

Lights, Cameras, Pencils! Using Descriptive Video to Enhance Writing

Helen Hoffner, Eileen Baker, Kathleen Benson Quinn

Grab a seat, dim the lights, and start the movie! Movies are not only entertaining; they are also educational. Teachers often use movies to supplement or complement the curriculum because viewing films provides an opportunity for children to apply many of the same strategies that they use while reading (Tompkins, 2008). Several recent movies have been based on children's books such as *Bridge to Terabithia*, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, *Hoot*, and *How to Eat Fried Worms*. Comparing a book with a movie is a classic teaching strategy. An innovative technology, Descriptive Video, propels this engaging activity in new directions.

Descriptive Video (also known as described programming) was developed to give individuals with visual impairments access to visual media such as television programs and films. For example, someone with a visual impairment might listen to a television program or film and glean as much as possible from the dialogue. That person would not, however, be able to detect and interpret highly visual elements such as an actor's gestures, an unusual costume, or a car chase scene. To close this gap in understanding, a described program has an additional audio track that is activated by using the Secondary Audio Program (SAP) feature on a television, videocassette recorder (VCR), or DVD player. This additional audio track contains narration to explain a film's visual elements.

As when activating closed-captioning features, teachers using standard televisions, VCRs, or DVD players can usually access descriptive narration (or SAP) by using the remote control device that accompanies their equipment. By pushing the audio button on the remote, the user can find a menu that enables him or her to select the SAP option. When the SAP option is activated, the descriptive narration track can be heard on a television program, VHS tape, or DVD.

In the 1980s closed-captioning opened the world of film and television to individuals with hearing impair-

ments. Its use has expanded, however, and captioning is now being used in literacy instruction for individuals with hearing impairments as well as for children and adults with average hearing ability. Described programming first appeared on U.S. network television in January 1990, approximately 10 years after the first nationwide, closed-captioned broadcasts (Hoffner, 1999). Findings from several recent studies suggested that described videos and eDescription (i.e., description provided on other digital media such as websites and streaming video) can assist students who are sighted (Katz & Turcotte, 1993), have low vision, or are visually impaired (Ely et al., 2006). We believe that described television programs, videotapes, and DVD technology can be used like closed-captioning with a wide audience. Described programming can enhance reading and writing ability as well as provide a motivating educational stimulus in today's entertainment culture. Vocabulary, concept development, background knowledge, language precision, and descriptive writing are just some of the ways descriptive video can be used to enhance classroom instruction. We have seen these results with classroom instruction at various grade levels.

Using Descriptive Video in the Classroom

Have you ever shown the film *The Lion King* to an elementary class and discussed the setting? Did you ask the students to identify the setting and the names of the animals shown in the opening sequence? How did they respond? Perhaps the students answered that the setting was a grassy jungle, a plain, or grassland. Did any of your students say the exact term for this setting? If they had watched the described version, your students would say "savannah" and they would know the names of gazelles, storks, and many of the other animals that they might call by more common names, such as deer or birds.

To develop creative writing ability, a group of third- and fourth-grade students watched the standard version of the opening “circle of life” segment of *The Lion King*. They were then instructed to write a description of the scene they saw. As the students were writing, their teachers also wrote. Although the students’ descriptions were accurate, their teachers found that their writing lacked content-specific vocabulary and colorful terms. The teachers and students then watched the same film segment with description and were again asked to write a description. While the teachers expected a second viewing to produce better writing samples, they were amazed to see that the students included content terms such as *savannah*, *gazelles*, and other words that had not previously been part of their speaking vocabulary but were included in the descriptive version of *The Lion King*. The students were asked to read their compositions aloud and compare their two writing samples. As they read aloud, many classmates noted that they had included vocabulary from the description tracks in their writing. For example, in her initial attempt, one child wrote,

In the beginning animals like zebra, monkey, elephant, birds and lions were right in back of Mufasa and Sarabi. So ZuZu put some kind of fruit on Simba’s head and took Simba from out of Sarabi’s arms and lifted him up. All the animals started to cheer for Simba’s birth. Monkeys started to jump around and elephants lifted their trunks.

After watching the same film segment with visual description, the child made another attempt at describing the segment. In her second attempt she wrote,

In the beginning animals like zebras, monkeys, elephants, birds, and lions were right in back of Mufasa and Sarabi. Then a baby giraffe and her mother went to the ceremony. So Rafiki climbed up and gave Mufasa a hug. Rafiki got two melons and Simba lifted his hand. Rafiki cracked one melon open and got his finger and rubbed the melon across his head. Rafiki took Simba from out of Sarabi’s arms and lifted him up. Monkeys jumped around and elephants lifted their trunks. Zebras made stamps of smoke in the air. Then the animals bowed down and nearly touched the ground.

This child’s second attempt showed more description and clarification.

“Some kind of fruit” became a melon and more animals were named, such as a baby giraffe. Teachers

Described Programs Available on U.S. Network Television

Network	Described programs
CBS	<i>CSI: Crime Scene Investigation</i>
FOX	<i>The Simpsons</i>
Nickelodeon	<i>Go, Diego, Go!</i>
Turner Classic Movies	<i>DVS Showcase</i> (Turner Classic Movies shows a described feature film every Saturday at 6:00 p.m. eastern time.)
PBS	<i>Frontline</i> <i>NOVA</i> <i>Mystery!</i> <i>Reading Rainbow</i> <i>Arthur</i> <i>Bob the Builder</i> <i>Between the Lions</i> <i>Thomas and Friends</i>

noted that in their second attempts, the children used more adjectives and specific details in their writing because they were trying to be more concrete. The description helped them paint pictures with their words.

As they watched and discussed additional films, the teachers defined and explained video description. The teachers and students brainstormed potential uses for this technology, compared description with the closed-captioned programs they had seen, and gave their personal reactions. While some students found the description to be annoying and distracting, others enjoyed the description and stated that it was almost like having a personal storyteller. In the

opening scene of the standard version of Disney's *Mulan*, for example, there was no dialogue as a guard walked the Great Wall of China. Some students were puzzled by the dark images and menacing music. The described version, however, featured a narrator richly describing the scene by saying, "In the moonlight, the endless wall winds along tall rocky mountains as royal flags wave atop the watchtowers. A guard walks the ramparts alone." The description track enhanced the viewing experience by guiding the viewer and expanding his or her vocabulary.

Students of mixed ages and abilities, including English-language learners from public, charter, and private schools watched described and nondescribed versions of films such as *Mulan*, *The Polar Express*, and *Pocahontas*. They then assumed the role of video describers and wrote their own description for segments from many films. For example, a group of fifth-grade students used the "writing a movie" technique to write and give a performance of the opening scene of *E.T.*, *The Extra-Terrestrial*. Writing a movie is a technique similar to Readers Theatre. Students view a short film segment (5 to 10 minutes), write a description of the segment, and then read their descriptions expressively as the film's soundtrack plays in the background (Hoffner, 2003). These students watched the first segment of *E.T.* in which the extraterrestrial is stranded and alone in a forest. After watching the 5-minute segment, the students wrote a description that they then read as the film played behind them. One group wrote, "It was a dark and eerie evening. The woods were alive with the sounds of crickets and owls. An unusual stillness swept across the wooded terrain." A second group wrote, "In the dark woods a creature emerges from the ship. As the creature looks up to the sky he thinks, 'I can't wait to go home.'" Joining in the adventure, their teachers wrote, "The inky black night was filled with an eerie silence. Silently, the mysterious space-ship approached the pine-filled forest."

Each group enjoyed reading and performing for their classmates. During the rehearsals and performances, the students engaged in purposeful rereadings and received constructive feedback from their teachers, classmates, and other members of the school community. The activity was motivating and helped to develop the students' reading fluency.

Obtaining Described Programming

Television programs, videocassettes, and DVDs are now available with a described track, and there are many ways for teachers to obtain these programs for classroom use.

Described programming can be found on PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) stations as well as on general commercial and cable stations. Newspaper television guides often indicate the programs that have this feature. For example, in their weekly program guide, a Pennsylvania newspaper places (DVS) next to described titles in their viewing guide.

Teachers can record described programs using a standard videocassette recorder or DVD recorder and then follow the guidelines for educational use of network programming. Fair use guidelines for PBS programs can be found at www.pbs.org/teachers/copyright/index.html.

Described programs are available for loan at over 1,200 public libraries in the United States. Teachers wishing to borrow described programs should contact their local libraries to learn the policies as well as the availability of titles and formats.

Most videotapes and DVDs sold in retail outlets contain closed captioning, but they usually don't have the description track. A few studios such as NBC-Universal have begun adding description tracks to mainstream DVD titles, including *The Inside Man* and *United 93*. Teachers should look for the described video symbol on the cover of a videocassette or DVD to determine whether a program has a description track that can be accessed with an SAP feature.

Descriptive Video Service (DVS), a division of the Media Access Group at Boston's PBS station, WGBH, offers over 200 described programs for sale through its catalog. These DVS videotapes have been produced in an open description format in which the description can be heard without the use of an SAP feature. The descriptions can be heard when these tapes are played on a standard television and videocassette recorder or player. The price of a described DVS tape is comparable with the suggested retail price of a mainstream videotape or DVD. There is no additional cost for the description. Teachers can contact the Descriptive Video Service by e-mail at dvs@wgbh.org or visit its website at main.wgbh.org/wgbh/pages/mag/resources/dvs-home-video-catalogue.html.

Many general release films shown in theaters also include a described track. Patrons wishing to experience a described film in a theater can find program listings in their local newspapers. Films with a described track will be indicated by (DVS) in the newspaper listing.

Enhance Learning

While the amount of time children spend viewing film and television programs has always been a controversial issue, learning can result when this media is used to promote literacy. In the publication *Making the Most of Television: Tips for Parents of Young Viewers*, Moss (1998) stated, “Studies have shown that children who watch *some* TV read more than they would otherwise.” Researchers Rice, Huston, Truglio, and Wright (1990) have also found that television and film may be a highly effective tool for introducing new word meanings to young children. Their research concluded, “Television allows for the introduction of familiar and novel words in a manner that focuses young viewers’ attention, with visual and verbal redundancies, and the potential of repeated experiences with the same material” (Rice et al., 1990. p. 427; cf. Greenfield, 1984). Kress (in MacDonald, 2005) defined reading as a form of “mental gymnastics that’s good for the mind” but said the experience of processing motion pictures is “intellectually much more demanding,” requiring thoughtful reflection in order to support comprehension while viewing. Effective teachers can use television programs and films to enhance learning in their classrooms. Limited studies have suggested that Descriptive Video has the potential to enhance comprehension and build vocabulary for students of various ages and abilities. We encourage teachers to investigate this new technology so that their students can read and write with the movies and describe visually exciting adventures.

Hoffner teaches at Holy Family University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA; e-mail HHoffner@aol.com. Baker teaches at Cinnaminson Middle School, Cinnaminson, New Jersey; e-mail dnebaker@comcast.net. Quinn also teaches at Holy Family University; e-mail kbquinn@comcast.net.

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