

# Practicing EAP skills through television drama: Using *Battlestar Galactica* for an academic discussion course

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Much of the time that a high school or university teacher shows a television episode in a class, it's done as either a reward or as a break – usually a one-off activity. I've done it and I am sure I am not alone. Television drama is rarely used as an integral part of the university English as Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum. Television series, be they serial or procedural dramas<sup>1</sup>, are particularly challenging to integrate into a curriculum conscientiously. It is hard to prevent the course from devolving into a 'TV watching' class. Yet, if used in a conscientious manner as part of a disciplined approach, television drama can add much to the EFL classroom.

I wrote an article in the previous issue of this journal arguing for the inclusion and examination of 'literary' television drama (Judge, 2012). At the end of that article, I indicated that I would detail in a future volume how I have used one such television drama, *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009), in an elective discussion class. I hope this will encourage others using film and television in their courses to further contribute to this journal by writing up how they do it. After all, I believe that most of the members of this JALT special interest group understand the power of a good story to help our students learn not only the content of a particular course, but to become more motivated and invested in the process of communicating with each other.

I teach in a policy studies department at a private university in the Kansai region of Japan. The university is highly regarded and tends to attract good

1. 'Serials' are drama relying on sequentially developed, episode-by-episode, continuing plots. Serials follow story arcs spanning entire seasons/series. Serials can be contrasted with 'procedural', or episodic, drama which utilize more stand-alone stories, relying on the setting and characters to provide a sense of continuity.

students. In particular, the department is known for its rigorous and demanding curriculum. In the first two years of the program, students participate in an intensive English program where they take 12+ hours of English each week, focusing on English for Academic Purposes (EAP). In their remaining years, students can take English-language content-based *zemi* (seminars) and various English-language electives. The goal of the program is to get students to both academic and communicative levels of fluency that would allow them to participate in graduate programs abroad or to work for various national/international agencies and NGOs.

*Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009) is used in two elective courses. These classes focus on academic exploration of current issues. Before being eligible to take these classes, students have already taken three to four semesters of courses teaching explicit academic discussion strategies, giving students plenty of opportunities to practice what they have learned. The purpose of these courses is to put them into situations where they are using implicitly, what they have explicitly learned in earlier classes, to discuss social policy issues in a vigorous yet academic manner. Students make verbal arguments, taking a point of view and explaining their reasoning in a rhetorically appropriate manner. There are also periodic vocabulary quizzes and discussion preparation prints that help them prepare for discussions.

The first course, using the 1st season of the drama, looks at issues of policy and philosophy through the perspective of the individual. We explore such topics as artificial intelligence, racism, limits of human suffering, and the strengths/weaknesses of democracy. The course tries to balance persuasive writing and academic discussion in a way that is

mutually supportive. The second course uses the 2nd season to look at issues from a sociological perspective, examining social institutions such as the military, religion, government, the media and criminal organizations; the course also focuses on gender roles, institutional loyalty and politics. This course more heavily focuses on academic debate and discussion, however there is a considerable amount of reading. Both classes have three main goals: enhancing academic discussion skills; improving university-level English reading and listening; and the acquisition of academic level vocabulary in context.

### What is “*Galactica*”?

*Battlestar Galactica* is the fictional story about humans living on the other side of the galaxy, fighting for survival against a race of robots called Cylons. Prior to the start of the story, humans had created the Cylons, developing advanced robots with artificially intelligence (AI), to do the unpleasant, difficult and dangerous work of society. Because the robots were sentient, they realized they were being treated as slaves and revolted against their human masters. When the TV series begins, the Cylons destroy some 50 billion people on the human home worlds, leaving only 50,000 human survivors. A small fleet of civilian ships, under protection of the last military warship, the old and recently decommissioned *Galactica*, escape in search of a new home. The Cylons pursue them across the galaxy, in an attempt to destroy humanity once and for all. The show explores the survivors attempt to re-establish human society as they seek to escape destruction at the hands of their own creation.

Why am I using a TV drama in a class for the department of Policy studies? Good fiction allows us to explore political, social and cultural issues in a way that is approachable and engaging. Science fiction, allows writers to use fiction to examine contemporary social, moral and ethical issues in allegory. Issues are often easier to see and debate when they come from fiction. The TV drama functions as a “playground” for students to consider policy issues from a new point of view. *Battlestar Galactica* is well suited for this kind of activity. The show’s primary show-

runner<sup>2</sup>, Ronald Moore, created the show with realism in mind, portraying the show’s heroes as being part of a ‘flawed’ humanity; the show draws inspiration from the tragic events of 9/11 and after (Poniewozik, 2007). Moore wanted the show to address questions like, “What does it mean to be free in a society under attack? What are the limits of that freedom? Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Are you rooting for the wrong side?” (Hodgman, 2005). *Galactica* is a four season story, with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Though I am only able to use the first two seasons in the courses, the story arcs for each season are sufficiently complete that they provide a compelling story, motivating students to work hard during the semester.

### Class Activities:

A typical class starts with watching a 40-45 minute episode. At the beginning of the course, we use Japanese subtitles. Depending on the average level of the students, we sometimes switch to using English subtitles half-way through the course – though for some semesters, we have continued using Japanese subtitles all the way through; both versions are made available to students for home viewing when it is a part of their homework. Though some may understandably question using so much Japanese language support, I view this as providing content to the students in the most efficient manner possible; they do more than enough speaking, listening, reading, and writing in English to make up for it. When I first began this course, I was hesitant about dedicating almost half of a 90-minute class period to passive viewing, especially when using Japanese subtitles. Yet, I found that in the immediacy of having viewed an episode in class led to far more passionate discussions and debates in the second half of class. Most of the time, it is worth the 40 minutes to watch an episode together.

The second half of the class is normally filled with one of three types of activities. The first and primary

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2 . ‘Show runner’ is an industry term for the chief creative director/ producer of any serial or episodic drama on television. For *Galactica*, Ronald Moore and David Eick are the show-runners.

activity is an academic discussion. Sometimes we have a class discussion about issues brought up in that day's episode. Other times, we have a formal graded discussion. Students are broken up into groups of 3-4 students and are tasked with answering a series of questions derived from the last few episodes. Students are allowed to use discussion preparation notes, previously done as homework – which greatly facilitates more in-depth discussions and a higher level of syntax and lexicon. Students are assessed on their ability to use a variety of EAP rhetorical strategies explicitly taught in earlier courses: agreeing/disagreeing, citing from sources, summarizing others' positions, interrupting, helping weaker members in the group, giving strong support for one's argument, and connecting show issues with real-world examples.

Another activity that sometimes fills the second half of the class period is vocabulary. With each episode, students are given a modified script as a PDF file and a list of words that I have chosen for students to study. Words were initially chosen after using Tom Cobb's Complete Lexical Tutor website (<http://www.lextutor.ca>). Some of the words selected for the episode vocabulary lists come from Coxhead's Academic Word List (1998); some are included because they are often seen in articles in news and policy issue publications such as *Time Magazine* or the *Economist*. Many are words from West's General Service List (1953) but have different usages that normally found – example: 'hit', meaning kill. Students are asked to use the PDF to look up the word and try to guess the meaning from context, using electronic dictionaries afterwards to verify meanings. Four times throughout the semester, they have quizzes testing, primarily, receptive understanding of these vocabulary.

The last common activity for the second half of the class comes from articles published in newspapers and magazines on contemporary issues that tie into themes discussed during the course. Sometimes the articles are used as published, but often-times they are somewhat adapted, either shortened or simplified, for usage in an EFL setting. This helps students tie themes raised within the drama to topics students of policy issues need to be aware of. On several occasions, instructors of other courses within the

department have reported to me that students have mentioned the drama when talking about various topics in their classes.

As an example, this last semester students read either, "*Rape is shredding Syria's social fabric*" (Wolfe, 2012), or "*How did rape become a weapon of war?*" (Smith-Spark, 2004). They answered a series of questions about the article they read, then came together with a student who had read the other article. Each student would summarize their article and lead a brief discussion with their partner; then they came together in groups of four to talk about how rape was used as a method of torture and humiliation in the *Galactica* episode, *Pegasus* (Saunders & Rymer, 2005). In the most recent semester, students focused on two main themes during their group sharing. The question of whether or not an artificially intelligent robot can be 'raped' is ultimately a question on the limits of what we call 'human rights' and involves the very definition of sentience. The second theme centered on the question of what it means for the audience when the humans are the ones committing war crimes and the Cylons, the AI robots bent on destroying humanity, are the victims.

One of the strong points of *Galactica* is that the show depicts actions contextually, in morally gray tones – it is up to the viewers to decide the rightness or wrongness of an action. It has been fascinating for me to watch student-initiated explorations of the problematization of notions of 'good guys' and 'bad guys'. Some students have even been able to make comparisons between characters' struggles to redefine what it means to be human on the show and the history of racist limiting assumptions for definitions of civilization and humanity in the real-world.

### **Why *Galactica* Works:**

I have been using seasons of *Galactica* in the classrooms of high schools and universities in Japan for over eight years. Over those years, I have seen a consistent level of motivation and effort by L2 learners in the courses unmatched in most comparable courses taught using more traditional approaches. I asked a student once why she seemed more enthusiastic

debating issues in the *Galactica* class than I had seen her talking about similar issues in other classes. She replied, “*To talk about politics and stuff is not so fun. We don’t have opinion when they make rules or such policies. But Galactica is not real. It is story. [We have as much say as anyone does about it.] Also, talking about the real world topics like racism and war crime and so on, is nervous. It is uncomfortable. But Galactica is not real. We don’t need to worry about other’s feelings. [No one gets troubled if we insult Cylons].*”<sup>3</sup>

At the university where I am currently teaching *Galactica*-courses, students fill out anonymous evaluations at the end of each semester. The evaluations shows that most students are generally quite enthusiastic about the drama and the discussions that derive from it. Though it is science fiction, *Galactica* has obvious relevance to students today. These are a few examples of their comments:

*“I could think, ‘What is human?’ ... it was very useful for me.”*

*“Watching it was very fun and interesting. Discussing about those stories was not easy for me, but I also think I gained knowledge and improved my English skills.”*

*“[What I like most about the class was] exchanging ideas about topics which students do not normally have the opportunities to discuss.”*

*“I could find a new view of thinking through this story.”*

It may sound ironic, but stories about the end of the world are most effective when they instil feelings of hope in the audience. *Galactica* works because it

speaks to the fears and concerns of post 9/11 viewers while instilling hope that students want and need. *Galactica*, “...shifts from the topical to the timeless, raising questions about the nature of humanity as the protagonists are forced to redefine their purpose. Can humankind save itself, not by finishing some quest but by understanding the threats of its own creation? As this brilliant space saga comes to an end, humans are forced to recognize that the big solution is not out in the stars. But it might be in themselves” (Poniewozik, 2009).

Storytelling is a part of our makeup as human beings. Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm (1987) argues that people are, in essence, storytellers who formulate a world view made up of a set of stories chosen to create, and recreate, both our individual identities and our shared cultures. Any work of good storytelling can have positive effects on students, allowing them the opportunity come together as a class and explore real-world ideas in the playground that is literary fiction.

I hope that other members of the Literature in Language Teaching special interest group will share their own experiences using high quality film and television drama in classrooms. Great stories, whether part of the traditional Western literary cannon or not, are powerful pedagogical tools. “Stories motivate people towards becoming greater than they are. Stories are how human beings have related to each other, passed down knowledge, skills, and experience” (Bellefeuille, 2013). What other stories are EFL teachers in Japan using? Tell the readers of this journal *your* story.

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3. This conversation was recalled from memory and only written down much later. It may not be an exact quote. Portions in brackets [ ] were spoken in Japanese.

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