

# Movie Trailers in the Language Classroom: A Practical Application

Laura MacGregor

While showing films in language classes is popular among both teachers and students, using them effectively can challenge time and other constraints. On the other hand, film clips, short scenes from movies, can highlight specific language, social, or cultural points, and because of their brevity, they can be used more efficiently. Related to film clips are movie trailers (予告編), short advertisements created for television and movie theatres to promote films that are about to be released. These commercials are typically 60–150 seconds long and are shown in TV ad spots and in movie theatres before the feature film begins.

Historically, as the name “trailer” suggests, they were shown after the feature film, in the days of serial films when audiences would stay for the final credits to find out what the next week’s program would be about. Nowadays, people tend not to stay until the very end as movies and their credits are much longer, so trailers are shown first (Berardinelli, 1998). Since they are part of the advertising campaign responsible for a movie’s success or failure at the box office, considerable care is taken in their making. They are sometimes made by the film studios themselves, but are more commonly outsourced to film promotion advertising agencies that cooperate closely with the film producers. The status of trailers as an art form in themselves is evidenced by the fact that there is even an award exclusively for them: the Golden Trailer Awards began in 1999 to honor trailers and their creators.

Movie trailers are often partly or completely remade for audiences

in different countries, in the same way that advertisements for products and services marketed internationally are. Thus, for example, an original trailer for a Hollywood movie is normally remade or at least revised for Japanese audiences, taking language and cultural differences into consideration to make it appealing. It is this point that will form the basis of this article, which introduces techniques for using original movie trailers and their Japanese counterparts to teach linguistic and cultural differences. It takes the form of a class activity that compares the two trailers for one movie. Because the purpose of the activity is primarily to challenge and help sharpen students' perceptive skills, it is obviously preferable to choose trailers for movies that they are not likely to have already seen. Furthermore, it is essential that the teacher does not give information about the film or the trailers in advance. One set of trailers that has been used with Japanese university students and will be introduced here is for *The Mighty*, a drama made in the U.S. in 1998. Both trailers are included on the DVD version available in Japan (Chelsom, 1998).<sup>1</sup>

## Procedure

Begin the lesson with a short introduction of movies and movie trailers in general. Distribute the student worksheet (Appendix 2) but do not give information about the film or the trailers. Students should use their perceptive skills alone to decode the two trailers. While the worksheet for *The Mighty* was made specifically for this movie, it is possible to use a general worksheet that can be applied to any set of trailers. An example of a template for examining only one version of a trailer can be found in an activity book by Stempleski and Tomalin (2001).

Key elements that are part of most trailers include visuals, sound, music, film dialogue, voiceovers, and screen text. The worksheet for *The*

*Mighty* asks students to consider all of these when they think about what is different, and later why. Go over the worksheet first to confirm understanding of the contents. Then, show the Japanese trailers a few times with time between the viewings for students to fill in the sheet. When they are ready, show them the original trailer in the same way.

After giving them plenty of time to think and write, conduct group and/or class discussions and replay the trailers as necessary. The teacher plays the important role of facilitator, guiding students in the right direction to help them shape their ideas into broader generalizations about how culture affects movie trailers as an advertising form, which is the primary goal of the activity. To go from the “small picture” of the trailers to the “big picture” of cultural contrasts is not easy. Teachers must help students make the leap. A teaching guide of possible answers is provided in Appendix 3 to help teachers do this.

### ***Discussion: General Observations about Original Trailers and their Japanese Remakes***

While it is very difficult to make generalizations about the elements of movie trailers, given that they will be different depending on the film genre and the country in which the film was made, the following attempts to summarize frequently appearing contrasts between Japanese and original, in this case western<sup>2</sup> trailers.

( i ) *Japanese trailers use reviews and cast track record to endorse the film, while western trailers rely on the film contents alone.*

As is apparent from their particular attraction to designer labels, reliability, quality, safety, and conformity are key concepts that Japanese people tend to value. It is socially “safer” to follow the status quo, which tends to favor things that have been publicly endorsed in some way.

Movies are no exception. The following features are frequently used in trailers made for Japan to help establish the credibility of the film for its potential viewers:

1. Reviews (as screen text) from the country where the film was released.
2. Cast introduction (with screen text) that gives the title of another film in which the actors have appeared and are well known for in Japan.
3. Reviews or screen text that predict an Academy Award win.

On the other hand, for western viewers at least, while publicly acknowledged credibility (awards, actors' track record, reviews) is important, people are perhaps more confident about and more accustomed to making up their minds by themselves. They tend to be concerned more with personal preference than conforming to a norm.

(ii) *The mood or atmosphere of Japanese trailers tends to emphasize pathos and sadness, while western movie trailers focus more on the positive, uplifting aspects of the film.*

The following help establish the mood of the film for Japanese viewers: Japanese trailers for dramas (and even comedies) tend to emphasize any apparent sadness, pathos, suffering, pain, death, using tearful scenes, and sad or solemn music to accomplish this. Voiceovers or screen text with key words and phrases such as “heartwarming” and “story of friendship” appeal to the hearts and emotions of the viewer to trigger interest in the film. Movies made in Japan tend to do this too. In contrast, original trailers tend to be more positive for a heavy drama, more comic for a comedy, and more story-oriented or image- or emotion-oriented in

general. This kind of intensity stimulates interest in the film. Three examples show this kind of contrast between western and Japanese trailers.

First, in the American comedy, *Wonder Boys* (2000), the pathos and bad fortune of star Michael Douglas are emphasized in the Japanese trailer, while the original trailer emphasizes the comedy of the film, showing Douglas' bad luck as humorous. Thus, the Japanese trailer triggers the empathy of the viewer while the original trailer interprets the same situation as black comedy.

In the American drama, *Life as a House* (2001), the terminal illness of the father, which is the underlying thread of the film, is presented as the key point in the Japanese trailer. The original trailer focuses instead on the father-son struggle and conflicts in other relationships, as well as the courage and determination of the man to achieve his goals, both of which are in the foreground plot. Thus, the Japanese trailer again emphasizes the emotional undertones of the film while the original trailer emphasizes the intense dialogue. The focus on emotions rather than words is typical of Japanese communication, which tends to rely more on context than content. In contrast, the original trailer is word-based and direct, thus subscribing to what Edward T. Hall coined low context communication style, which is typical of U.S. North American culture.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, as we have seen in *The Mighty*, the emotionally charged friendship and heartwarming aspects of the film are emphasized in the Japanese trailer along with the sadness of Kevin's illness and coming death in the background. Together, they lead the viewer to believe that this is a sad movie. In the original trailer, the focus is on the foreground reality of Max and Kevin's lives and how they cope with their problems, and the middleground King Arthur theme emphasize their heroism, therefore sending a message that this is a positive, upbeat film about life, not

death.

- (iii) *Japanese trailers contain a great deal of basic information about plot and background, and often even the ending.*

Knowing the storyline tends to appeal to Japanese viewers, because with this knowledge they can focus on the plot, the subtitles, and the emotions presented. Thus, trailers are like magazine and television previews, which summarize the storylines of TV serial dramas, even before the first episode is aired.

For the same reason, Japanese trailers also make more use of screen text and voiceovers to summarize the story, to establish the mood of the film, and to seal the impression that viewers should have. For example, taglines at the end cap the emotional appeal noted above and put the film “in a nutshell” so to speak, giving viewers the mindset that the marketers want them to have. The tagline for *Life as a House* is “一緒に建てよう” [Let’s build it together.]. In the American drama *Fargo*, it is “人間はおかしくて、悲しい。ファargo” [Humans are strange, sad. Fargo.] And, in the drama set in France, *Mr Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran* (2003), the tagline is “ほら、人生はずばらしい” [Look at that, (in spite of, or because of, great hardship and sadness), life is wonderful.].

In Japanese trailers, the story is presented simply, without distractions. There are fewer references to things sexual, risqué, or otherwise controversial that may overcomplicate things. Instead, emphasis is placed on giving emotional cues in the form of tearful scenes, images of sadness, and dark, solemn, or sorrowful background music, as noted in the teaching guide for *The Mighty*. Charming, *かわいい* [cute] images are sure to appear where appropriate to give a heartwarming impression. For example, the Japanese trailer for *The Blue Butterfly* (2004), an American drama set in the Costa Rican jungle, contains a number of closeups of centipedes and

other insects and birds. These are not central to the story (and do not appear in the original trailer), but their simple, playful presentation makes an otherwise complex drama readily appealing and accessible to Japanese viewers.

In original trailers, film footage is used to tell the story instead of screen text or voiceover narration. The storyline, therefore, may not be clear to viewers, leaving more for them to figure out for themselves. Telling the story in advance to western audiences may spoil the pleasure for them, since they tend to prefer more left untold in order to enjoy the film. Furthermore, taglines and voiceovers in original trailers are much less frequent. These absences give viewers the freedom to decide for themselves, rather than be told what to think. Charming imagery as described above is not a necessary feature.

## **Conclusion**

The above description of using movie trailers to show cultural differences is just one of the many ways that films and film-related materials can be used in the classroom. Instead of or in addition to discussing the trailers in class, writing tasks could be assigned. After introducing the procedures in class once, students could also be assigned a different movie to analyze on their own, either in writing or as a class presentation. Movie reviews and movie posters are two other media that could also be adapted for teaching purposes. With whatever media and method the teacher decides to use, it is essential that the students consider not only what is similar or different about the two pieces examined, but also why they are similar or different. The ultimate goal is for students to gain a greater conscious awareness of cultural differences.

Judging from the students' favorable response to the activity de-

scribed here, both in their enthusiasm toward the task, and in their active participation in the discussion, it is well worth the class time and the effort required to prepare. Furthermore, it can be modified or extended to suit various classroom contexts and student levels as necessary. In any case, as advertising tools, as art forms, and as teaching and learning devices, movie trailers are worthy of our attention.

## Future Research

This short report has introduced a class activity for crossculturally comparing movie trailers for Japanese and western audiences. The observations based on these two and several other trailers, suggest three sets of cultural generalizations:

### *Japanese culture*

1. reliance on others in decision making
2. preference for sad or dark mood in art forms
3. focus on underlying emotions (high context)

### *Western culture*

1. independent decision making
2. preference for upbeat, positive mood
3. focus on foreground events (low context)

For the moment, however, the above movie trailer activity can be used as is, since the discussion is about cultural differences between advertisements, not about comparing global cultural values. Future research should investigate the above cultural hypotheses to test their validity in other contexts.

## Notes

1. As to general availability, DVD movies often include their trailers. They are also widely available on the internet (see Appendix 1 for a list of websites and DVDs containing trailers).
2. For the purposes of this discussion, “western cultures” include the United States, Canada, and western, northern, and southern European countries (Collins Cobuild, 2001).
3. For a discussion of high context culture and low context culture, see Edward Hall (1976).

## References

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## Appendix 1:

### A Selection of DVDs: Feature Films with Movie Trailers (映画予告編)

n = 38

Film	Original	Japanese	Both	No Trailer	Other	DVD Source
	Trailer	Trailer	O/J Trailers			
About a Boy	X					Universal Pictures Japan
All the President's Men				X		Warner Home Video
American Beauty				X		Universal Pictures Japan
...And Justice for All	X					Sony Pictures Entertainment
Annie Hall	X					Fox Home Entertainment
Barefoot in the Park	X					CIC Victor Video
<b>The Blue Butterfly</b>			X			Amuset ソフトエンタテインメント
Brassed Off	X					Amuse Pictures
Bridget Jones' Diary				X		Sony Pictures Entertainment
Cider House Rules			X (asmik-ace.com)			Miramax
<b>East is East</b>			X			<b>Crest International</b>
Eyes Wide Shut	X					Warner Brothers
The Fabulous Baker Boys	X					<b>東北新社</b>
<b>Fargo</b>			X			<b>Asmik Entertainment</b>
Four Weddings & a Funeral	X					Fox Home Entertainment Japan
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?	X					Sony Pictures Entertainment Japan
Gung Ho				X		Paramount Home Entertainment Japan
In the Heat of the Night	X					Fox Home Entertainment
It Happened One Night	X (+radio CM)					Sony Pictures Entertainment
Howard's End	X					Asmik-Ace Entertainment
The Joy Luck Club		X				Buena Vista Entertainment
<b>Life as a House</b>			X			<b>Pony Canyon</b>
<b>The Mighty</b>			X			<b>Asmik/Toei Digital Frontier</b>
<b>Monsoon Wedding</b>			X			パノラマ・コミュニケーション

<u>Film</u>	<u>Original</u>	<u>Japanese</u>	<u>Both</u>	<u>No Trailer</u>	<u>Other</u>	<u>DVD Source</u>
	<u>Trailer</u>	<u>Trailer</u>	<u>O/J Trailers</u>			
Monsieur Ibrahim et les Fleurs du Coran			X			<b>Gaga Communications Inc.</b>
Nuovo Cinema Paradiso		X				Asmik-Ace Entertainment
The Perfect Storm	X					Warner Brothers
Searching for Debra Winger	X (vdeodetective.com)					Pony Canyon
The 7-Year Itch				X (Italian)		Fox Home Entertainment
3 Days of the Condor	X					<b>東北新社</b>
Tootsie				X		SonyPictures Entertainment
The Truman Show	X					CIC Victor
<b>The Turandot Project</b>			X			ジェネオンエンタテインメント株式会社
The Way We Were	X					Sony Pictures Entertainment
When Harry Met Sally	X					Fox Home Entertainment Japan
Witness	X					Paramount Home Entertainment Japan
<b>Wonder Boys</b>			X			<b>Marubeni/Toho-Towa</b>
It's a Wonderful Life	X					<b>東北新社</b>

## Appendix 2: Student Worksheet

### Comparing Japanese and original movie trailers

**The Mighty (1998; drama)** Watch the trailers and fill in the chart.

<i>Question/Analysis criteria</i>	<i>Japanese trailer 1'57"</i>	<i>original trailer 2'17"</i>
Screen text (including reviews): Effect?		
Movie dialogue: amount? effect? Voiceover (narration): amount? effect?		
Do knights appear? How many times? Effect?		
Content differences:		
Music: fast? slow? quiet? energetic? / instrumental? vocal?	clip #1 (Christmas carol) clip #2 (instrumental) clip #3 (vocal & instrumental)	clip #1: clip #2: clip #3: clip #4:
Overall mood: happy? sad? other?		
Other information:		
What do you think the story will be about?		
Why do you think the two trailers are different? Explain in detail. Also, comment on the effect of the different titles (The Mighty vs. マイフレンドメモリー) .		

## Appendix 2: Teaching Guide

Comparing Japanese and original movie trailers: Possible answers for *The Mighty*

Question/Analysis criteria	<i>Japanese trailer1'57"</i>	<i>original trailer 2'17"</i>
Screen text (including reviews): Effect?	3 cast names ( <i>katakana</i> ) reviews with key words highlighted 友情の物語 [story of friendship] "Sharon Stone sure to win Oscar." other text: この冬。。。温かい涙と感動を贈ります。 [this winter we bring you warm tears to touch and move you] as sales pitch. Effect: works on emotions, name value to sell film.	all main cast names + "From the Bestselling Novel." All cast have name value (including Gena Rowlands, Gillian Anderson). no reviews (trailer usually made pre-release).
Movie dialogue: amount? effect? Voiceover (narration): amount? effect?	a little; tells the story  a lot; explains what the movie will be about; ends with マイフレンドメモリ、二人は消して忘れない。 [The Mighty, an unforgettable story] to seal emotional impact.	a lot: entertainment value; hints at the story. a little; theme: "courage comes in all sizes."

<p>Do knights appear? How many times? Effect?</p>	<p>do not appear; simplifies story</p>	<p>appear 3 times, underlining chivalry theme, central to the film; teaser: connection to Max &amp; Kevin?</p>
<p>Content differences:</p>	<p>only Kevin and Max in credits</p>	<p>humor (Wizard of Oz joke); "From the novel ..." (narrator); bullying;"special" hospital; "magician" father issues; full cast introduced.</p>
<p>Music: fast? slow? quiet? energetic? / instrumental? vocal?</p>	<p>clip #1: (Christmas carol) silent night (solemn; serious) clip #2: (instrumental) military music clip #3: (vocal &amp; instrumental) sacred music (Latin chorale) Effect: serious/sad mood</p>	<p>clip #1: piano (quiet; for drama) clip #2: orchestra (fairy tale/Star Wars fantasy type) clip #3: rousing knight music clip #4: upbeat theme song (pop vocal-Sting) Effect: positive/encouraging</p>
<p>Overall mood: happy? sad? other?</p>	<p>sad / heavy drama, sealed by clip #3; film is about death, parting, sadness</p>	<p>happy / positive, sealed by all clips; film is about life, not death.</p>

<p>Other differences:</p>	<p>Kevin is Max's tutor ("teacher-student" stability); Kevin's physical collapse (turning pt.) is high pt. of emotion (evokes sympathy, curiosity of J viewers); Kevin has 1 year to live (sympathy); ends with sky, two on bench stills (sympathy, emotion); Wizard of Oz joke subtitles not a joke: "we can do anything together;" Kevin's mom, Max cry (emotion). None of above in original trailer.</p>	<p>Max &amp; Kevin both outsiders; both bullied, both abnormal and that's why they are friends; chivalry theme (not just a kid story).</p>
<p>What do you think the story will be about?</p>		
<p>Why do you think the two trailers are different? Explain in detail. Comment also on the effect of the different titles (The Mighty vs. マイフレンドメモリー) .</p>		

# 外国語授業における映画予告編： 実践応用について

ローラ・マクレガー

映画のクリップ（一場面）は外国語の授業には有効な教材である。言葉の使い方や、その国の社会や文化をいきいきと描写し、時間が短いので効率よく利用できる。このクリップと同じ種類のものに映画の予告編があり新作映画の予告をテレビや映画館で放映する。予告編は普通 60-150 秒の長さである。世界で売られている商品・サービスの宣伝と同じように、映画の予告編は放映する国によって一部（または全部）内容を変えることが多い。例えば、ハリウッド映画の予告編の日本版は、日本人を引きつけるために、言葉や文化の相違を考慮して新しく作られるか、少なくとも一部編集されるのが普通である。この論文は、原作の予告編と日本版を比較し、言葉と文化の違いを授業で教える方法を紹介するのが目的である。ここでは、*The Mighty*（1998 年米国作のドラマ）の 2 つの予告編を授業でどう取り上げるかを考察する。