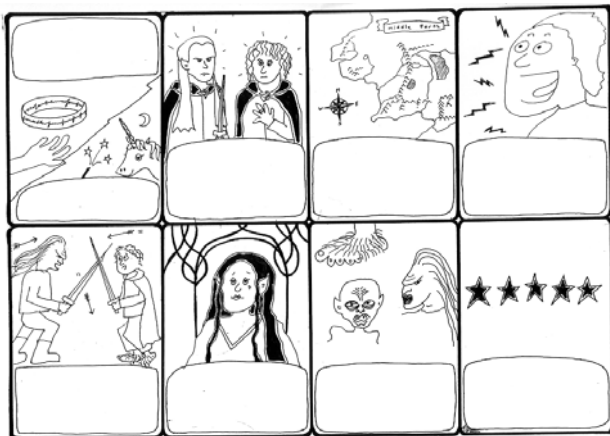
Stage 4 (independence and personalization)

The approach to discussing a movie in this proposal is what might be called a formulaic sequence. This means that it offers the learners a mini formula that they could insert into conversations about movies, all the time personalizing it. To learn and remember a formulaic sequence a learner must repeatedly use it at least five to ten times. The visual cues will help students with ideas, but eventually the specific visual cues can be removed and replaced by only the key words. The key words, written on a board side by side and not one under another, then become reminder cues to help students talk about a movie or TV show that they like or have recently seen. This personalized stage will help students develop confidence and acquire the ability to transfer what they have learned in a structured and guided context to one with less (and different) guidance. See Figure 7.

Figure 7: Key word cues to follow the formulaic sequence independently



For practice discuss *Lord of the Rings*.



Closing

Although real life communication may not be as contrived as the formulaic sequence, the above four scaffolded steps offer learners an opportunity to express their ideas in the safe milieu of a classroom with an appropriate amount of challenge and support. With growing confidence, learners should be able to engage with more competent HL speakers and direct and participate in conversations about movies, instead of only listening to them. Further, the oral practice prepares them to write a movie review. See Appendix A.

Special thanks to Kate Lange of New Zealand for her collaboration with the visuals.

References

Bilash, O. (2007) Scaffolding activities to develop the four skills *Notos*, vol.7 (2), 12-23.

Appendix A: Follow these parts to write a movie review

"Movie Review" Format

Title Subtitle	
<i>Movie Title</i> <i>Director</i> <i>Show Times</i> <i>Location</i> <i>Rating (stars)) ☆</i>	<i>Basic Plot (and development)</i>
<i>Genre</i> <i>Themes</i>	
<i>Initial Opinion / Reaction</i>	
<i>Setting</i> <i>Characters (names of actors)</i>	
<i>(Photo)</i>	<i>Criticism and praise</i>
	<i>Concluding Opinion</i>
	<i>Reviewer's Name</i>