
COMMERCIAL MOVIES IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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In ESL teaching, genius is wonderful, and hard work pays off, but there is nothing so sweet as serendipity. For instance, I have sitting on my desk at my teachers' training college a toy that can be found in any toy store in Poland, consisting of a clown head sitting on a stack of brightly colored wheels. "You look at it and see a silly toy," I tell my students, "but I see a dandy teaching aid." Whereupon I pull off the head and toss the wheels, calling out, "Catch! Throw me the red wheel!"

My favorite video tool came to me through serendipity. A few years ago, I was teaching at the Bi-National Center in San Jose, Costa Rica. We had a Friday Afternoon Movie Club for our English language students, and as head of the Audio-visual Department, it was my job to find the films. I would comb the satellite TV listings for movies to tape for later use. One day I set the VCR for a well-known classic, but when I ran the tape, I discovered that the station had substituted a film I had never heard of, *Flame of the Islands* (Republic, 1955, with Yvonne deCarlo, Howard Duff, and Zachary Scott.) Now I am not one to pass up even a bad old movie, so I took a look at it before I erased it. I noticed scenes in which characters introduced each other, asked questions, and even took a mini-tour of Nassau, the Bahamas. I decided these scenes could be useful to my Book 2 and Book 3 students. We had a couple of ESL videos, but in the movie the scenes sounded more natural. So I copied off those scenes and made transcripts so that my students could see in print what they might not recognize on the soundtrack.

The more I viewed the film, the more I began to think that all of it would make a useful ESL program. As a low-budget but well-made film, *Flame* has several things going for it. First, the color looks good on TV, and the simple, uncluttered locations show up well in small-screen classroom viewing. Second, the director did not get fancy, and the plot moves right ahead as the actors face the camera and speak to one another in clear diction. Third, the movie has a surprisingly literate script which generates lively discussion. On one level, the plot has surprise twists and revelations that keep the viewer guessing. On a higher level, characters are not villains or heroes but basically decent people who are tempted to make moral choices which are disastrous to people they have no wish to hurt. Even the way characters drink and smoke is a subject for discussion.

So I divided the movie into nine ten-minute segments to correspond to the units of our intermediate book, which happened to be Heinle and Heinle's *Perspectives*. I typed out a transcript on a word processor, created a glossary, and wrote exercises which reinforced the grammar points in the textbook. For instance, the first three units dealt with the three types of reported speech, and there was plenty of speech to report in the movie. And for every other point: infinitives without "to," choice of infinitive or participle after certain verbs, etc., there always seemed to be a handy example in the dialog. At first it seemed like a remarkable coincidence that the episodes of the movie fit the grammar points of the text so well. Then I realized that the film could just as readily be adapted to any intermediate textbook, because the characters speak in the recurring structures of normal speech.

My students responded positively to the project. At the start of each lesson, I would ask them to recount the plot to date, we would discuss the cultural and ethical implications that the story raised, and I would ask them to predict what was going to happen. In *Flame*, the heroine is involved with four men, so we were kept guessing which one, if any, she was going to be clutching at the fade-out. I would begin each session by screening the previous episode and then vary the procedure for viewing the new one. Sometimes I would have the class view the episode first without script to see what they could understand, sometimes we would watch it with the script, and sometimes we would read the script or act it out before we viewed it. Because I wanted to take advantage of the surprise twists of plot, I handed out only one episode at a time.

Going Commercial

I began to view what I had developed as a possible commercial joint venture with the film's owner, a text-tape package for classroom use or individual study. I even prepared readings to go with each episode telling the history of movies in general, what I knew of this movie and the actors, and the history and geography of the Bahama Islands, where the movie was made on location. Ideally the readings should use vocabulary and idioms from their respective episodes, for maximum reinforcement, but my present students are beyond the intermediate level and do not need that kind of reinforcement, so I have put off that part of it.

I worried that what I was doing is probably violating a copyright, though in fact at the first opportunity I bought a good-quality commercial cassette of the film. Because *Flame of the Islands* is something less than a film classic, it occurred to me that its value to Republic might be considerably increased if it were part of an ESL package. Even if its share of the price of the package were something more than the \$19.95 most video movies retail for, the film would bring a good profit to its owner and still cost the ESL user considerably less than an equivalent film made especially

for ESL use. It has been my experience of films made for ESL use that large as it is, the ESL market is limited, and even the best ESL videos look cheap compared to theater films, and their story lines are less than riveting. Furthermore, those made for intermediate use have vocabularies more controlled than *Flame Of The Islands*.

I wrote several letters to the Republic Corporation, which made the film and still distributes the videocassette, but I never received a reply. I figure that such a project is so far from their imaginations that they would take seriously only serious negotiations with a publisher. So there the matter rests, though in the absence of complaint on the company's part, I go on using what I have worked up.

"Oldies But Goodies"

I figure that languishing in vaults somewhere, there must be thousands of old movies that could have a second life as ESL material. Old movies have the advantage of having been professionally produced, so even the cheapest of them have a more professional look than most ESL productions, and they have stories by professional storytellers. I find, however, that young people today will not sit still for even the most superior black and white productions. It has to be color films.

My students would prefer more recent action movies like Star Wars or Rambo, but these pose a significant problem. As film technology improved and directors moved out of the studio, they stopped filming in discrete scenes. The films are not only harder to teach, they are harder to hear as well. A lot of dialogue is lost in the background noise. Native speakers don't need it, and casual viewers can get what they need from the context, but intermediate ESL classes need more help.

And what made the old B movies so good in a classroom—simple sets, discrete scenes and straightforward speech into a microphone—is readily available on television. Without the commercials, situation comedies are twenty-minute programs that divide neatly into two parts at the commercial break. I have brought dozens with me to Poland to illustrate American idiom and culture. One which I find especially good is "The Cosby Show." Dr. Cosby and his writers have worked so carefully to make each episode educational that it needs virtually no preliminary exposition (as opposed to series like "Family Ties" or "Who's the Boss?," which are well written, but where the humor of the central plot gimmick is lost out of context.)

"The Cosby Show" is currently running on Polish television, so my students know and love it, and each episode not only uses a basic store of recurring vocabulary and idiom, but a story that offers plenty of discussion, not only of family relations in general, but of differences in cultures. Both my students and I enjoy watching and discussing such basic situations as taking a small child to the dentist, having a family conference, going to a senior prom, planning a wedding, having a backyard

cookout, and figuring out how to keep the romance in marriage. I would like to write to Dr. Cosby about the show's value as an ESL tool, but again I figure a publisher would be more persuasive.

I have great faith in the value of old movies and television series as ESL programs. If they were made available to ESL programs, teachers would have an enormous variety of material to choose from both for classroom and for individual use, and the owners of the movies and TV series would have an additional source of profit from their productions. If any publisher is interested in taking on such a project, I'm already halfway there with the first one.

About the Author

Richard Davis is one of the many early volunteers who responded to the increased needs of the U.S. Peace Corps for trained ESL specialists in the countries of Eastern Europe. He currently teaches at the College for Foreign Language Teachers in Opole, Poland.