

Analysis of the Pedagogical Perspectives Represented in the Movie *Dangerous Minds*: Based on the Constructivist Framework

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyze educational theories and practices represented in the movie *Dangerous Minds*. This paper begins by giving the overview of the movie. Then this paper makes an analysis of the pedagogical methods and practices used by the teacher in the movie, which can encourage students to fulfill their academic success and social mobility. The lives of students at risk are transformed through the teacher's beliefs and pedagogical practices based on the constructivism, leading students on a path of self-discovery and self-empowerment. What is imperative in the students' lives here is their intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy toward the self and their educational system. By providing constructivist pedagogical paradigms and viewing these media texts within the context of an urban school, this paper intends to introduce educational theories and methods which can create better educational environment for students. In short, this study explores teaching theories and methods represented in the movie based on the constructivist perspectives, which are supposed to fully cultivate the potential of students.

Key words: Constructivism, Media Texts, Meaningful Learning, Motivation, Cooperative Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of movies in language teaching has recently gained increased popularity among English teachers in Korea [1], [2]. This attention to movies or multimedia as language teaching materials is not viewed to be innovative or novel any longer. Movies are a repository of authentic text, which has wonderful power not only to entertain people but also to provide them with various kinds of ideas and inspiration [3]. Since many teachers regard the utilization of movies as an entertaining and effective method in their language classrooms, movies have been used to simple source of teaching authentic everyday conversation. Using movies and multimedia in language teaching allows the possibilities for second or foreign language learners to acquire more genuine and useful learning materials. It also helps students understand the target people and culture as well as learn the target language. In spite of some limitations, implementing movies or multimedia in the language classroom offers a great opportunity and potential to language teachers and learners.

However, few teachers consider movies as critical texts to inspire their teaching or as a tool to help them reflect their own teaching practice. A lot of researchers have tried to describe the benefit of using movies in specific teaching situations for specific linguistic purposes. Although there is a lot of research related to the implementation of movies or multimedia in language learning

and teaching, most of the publications have centered on how movies can be used effectively to teach a foreign language [4]-[6].

In fact, from pedagogical perspectives and language teaching theories and methods, the repository can provide English teachers with authentic materials in understanding language teaching theories and methods, and help them contemplate their own teaching practice. Along with the development of the information and communication technology, language teaching theories and practices have evolved from the behavioral perspectives to the cognitive framework to the socio-constructivist perspectives. From the constructivist perspectives, the role of a teacher is a facilitator who supports his/her students to be more responsible for their own learning and eventually to become a more independent and empowering person in and outside of the classrooms.

This paper is intended to show the use of movies in understanding English language teaching theories and methods by analyzing the movie *Dangerous Minds* (1995, Director: John, N. Smith, Hollywood Pictures). Among various language teaching theories and practices, this paper will focus on analyzing constructivist teaching approach implemented by the teacher in the movie and categorize them according to the relevant themes. This paper will first describe the theoretical perspectives and the overview of the movie *Dangerous Minds*, and then makes a connection and comparison between representations of the movie and constructivist pedagogical theories of language teaching.

In addition, this paper tries to help the teachers realize the importance of being aware of their reflective attitudes in improving and understanding their own teaching.

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2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Movies as authentic media text

Movies are authentic recourses, which have amazing magic power to entertain people and bring them into the various kinds of dreams and fantasies. From educational perspectives, the magic formula provides English teachers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context with wonderful tools in teaching for the more genuine usages of English. Language instructional materials are very important in EFL situations because they are major resources of exposure to the target language for the students [7]. Unlike students in English as a second language (ESL) context, who have abundant real-life language input, language learning materials serve as the most important language input for EFL students. The development of multimedia technology also makes it much easier to utilize movies for English language education. Linguistic acquisition, intercultural communication, and the other social components are passed on to students through movies [3].

Except the impact of movies on English language learning and teaching, movies are able to serve the role as the vital media text for critical pedagogy. Movies provide people with critical text that far outweighs the importance of just giving simple pleasure and entertainment to people. Movies reflect a lot of images of real world such as schools, students, teachers, or social values. Accordingly, movies can be served as the site of investigation that can help teacher researchers examine educational phenomena based on the historical, political and socio-cultural perspectives [8]. In the era of technological advances and its influence on English language education, it is worth exploring the impact of integrating multimodal instructional materials into pedagogical context [9]. In the modernized and industrialized society of the 20th century, schools and teachers played the major role of delivering knowledge as the only source of information. However, in the era of information technology of the 21st century, multimodal materials such as movies or dramas have emerged as a crucial educating tool in offering profound influence on both the learners and the teachers [10].

2.2 Constructivist Teaching Framework

In the last part of 20th century, constructivism emerged as a major paradigm in education. Constructivism has been a prevailing framework to portray how learning occurs. The theory has helped educators identify key components for optimized pedagogical environments [11]. Constructivism emphasizes the importance of learners constructing their own representation of reality in their lives. Instead of indoctrinating simple skills and drills or emphasizing rote memorization, constructivism emphasizes social interaction, communication, the discovery of meaning, learning communities, and collaboration during the learning process [12]. In the premise of constructivism, learners are not passive recipients of knowledge in the classroom, but main agents who actively construct knowledge through interaction with others and the outside world. Learners must individually discover and transform complex information if they are to make it their own, which requires a more active role for students in their own

learning than is typical in many traditional classrooms. Learners construct meaning by assimilating and revising their prior knowledge [13]. When the learners accept new knowledge which is not compatible with their existing schema, then they reflect upon their status quo and revise their knowledge. This results in conceptual changes that are then internalized in the learner. Therefore, in constructivist perspectives, knowledge does not dwell internally in a person, but is constructed through social interaction within the discourse community [14]. This newly revised knowledge serves for the development of the learners' positive self-concept and of their personal sense of reality around them. These internal forces cause the learners to act and grow in the direction of behavior that enhances their existence and wellbeing as a whole person. If the teachers provide the learners with a nonthreatening environment and proper scaffolding, learners will be able to construct their meaning that is congruent with their reality and will prosper and learn. Only when learners can feel at home with all of their feelings and reactions, they are able to reach their full potential.

In the constructivist framework, the traditional pedagogical focus is moving away from teaching to learning; from teachers to learners. For constructivists, the aim of education is the facilitation of change and learning. This change makes it possible for the learners to be transformed as the principal agents in their lives. Learning how to learn is more essential than just being taught something from omnipotent teachers who distribute prescribed knowledge to their students. Many of the educational systems fix curricular goals and dictate what shall be learned for the learners, thus denying learners both freedom and self-respect. However, what is needed is for the teachers to realize their roles as facilitators of learning through establishing rapport with their students. Accordingly, with the support of teachers as facilitators, learners can fulfill their potential within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and can get ownership for their learning by exercising the muscle for learning how to learn [15]. To become facilitators, teachers should realize the importance of empowering their students in classrooms. Through the empowerment, students will be able to negotiate their learning outcomes for meaningful learning. Through the cooperation with teachers and other classmates in the process of self-discovery, learners can engage in critical thinking, and connect everything they learn in school to their reality outside the classroom.

3. THE MOVIE *DANGEROUS MINDS*

3.1 About the author

Dangerous Minds is an American movie released in 1995. The movie is dramatized on the basis of the autobiography *My Posse Don't Do Homework* written by Lou Anne Johnson. Lou Anne Johnson was a former U.S. Navy journalist as well as a Marine Corps officer. She served nine years on active military service, first as a journalist in the Navy. While on active duty, Lou Anne received a B.S. in Psychology. After she left the military service, she attended a graduate school to get a master degree in teaching English. In 1989, she began teaching reading

and writing to non-English speakers as an intern teacher at Carlmont High School in Belmont, California. Most of her students in the school were African-American and Hispanic teenagers with socio-economically disadvantaged family setting. Most parents showed little interests and enthusiasm in educating their children. In 1992, she wrote the book *My Posse Don't Do Homework*, which portrayed her experiences working with teenagers at-risk. The book was published in eight different languages and was dramatized for the box office hit *Dangerous Minds* in 1995. When the film was first released, it brought mixed responses from the public. However, it soon turned out to be a surprise box office success in the summer of 1995 [16].

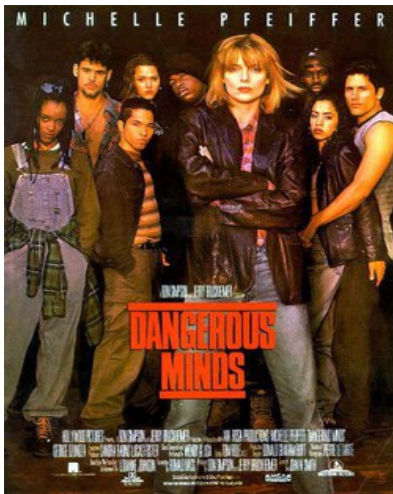


Fig. 1. The Poster of *Dangerous Minds*

3.2 Synopsis of the movie

In this movie, Lou Anne Johnson is a veteran of US Marine and has a degree in education. When she begins her new occupation as a novice teacher at an urban school in California, she soon realizes that it takes more than teaching just reading and writing. On the first day, she notices that she has to deal with a class of hard-to-teach students. As soon as she finishes first meeting with the students as a tough initiation ceremony, she describes the class as the 'rejects from the hell.'

The students in her class actually have serious social problems and no interest in education. Even though her African-American and Latino students make fun of Lou Anne at first, she eventually leads them to open up their mind and to find their track to learning and understanding literature. In the meanwhile, she tries to make rapport with her students through a combination of bribery (candy bars) and intimidation (her karate training from the Marines). Among the students, particular students draw Lou Anne's attention for their individual problems. Callie of the class is a very bright girl who excels at English, but Ms. Carlar tries to persuade her to move to another school halfway through the semester and to give up her academic future when she becomes pregnant. Lou Anne visits her house and tries to persuade her to continue to study. Raul is the bright student in the class, but he is frequently involved in various troubles. Lou Anne tries to encourage him by visiting his family and appreciates his effort on his study in front of his parents. Also she goes to dinner with him as a way

of promoting his confidence and self-respect. Emilio is the most troublesome student in the class and his life is jeopardized due to a personal relationship with a recently-released thug. She tries to protect him, but owing to the cold attitude of the principal, he cannot get help at the critical moment and is finally killed [17], [18].

 Michelle Pfeiffer Lou Anne Johnson	 George Dzundza Hal Griffith	 Courtney B. Vance Mr. George Grandey
 Robin Bartlett Ms. Carla Nichols	 Bruklin Harris Callie Roberts	 Renoly Santiago Raul Sanchez

Fig. 2. Casting members of the movie

Amongst the entire chaotic situation, in the movie, she is finally able to reach out to the students who need her encouragement the most. She can guide the students to understand the power of learning how to learn and let them grow as independent and autonomous learners.

4. CLASSROOM PRACTICE IN THE MOVIE

4.1 Negotiate the curriculum

Lou Anne Johnson, a retired U.S. Marine, applies for a teaching position at Parkmont High School in California. On the title scene, the screen displays a school building, whose walls are covered in graffiti with the sound track *Gangsta's Paradise* by Coolio Featuring L.V. Most of the students on the scene are African-American and Hispanic teenagers. The scenes indicate that most students are from lower-class and have underprivileged family backgrounds. In addition, the scene suggests that some of them are involved in gang fighting and drug use. The lyrics of the original sound track also imply the condition in which the students in the movie are situated.

*As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I take a look at my life
And realize there's nothing left*

...
*Been spending most our lives
Living in a gangsta's paradise*

*Keep spending most our lives
Living in a gangsta's paradise*

I'm twenty-three now, will I ever live to see twenty-four

...

They say I gotta learn

But nobody's here to teach me

If they can't understand it, how can they reach me?

I guess they can't

I guess they won't, I guess they front

That's why I know my life is out of luck, fool [19].

When Lou Anne is immediately offered the full time teaching position on the spot of the interview, she is very surprised and pleased. Mrs. Nichols explains that she is going to teach the 'special kids', who are passionate, energetic, and challenging, as an academy teacher. His friend Hal, a teacher at the school, tries to warn her about the academy class that she is going to teach, but soon gives up. Showing up the next day to begin her new teaching job, Lou Anne finds herself confronted with full of tough and hostile teenagers in the classroom. Most of them in the class seem to have low self-esteem. They totally refuse to engage with anything, especially learning. The students in the class mock her and immediately coin the nickname "White Bread" for Lou Anne because of her Caucasian appearance. With evident lack of authority, she cannot control the students and just leave the classroom while the students triumphantly yell out a cheer. Lou Anne asks Hal, "Who are these kids, rejects from the hell?" Hal answers, "They're bright kids with little or no educational skills and what we politely call a lot of social problems. To teach them, all you gotta do is get their attention,"

Lou Anne returns the next day in a leather jacket and teaches them karate. The students show some interest in such activities, but immediately regress to their former behavior when Lou Anne tries to teach the prescribed curriculum for the class. Actually, the assigned curriculum to the class is a book called *My darling, my hamburger*, which is not motivating or challengeable at all. Moreover, the principal of the school, who is a very authoritative figure, rebukes Lou Anne for not knocking the door before entering his office and warns that teaching Karate is against school policy and can lead to a lawsuit in case of an injury. He insists that she should simply follow the school curriculum dictated by the Board of Education to avoid that kind of error and admonishes her just to get along with the school policy.

Holt asserts:

We encourage children to act stupidly, not only by scaring and confusing them, but also by boring them, by filling up their days with dull, repetitive tasks that make little or no claim on their attention or demands on their intelligence [20].

As Holt suggests, the school sets limit to the students and instills mediocrity with simple skills and drills into the students. Instead of encouraging the students to broaden their horizon and accomplish their potential, the school system forces the students to accept their state quo and let them believe that they do not deserve anything better than that. The school does not expect anything excellent from the students while the school provides the students with poor learning materials. These

students are supposed to fail to reach their potential in their academic achievement just because the school system does not put any expectation for their success or excellence. The students' learning is poorly coordinated with their learning of content or subject matter. Prodromou proposes that we need to acknowledge the ideological nature of language teaching. He suggests that what we teach and particularly the way we teach reflects our attitudes to society in general and the individual's place in society [21]. The students are placed in lower level programs that would result in under-preparation for higher education. To lower level classes, the school offers an alienating and trivial curriculum with passive drills and practice such as *My darling, my hamburger*.

To motivate the students, Lou Anne says that she will give them all an *A* grade from the beginning of the semester. She also says that the only thing required of them is that they try to maintain the grade *A*. She challenges the students saying, "It's up to you to keep it." Lou Anne is maybe the first teacher who confronts the students to take more responsible role in their own study if they want to succeed. Desperate to reach the students, Lou Anne creates classroom activities that provide students with something better than the prescribed curriculum. She decides to challenge the entire curriculum in order to supply the students with more meaningful learning materials. However, the students refuse to try something further than their current level and resist. She needs to find a gimmick first to grab their attention. Lou Anne rewards the students generously, using 'her own little secret weapon', candy bars. Trying to teach literature and poetry, she promises to take all of them to an amusement park for free if they finish their assignment of reading poetry. However, the students cannot understand why they should read poetry. They fail to see any connection between reading poetry and living their mediocre lives.

A student: Yo, how come you keep saying 'poetry'? What's poetry got to do with this?

Lou Anne: Poetry? Well, because if you can read poetry, you can read just about anything. When you're ready for poetry, you're ready for bear.

By saying this, she proposes the power of learning how to learn. She tries to teach the students learning how to learn is more important than passively being taught some discrete and trivial knowledge.

In order to guide them to the world of poetry, Lou Anne uses the lyrics of a popular singer Bob Dylan's '*Mr. Tambourine Man*', which is very familiar to them. She uses the popular song in order to teach symbolism and metaphor. Lou Anne actually helps the students to move upward and forward by assimilating and revising their familiar existing knowledge. When the students begin to read the lyrics of Bob Dylan's song and appreciate the power of learning how to read, she takes the whole class to the theme park as she promised.

Once this is achieved, she progresses on to the poet Dylan Thomas's '*Do not go gentle into that good night*' although her methods cause the anger of the school authorities who try to force her to remain within the curriculum. To have the students read the real poem, she devises a project called 'Dylan-Dylan contest.' First, she shows the students the menu of a nice

restaurant 'The Flowering Peach' and says whoever wins the Dylan-Dylan contest goes there for dinner with her. She explains that Bob Dylan is the singer whose lyrics they have been reading in the class and that there is also Dylan Thomas who also wrote famous poems. She adds, "If you can find the poem written by Dylan Thomas that is like a poem written by Bob Dylan, you win the Dylan-Dylan contest." For the team project, the students begin to learn how to cooperate and negotiate in order to finish the given task successfully. Through the cooperative team project, students can realize that they should help and depend on each other. Actually, they learn that each one of them should be held accountable for their own learning and be motivated to increase the learning of others [22]. When Raul, Durrel, and Callie win in the Dylan-Dylan contest, she offers prizes to the rest of the students as well. She says, "There are no losers in this class, you guys did great. You all get to pick a prize from the box." When Raul asks how come they get a prize when they got the wrong answer, she responded, "Well, because sometimes it takes a lot of wrong answers to get to the right one."

4.2 Become a victor, not a victim in your life

Most of the students in Lou Anne's classroom have low self-esteem and blame their current underprivileged situation for their disappointing schoolwork. They attribute their academic failure to the people in the mainstream and unfair school system. When some of the students are involved in the fight at school and get suspended, they blame Lou Anne and refuse to focus on the study during the class. They are victimized themselves and blame others for their troublesome situation. She challenges the students, saying:

- Student 1: We don't have no choice in this room.
Lou Anne: if you all feel that strongly about it, leave the room.
Hey, listen. Nobody's forcing you to be here. You have a choice. You can stay, or you can leave.
Student 2: Lady, why are you playin' this game?
We don't have a choice.
Lou Anne: You don't have a choice? You don't have a choice on whether or not you're here?
Student 2: No. If we leave, we don't get to graduate. If we stay, we gotta put up with you.
Lou Anne: Well, that's a choice, isn't it? You have a choice. You either don't graduate or you have to put up with me. It may not be a choice you like, but it is a choice.
Student 3: Man, you don't understand nothin'. I mean, you don't come from where we live. You're not bussed here.

As shown above, the students see themselves as victims or subordinates within the institutional hierarchy. They are just accustomed to playing blaming-games. They feel insecure and hopeless in their academic career and life events. Lou Anne challenges the students saying,

- Lou Anne: Do you have a choice to get on that bus?
Student 3: Man, you come and live my neighborhood for one week and then you tell me if you got a choice.

Lou Anne: There are a lot of people who live in your neighborhood who choose not to get on that bus. What do they choose to do? They choose to go out and sell drugs. They choose to go out and kill people. They choose to do a lot of other things. But they choose not to get on that bus. The people who choose to get on that bus, which are you, are the people who are saying, 'When I got to my grave, my head will be high'. That is a choice. There are no victims in this classroom!

It is a really an eye-opening moment for the students to appreciate that it is their own choice to decide to be in the classroom and that they should stop playing victims in their lives. The focus of their mindset is moving away from 'blaming others for their miserable situation' toward 'having ownership in their own lives'. With her perspectives of transformative pedagogy, she helps the students recognize that the goal of being educated is to make a right choice in life. By realizing this fact, they put a step to the path of transformation as independent and responsible human beings. It is a significant turning point for the students to stop being victimized and to accept their reality with more positive and serious attitudes.

4.3 Learn to empower yourself

At first, Lou Anne utilizes the strategies to tap the extrinsic motivation of the students, which are to give candy bars or to bring them to the theme park when they read lyrics of Bob Dylan's song. Now she realizes that the students are ready to read the real poems. When she introduces the poem written by Dylan Thomas, one student asks,

- Student 1: What's the prize we're gonna get for learning this poem?
Lou Anne: Learning is the prize.
Yeh, knowing how to read something and understand it is the prize.
Ok? Knowing how to think is the prize.
Student 1: I know how to think right now.

The answer of Lou Anne is really powerful and significant in that she pinpoints the essence of the constructivist perspectives.

She continues to say,

- Lou Anne: Okay, well, yeah, will you know how to run too. But not the way you could run if you're trained. You know, the mind is like a muscle. Ok? And if you want it to be really powerful, you got to work it out. Ok? Each new fact gives you another choice. Each new idea builds another muscle, okay? And it's those muscles that are gonna make you really strong. Those are your weapons, and in this unsafe world... I wanna arm you.
Student 1: And that's what these poems are supposed to do?
Lou Anne: Yeah, Yeah, Hey, try it. You're just sitting' here anyway. Look, Okay. If at the end of the term, you're not faster, stronger, and smarter, you will have lost nothing.

But if you are, you'll be that much tougher to knock down.

What Lou Ann tells to the students is a really powerful statement. Till now she utilizes the instructional techniques to motivate the students extrinsically by using positive reinforcement such as candy bars or the amusement park. From this point, she challenges the students to become more independent and autonomous learners. It is the moment that students are able to realize the power of intrinsic motivation in learning. Lou Anne wants the students to understand that learning itself is the prize and learning each new fact gives them another choice in their lives. For the students, Lou Anne tries to be a facilitator of students' learning through the establishment of genuine relationship with the students. She shows the students real trust and regards the students as worthy and valuable individuals with great potentials. She also wants the students to understand the power of learning as the tool for empowering the self.

At the end of the year, Lou Anne announces to the class that she will not teach at the school next school year. The students refuse to let her go and quote the poetry that they have learned during from her the class:

"You can't give in. You can't go gentle. You got to rage against the dying of the light. Yeh, you gotta go for yours."

Meanwhile Lou Anne has struggled to teach them to appreciate the value of reading poetry. Now they are able to relate what they have learned in the classroom into their reality to negotiate meaning. They also adopt the same strategies that Lou Anne uses to teach poetry. They offer her a candy bar and show their respect and adoration by quoting the verses of the poems.

"We see you as being our light. You're our Tambourine Man. Come on, Miss J. All the poems you taught us say you can't give in. You can't give up. Well, we ain't giving you up. What you need to stay, girl? You want a candy bar?"

Truly, the students become to be able to negotiate their learning outcomes and to cooperate with their peers and the teacher in the process of reading poetry. They can engage in critical thinking by developing their mind muscle and relate everything they learn in the classroom to their reality. They are transformed as "fully functioning persons" who stay in peace with all their personal feelings and reactions [23]. They can finally be ready to reach their full potential.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, pedagogical perspectives depicted in the movie *Dangerous Minds* are investigated in the viewpoints of constructivism. This paper also tries to examine the role of movies as the crucial media text for critical pedagogy. In the movie, the students can find their way to fulfill their academic

success and social mobility through the encouragement of a teacher who views learning as acquiring internal force for empowering the self. The lives of students with underprivileged family background are transformed through the teacher's pedagogical beliefs and practices. Even though the teacher undergoes trials and errors in the attempt of teaching the students the value of reading poetry, the teacher's constructivist perspectives can finally guide the students on the right track to self-discovery and self-empowerment. What is vital in the students' academic success in the movie is their intrinsic motivation and positive image toward the self and their lives.

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