

Corpus-based Cultivation of Critical Language Awareness: A Case Study on English Film Subtitles

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of English film subtitles to cultivate critical language awareness (CLA) and enhance language skills via a corpus-based approach. Creating and analyzing a specialized corpus of film subtitles reveals the cultural, social, and ideological dimensions of language usage. The findings show that film subtitles provide an authentic context for language learning, improving the comprehension of diverse linguistic expressions. This approach fosters cultural awareness and critical thinking, bridging linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding. While focusing on English, the methodology is adaptable to various languages. This research offers novel insights into language education, particularly in applying corpus-based methods for CLA and practical language skill enhancement.

Keywords: Critical Language Awareness, Film Subtitles, Language Education

INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking is a crucial skill in modern society. It has a broad impact on personal growth, economic development, and social progress (Elder, 2022) and plays an important role in enhancing language expression ability (Rezaei et al.,

2011). Critical thinking helps us communicate more effectively and drive innovation by analyzing and adjusting ideas, constantly promoting new developments. More importantly, it provides tools for self-reflection (Mann et al., 2009), allowing us to better assess our motivations, goals, and actions and understand and solve social problems more powerfully.

Critical thinking is becoming increasingly prominent in 21st-century language education (Li, 2016), and enhancing and honing the critical thinking of foreign language learners is considered one of the most important prerequisites in foreign language teaching and learning. With the acceleration of globalization, language learners need not only to master the basic rules of language expression but also to deeply understand the cultural, social, and ideological factors behind the language. However, this deep understanding often faces challenges, as language learning and teaching often only focus on the grammar and vocabulary levels, ignoring the deeper cultural connotations behind language use.

In the field of language learning, films serve as rich teaching resources that significantly enhance students' language abilities. Scholars such as Bostanci (2022) and Alharthi (2020) have shown the positive impact of film subtitles on learners' vocabulary, grammar, spoken language, and cross-cultural communication skills. Additionally, the importance of corpora as essential tools in language learning has been highlighted in research by Vyatkina and Boulton (2017), who demonstrated how corpora aid in cultivating language awareness and fostering a deeper understanding of language features. However, a conspicuous gap remains in current research: the exploration of combining film subtitles and corpora for cultivating critical language awareness is relatively limited. Therefore, this study aims to explore the following three key research questions:

1) How English film subtitle corpora help unveil linguistic characteristics within film subtitles

grammatical, lexical, or pragmatic features?

2) How does the English film subtitle corpus help reveal cultural, social, and ideological information?

3) What expected impacts on the cultivation of CLA and language skills could this method potentially yield?

This study underscores the utilization of a corpus-based method to cultivate a CLA, employing a self-built corpus and corpus tools to process and analyze textual data. These analytical tools were initially employed to identify linguistic features, enhancing aspects such as grammar, lexical usage, and pragmatics. A more comprehensive understanding of language patterns and characteristics is subsequently achieved by exploring data such as lexical cooccurrences, keywords, and collocations. This deeper exploration aims to reveal the cultural, social, and ideological information embedded within film subtitles. Additionally, it aims to explore the potential application of language learning practices.

The novelty of this study lies in its perspective, methodology, and innovative use of language learning tools. First, it adopts a research angle by combining film subtitles with corpus analysis to investigate how a corpus of film subtitles can reveal linguistic features such as grammar; vocabulary usage; pragmatic characteristics; and cultural, social, and ideological information. This approach offers a new perspective for language learning and teaching. Methodologically, it employs a self-built corpus and corpus tools to process and analyze textual data. This interdisciplinary approach enhances the effectiveness of language learning and facilitates students' understanding of cross-cultural communication. With respect to the choice of language learning tools, the study demonstrates how to use existing resources to promote language learning innovatively. This method may inspire other researchers and educators to explore and develop new tools and methods for language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is an intellectual discipline involving the following elements of thought: purpose and problem identification, concept clarification, discovery of assumptions, consideration of viewpoints, detection of impact/consequences, verification of evidence, and reflection (Hawkins et al., 2019). The critical concept of education and schools and the critical method of language research are the premise assumptions of CLA (Fairclough, 2014). Although we realize that teaching thinking skills is important, integrating thinking into language teaching has always been marginal (Li, 2016). Scholars have conducted many related studies and practices to cultivate language learners' critical thinking. El Soufi and See (2019) conducted a systematic review of international research and reported that explicit teaching of critical thinking can effectively improve the critical thinking ability of English learners in higher education. Din (2020) investigated the critical reading ability of Pakistani foreign language learners and reported that college learners have a highly positive attitude toward critical thinking, but the level of critical thinking and critical reading ability does not match the attitude of critical thinking. On the basis of previous studies, the significance of critical thinking in language learning has been tested. However, there are still obvious deficiencies in the practice of integrating the cultivation of critical thinking with language learning.

Critical Language Awareness

The term "language awareness" (LA) has been used since the early 1980s to denote a group of language teachers, educators specifically, and applied linguists

advocating for new elements of language awareness in school curricula (Fairclough, 2014). LA reflects learners' active processing and thinking about the language they are learning. Language awareness manifests as individuals' cognitive understanding and contemplation of language knowledge and its application (He & Gong, 2017). Language awareness is also a resource that supports their learning of culture and the cultivation of cultural awareness (Kidwell & Triyoko, 2024). Building upon the foundation of LA research, Fairclough (2014) introduced "critical language awareness (CLA)" as a replacement for "critical knowledge of language" and published a series of studies related to CLA. Fairclough presented how the transformation of language practices in contemporary society significantly impacts power operations, professional relations, and social identities.

Currently, CLA has been extensively applied in various educational settings, such as in the exploration of the relationship between language awareness and proficiency; CLA's association with writing, reading, and learning activities; social identities; gender construction; and linguistic effects on minority ethnic groups (Fairclough, 2014). These studies provide valuable research perspectives for both CLA research and teaching practices. Overall, the CLA emphasizes the importance of language learning and social engagement, illustrating how it aids learners in developing critical thinking skills that can drive social change. In emerging fields such as heritage language (HL) education, increasing attention has been given to CLA. Holguín Mendoza (2018) delved into the practical implementation of CLA pedagogy, providing an in-depth exploration of a study on language attitudes among HL learners. Beaudrie et al. (2019) identified that CLA enables learners to challenge the ideology of English monolingualism and standard monolingual Spanish as ideal norms, initiating resistance against the erosion of traditional languages. In the domain of English for specific purposes (ESP), Micalay-Hurtado and Poole (2022) proposed an ecocritical pedagogy that integrates elements of critical language awareness within an ecological linguistic framework.

Films in Language Learning

Integrating films into language learning has positive effects on language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, vocabulary, and writing (Albiladi et al., 2018). Bostanci (2022) examined the impact of subtitled films on vocabulary development in English as a second language (ESL) learners. ESL learners generally exhibited a positive attitude toward watching films in language courses, particularly vocabulary lessons (Fakhrurriana et al., 2024). Alharthi (2020) utilized corpus-based sampling to engage 88 undergraduate Arabic learners in watching an English subtitled film. The results revealed a positive impact of watching English-language films on vocabulary learning, both in recognition and

recall tasks. Larasati et al. (2021) found that English-language films significantly influence learners' understanding of spoken grammar. Chaya and Inpin (2020) suggested that film-based mobile learning (MBML) teaching is effective in improving EFL learners' oral skills and cross-cultural communication abilities. Lee (2017) examined Korean EFL learners' perceptions of mainstream American Christmas culture through films, emphasizing the importance of learners analyzing cultural themes in films to determine the accuracy of their film-based cultural concepts. Liu (2019) introduced the use of science fiction films in the classroom to provide new language learning experiences for EFL learners, developing critical literacy skills in a thoughtfully designed contextual meaning-building course. Thus, films serve as information-rich and memorable tools for teaching concepts of cross-cultural communication, holding significant value as tools for learning cross-cultural communication.

The Corpus in Language Learning

Interest in the direct application of corpora grew from the 1980s onward, with teachers or learners directly interacting with corpora (Vyatkina & Boulton, 2017). Although corpus use in language learning research started relatively late, it has yielded numerous achievements (Ma et al., 2024). Vyatkina and Boulton (2017) explained the explicit use of corpora in foreign or second language (L2) teaching, where end-users directly or indirectly explore corpus data. Yin and Vine (2022) focused on multifunctional language units in English, combining corpus linguistics, pragmatics, domain/disciplinary variation, and language and academic literacy education. Most publications related to corpus linguistics are geared toward English contexts. For example, various uses and frequencies of use of "be able to" through the British National Corpus (Whitty, 2022), as well as a comparative corpus analysis of the frequencies and functions of "so" between native and nonnative speakers of English in Hong Kong (Lam, 2022), have been identified. A review of the literature reveals that while a significant amount of research focusing on fostering CLA employing various innovative methods, including corpora, studies specifically integrating corpora with English film subtitles for investigating CLA cultivation are relatively scarce.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a data-driven mixed research approach to explore the connection between linguistic aspects in film subtitles and cultural contexts. By merging quantitative and qualitative analyses via corpus analysis tools, it quantifies linguistic elements such as word frequency and vocabulary while interpreting cultural backgrounds and societal values. The practice process of

adopting a corpus-based study on the cultivation of CLA outlined in this case primarily involves three main processes: 1) establishing the corpus; 2) obtaining data via corpus analysis tools and conducting multilayered language analysis to identify linguistic features; and 3) further exploring cultural, social, and ideological dimensions.

Corpus Building

The creation of a new corpus involves three primary phases: data identification, data collection, and data collation. Data identification begins with designing the scale and type of corpus aligned with the research goals. The scale and type rely on the needed scope and comprehensiveness, taking into account the available resources. It is pivotal to ensure feasibility and control as well. The corpus size should be manageable within the research capacity, considering project timelines and available resources. Taking into account the above factors, this study selected 50 English-language films covering various genres from the top 250 list of Douban films (a Chinese film ranking platform) as the target of this research.

Data Analysis

This study uses two effective corpus analysis tools: Sketch Engine and Voyant Tools. The primary uses of Sketch Engine include language teaching and research, language technology, translation teaching, and discourse analysis (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). Moreover, users benefit from the ability to choose any desired feature via the provided icons via Voyant Tools without the need to configure parameters for extracting information (Alhudithi, 2021). The data analysis involves three logical steps that are crucial for achieving our research objectives. Beginning with the analysis of language features in film subtitles, this phase entails a thorough examination of grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatic elements. The goal is to uncover connections and variations within these language components. Following the analysis of language features, the next logical step is the visualization of these features. This stage involves the use of corpus analysis tools such as Voyant Tools to generate visual representations such as Cirrus, TermsBerry, and WordTree. The final phase of this process involves the exploration of cultural connotations. By meticulously analyzing cultural details, implicit messages, and the societal context embedded within the film subtitles, learners gain insights into the cultural depths underlying the language.

RESULTS

The corpus-based method used in this study revealed various linguistic patterns and cultural insights embedded within film subtitles. The corpus analysis tools

facilitated a detailed exploration of linguistic features such as grammar, lexicon, and pragmatics. Additionally, the examination extended beyond mere linguistic aspects to encompass cultural, social, and ideological dimensions. The following examples illustrate the diverse revelations extracted through corpus analysis, offering a nuanced understanding of language use and its embedded cultural connotations within film subtitles.

After text is imported into Sketch Engine and Voyant Tools, it becomes possible to view various linguistic features directly on their interfaces. Sketch Engine, for example, offers functions such as word lists, keywords, and concordances, enabling the analysis of parts of speech, high-frequency vocabulary, collocations, and the meaning and usage of words. This assists learners in expanding their vocabulary and understanding how words are used in different contexts.

In cultivating CLA through vocabulary study, learners can delve into the meanings and contextual usage of words, exploring beyond mere definitions. Parts of speech in Sketch Engine are annotated into nine categories: others (x), verbs (v), nouns (n), pronouns (p), adverbs (a), prepositions (i), adjectives (j), conjunctions (c), and numerals (n). Analyzing each part of speech involves filtering the exported word list, which also serves as a frequency table for vocabulary learning. For example, in the study of conjunctions, words such as "and," "but," "or," "either," "nor," "yet," and "versus" are predominant. Inserting these words into the KWIC (key words in context) allows for contextual analysis of their usage. In nouns (n), many proper nouns (NP), such as "Frodo," "John," places such as "America," "Mordor," "Gondor," and events such as "World War," "Christmas," are found. Actively summarizing patterns from texts fosters students' deep understanding, categorization, and analysis of texts, enhancing sensitivity to different linguistic elements.

For grammar analysis, Sketch Engine is used to identify and analyze different grammatical structures in film subtitles. This involves analyzing sentence structures, verb tenses, voices, and other grammatical elements. For example, modal verbs (MDs), such as "can", "could", "will", "would", "may", "might", "shall", "should", "must", and the archaic "shalt", are commonly used. "Shalt" indicates future responsibility or action, which is still found in literary and historical texts, especially in Old English literature.

Using Voyant Tools, it is also possible to analyze the overall social and cultural background reflected in the text of a film. Moreover, it provides a more intuitive way to showcase this. For example, Voyant Tools' Word Tree function offers an intuitive display of word collocations.

Figure 1

Word Tree for "knowing" in the Silence of Lambs by Voyant Tools



Through the word tree in Figure 1, we can derive relevant information about the collocations of "know". For instance, it often precedes personal pronouns such as "you" and "I" and follows certain grammar rules such as "know + noun/possessive pronoun/personal pronoun". It also commonly appears with object clauses (e.g., "know + why/what/how"). Additionally, there are typical usages such as "know nothing/something/each other", among others. When learners explore these functions autonomously, they tend to create stronger memory associations than traditional rote teaching methods do. Moreover, learners can compare how the same word is used differently in various films or within a larger corpus (e.g., 50 films) to generate more comprehensive search results.

Data analysis extends beyond just words or grammar. It also delves into cultural, social, and ideological dimensions. Exploring these dimensions involves delving into the cultural elements, societal factors, and ideological influences behind language within a corpus. This can be accomplished by analyzing colloquial expressions, implicit messages, societal themes, and culturally specific language features within particular cultural contexts. To illustrate how corpus tools manifest these factors, a few typical instances are used.

Figure 2

might be related to the professions, economic status, and possessions of Jews in that societal context. In terms of work and economics, words such as "businesses", "investors", "economic community", "money", and "art" emerged. These terms could be connected to the occupational roles, economic status, and assets of Jews within that historical setting. Religious and cultural terms such as "Jewish", "rabbi" (a Jewish teacher), "star" (the yellow star Jews were forced to wear), "national", "community", and "announcement" were uncovered. These terms might touch upon the religious and cultural identities of Jews, as well as their roles and positions within the community. Words related to politics and law, such as "law", "enforced", and "priority", were also found. These terms may signify the legal restrictions and policies imposed by Nazi Germany on Jews.

In essence, these films often convey specific values, social concepts, and historical backgrounds through language and dialog. The choice of words, colloquial expressions, and messages conveyed through character dialogs in these films can reflect the attitudes and values of a specific societal culture. Understanding the cultural and historical contexts behind this language is crucial for language learners to correctly comprehend and evaluate the text. The ideologies portrayed in these films are often multidimensional, covering aspects such as politics, society, race, and gender. Language learners need to keenly analyze and understand the multiple issues addressed in the film and explore their impact on society and culture. Most importantly, by learning from the language used in these films, learners can develop critical thinking skills, enabling them to analyze and evaluate the messages conveyed within the text. They learn to scrutinize and question the viewpoints and concepts presented in the films, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the connection between language and culture, as well as the interaction between language and society.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to explore the usage of English film subtitles to cultivate CLA among language learners. From the outset, it was clear that this approach had the potential to fill a significant gap identified in the literature review, specifically in the realm of integrating linguistic analysis with cultural and ideological insights. The methodology adopted, a corpus-based analysis, proved to be particularly effective. It allowed for an in-depth examination of subtitles, not only in terms of their linguistic features but also their cultural and social nuances. The results revealed that film subtitles are not merely tools for understanding foreign language films; they are rich repositories of linguistic diversity, showing varied grammatical structures, vocabulary choices, and pragmatic uses. More importantly, they serve as windows into the cultural, social, and ideological contexts of the language.

These findings have profound implications for language education. It is suggested that film subtitles can be a valuable addition to language curricula,

offering learners a more nuanced understanding of language in context. However, incorporating this approach into diverse educational settings is not without challenges. These include the selection of appropriate films and the adaptation of this approach to suit different learning environments and student proficiency levels. Expanding the scope to include different genres and languages and assessing the long-term impact of using film subtitles in language learning are areas ripe for exploration. This study, therefore, not only contributes to the understanding of CLA but also functions as a reference for future innovations in language education.

In future research, there are several directions and recommendations to explore, for example, the establishment of multimodal corpora. In addition to textual subtitles, various language modalities, such as audio and video, can potentially be integrated to create more diverse and rich corpora. Multimodal corpora aid in a comprehensive analysis of interactions and influences among different modalities—language, body language, sound, scenes—within films. The use of more diverse analytical methods during practice is also expected. By employing various tools and technologies, such as text mining, machine learning algorithms can yield comprehensive and in-depth research outcomes. Furthermore, long-term research tracking is necessary to observe learners' progress and changes in critical language awareness. Regular assessment and feedback mechanisms can explore the long-term impact of teaching methods on learners' development of language awareness. With the rapid development of ICT, it is possible to employ emerging technologies and tools such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality to innovate teaching methods and research approaches, effectively enhancing learners' critical language awareness.

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