

Teaching ESL Through Films

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Using films in the classroom is certainly not new, but studying grammar, vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, writing, culture and communicative skills through this audio/visual medium can definitely add a more effective and affective dimension to your ESL teaching.

Film Selection

As the text for your class is selected according to level of difficulty, purpose of learning the language, and quality of subject matter, the selection of films for your class should be given the same careful attention. Moreover, selection of films for the ESL classroom requires some special considerations:

Length of time (A ten to twenty minute film holds attention better and leaves more time for learning and teaching.)

Realistic social situations or current issues and problems of importance (These offer material of general interest.);

Quality and technical aspects of the film such as color, continuity, clear dialogue story or narration;

Level of vocabulary, dialect and English used. (Some film suggestions are listed at the end of the article.)

Learning Activities

Once the film has been selected and considered appropriate for the class, the teacher's preparation begins in earnest. After previewing the film, these questions will get you started: What are the central concepts of the film? Will the students gain insight into another way of doing and saying things? Can they identify with the problems in the social or cultural situations experienced by the characters? Can they empathize with the people experiencing the problems? Is there an opportunity to compare and contrast cultural values? What vocabulary and language skills can best be developed through this film? Answers to these questions will provide material with which you can write a lesson objective and/or purpose for viewing

the film. In addition, these questions can be a basis for selecting or creating appropriate exercises and extending the film lesson.

Each student should be provided with a brief description of the film, (the teacher may want to expand this in class) and some of the concepts or main ideas presented in the film. New vocabulary, comprehension, and language exercise worksheets, which have been carefully prepared to provide practice and help toward reaching the desired objective and purpose, can be used both before and after viewing. This introduction stage is quite important as most students report that the more they are prepared for a film the more learning they receive from it, especially if they are asked to watch for certain items while viewing the film. This implies that a film used for teaching language, as well as content comprehension, may be viewed several times for different or reinforced purposes. The teacher may want students to listen and observe when, how, and by whom key phrases, new words or concepts are used. Students may like to take notes on new cultural observations and ask questions they would like discussed after the film.

In the viewing/learning stage numerous activities may be employed. The following film related exercises have been used successfully with ESL students; moreover, they have been found to be helpful in many other English and language skills classes. Each activity is explained under one skill area. The letter(s) after each one indicate(s) other skill areas that are also taught.

KEY:

G—Grammar	V—Vocabulary
L—Listening	W—Writing
S—Speaking	C—Culture
R—Reading	CM—Communication

Grammar Exercises

1. Have the student identify specific aspects of language used in the film dialog, such as a certain verb tense, two-word verbs,

idioms, exclamations, complete sentences, or non-sentences. Have them count the times each is used or repeat the sentences where each is used. (L)

2. Have students write whatever word they heard immediately after a given word. For example, teach them the modal auxiliaries and then have them watch the film and write the words that follow each modal auxiliary used in the film. (L,W)
3. Show a scene of the film. Have students tell how they would describe the scene if it were happening right now. How would they describe it if it happened yesterday? If it were going to happen next week? etc. (CM)
4. Read part of the film dialog to the student omitting a word and let the class supply the word orally or in writing. Or, have the students read the synopsis or part of the film dialog which has been written as a cloze exercise. Let them supply the missing words either orally or in writing. (L,V,W,R)
5. Give the students a written copy of dialog taken from the film. Have them provide variations for each line of the dialog. Then put as many variations on the dialog together as possible and act them out. (V,S)
6. Have the students identify types of sentences—simple, compound, complex. Or, have the students identify transitions or reference words in dialogs. (W)

Listening Comprehension Exercises

7. Extract a dialogue excerpt from the film. Write the lines on separate cards to look at. Then play the film dialogue. Have the students put the cards in the order they were spoken. Let them practice the dialogue, after achieving correct word order. (S)
8. Have the student listen for words containing a certain sound (e.g., /θ/, /r/, /ʃ/). Divide the class into teams for competition and see which team can find the most occurrences of the sound. (S)
9. Have students listen for words that they do not understand or recognize. Teach them contextual cues to watch for and have them write down any cues which

might help them discover the meaning of the words. This also teaches them how to ask questions about the meanings of words; then let them practice asking those questions to find out what their selected words mean. (V,S,CM)

10. Have the student identify errors in pronunciation made in the film (or dialectal features which they can find in the film). Have them tell how things would be pronounced in the English area where they live. (S)
11. Play a short portion of the film and then stop it. Have the students repeat as best they can the lines in the part seen, and describe what is happening. (S)
12. Have the students write a dictation exercise from a taped version of part of the film dialogue. (W)
13. Send students out with tape recorders to visit places similar to those shown in the film. Have them record the conversations they hear there. Have them transcribe the conversations and the ones in the film. Have them re-enact their conversations. (C,W,S,CM)

Speaking Exercises

14. Turn the sound off on the film and have the students narrate the film, or supply the dialogue from memory.
15. Give the students a written copy of dialogue taken from the film. Have them memorize portions for classroom role play. (R)
16. Have the students act out the situations seen in the film using whatever vocabulary or means they desire. (CM)
17. Assign students to act the parts of characters in the film. Change the situations and have them try to act as their character would in the new situation. (CM)
18. Have the students try to discover what kinds of language differences there are in the way adults and children speak in a film, or the way the educated speak and the way the uneducated speak. Get them to pay attention to register differences and try to imitate them. (CM)
19. On a written passage of dialogue, have the students mark the stress (or intonation, or any other pronunciation point).

20. Prepare a questionnaire about the film's contents which students can use to verify the information given in the film. Have them get a variety of persons to fill out the questionnaire to analyze if most people agree or disagree with what is taught in the film or if they are even aware of the information. (C)
21. Have each student tell what would have happened in any given situation if it had taken place in his culture. Then have the other students take the parts of the characters and try to act in accordance with what the student has explained. (CM)
22. How would a certain scene be reported if it were on a TV news report? Let the students act as if they were doing a TV news report. (G,CM)
23. Make language master cards for parts of the dialogue and have students repeat the phrases trying to match the speed and pronunciation features of the model. (G)
24. Using written copies of sections of dialogues, have choral readings of the dialogues. Divide the class into groups and do group choral readings (e.g., have the boys take one part and the girls another). (R)
25. Have the students find posters of magazine pictures portraying scenes or situations similar to those seen in the film or that demonstrate some aspect of American life which is seldom seen in movies. Have them tell why they think some aspects of American life are seen in movies and others are not. (C,CM)
26. Set up a panel discussion based on the topic introduced by the film. Have them decide what they would tell someone who had never seen the film about it. If some cultural aspect has been discussed, have the students decide what they would tell someone from their country about that aspect if the person had never been in the English-speaking country. (C,CM)
- actions they saw in that scene as they can. (CM)
29. Have the students listen for idioms. Write the idioms down and make up another dialogue in which the idiom could be one of the lines. (L,G,CM)
30. Have the students read the synopsis of the film before it is shown. Have them think through the film before they see it so that they have an idea of what it is about. (W)
31. Have the students recall and write as many of the film subtitles as possible, (if there are subtitles) or turn off sound and have students write some subtitles. (W)
32. Have the students do mini-reports on some aspect of culture which relates to what they have seen in the film. The reports can be presented in writing or in front of the class. Culture capsule reports that compare and contrast work well. (W,C)
33. Have the students read and report on the kinds of things they have to read everyday which are related to things which the students might have seen in the film. (e.g. menus, greeting cards, signs, bank statements, pamphlets, etc.) (C,CM)
34. Have the students make lists of words which are used in the film which have multiple meanings. Have them gather examples of the use of the words outside of the classroom. (V)

Writing Exercises

- ### Reading and Vocabulary Exercises
27. Remind the students of any one scene in the film. Have them name the objects or things they saw in the film. (CM)
 28. Remind the students of any one scene in the film. Have them name as many of the
 35. Have the students write an advertisement for the film that would persuade people from different walks of life to come to see the film. How would you persuade mothers to come to see this film? How would you persuade teenagers? How would you persuade children? Have the students be honest in their ads but choose what to include according to the audience they will address. (W)
 36. Have the students write instructions for doing something they saw done in the film.
 37. Have the students write a comparison/contrast essay of the various scenes in

the film. They can compare characters, settings, costumes, or information given. (W)

38. Have the students write a comparison/contrast essay of what the situations of the film would have been like if they had taken place in the students' cultures. (C,CM)
39. Have the students write an explanation of why certain things occurred in the film. (C,CM)
40. Have the students write an extension to the film telling what the next scenes are which should be shown. Or, have the students write an extension to the film telling about their experiences with the subject of the film. (W)

Culture Exercises

41. Have a panel discussion of cultural customs compared and contrasted to your students' culture. For example, "How would a man and woman greet each other in your country?"
42. Turn the sound on the film off and have students pay particular attention to the non-verbal communication. Have the students guess what is happening as they watch the film without hearing the sound. (CM)
43. Ask the students questions which guide them to make specific observations. For example, ask: "What did John do with his hands when he was introduced to Mary?" "What clothes did the actors wear when they went to the football game?" "How close did the students stand to each other when they talked?"

General Recommendations

Each teacher will want to choose exercises and extensions according to his/her class needs and as time permits. How much time is spent on a film should remain flexible depending on interest in the film, level of students, and amount of language opportunities provided. A week or more of these activities is not unusual.

After previewing and viewing, learning activities, a film expansion assignment, report, summary cloze exercise or natural extension of concepts taught might conclude the film

lesson. Several of our students have wanted to write and produce their own films as a result of dialogue study, mini dramas and other viewing exercises. This is possible by using super 8mm equipment and film which doesn't require extensive experience or lighting. However, it does require careful planning.

In summary, the film lesson requires careful selection, an introduction with an objective and/or purpose clearly stated, a brief description of the film and concepts or main ideas for the students, appropriate creation or selection of learning activities for class participation in viewing the film, and a concluding extension, expansion or summarizing exercise to conclude their English study through film.

Thus, this kind of lesson provides an interesting motivating variation from the usual text and classroom drills and exercises in the ESL classroom. Students are involved in active, realistic language learning and communicating experiences which integrate language skills as they are used in real life situations.

A Condensed Annotated List of Films For Use in the ESL Classroom

The following list is not considered comprehensive in any way. The films listed have been chosen because of their value in teaching culture or other important English skills for ESL students.

KEY:

bw—black & white	C—College
A—Adult	S—High School
J—Junior High	I—Intermediate
P—Primary	

Capital letters indicate major audience.

1. *All American Meal* (1974) 11 min., color, S, Barr Films. Hamburger, soft drink, and fries make up the "All American Meal." The sociologic aspects of nutrition and life-style of fast foods are illustrated.
2. *American English in Modern Situations* (Series) (1978-1979) color, A C S J, Alpine Film and Video Exchange. Portrays common social situations with International students and Americans who interact and experience problems and suggestions for gaining more confi-

- dence in cultural English. A work book of exercises is provided with each film.
- Meeting New People* (12 min.)
- Eating in New Places* (12½ min.)
- Classroom Conduct and Culture* (10 min.)
- Business Beginnings: Buying and Selling* (10 min.)
- Conversation Skills in American Culture* (8½ min.)
- Misunderstandings and Apologies* (13 min.)
- Adjusting to a New Community* (13 min.)
- More Understanding, Please* (13 min.)
- Legal and Medical Emergencies* (15 min.)
- Effective Study Skills for ESL Learners* (12½ min.)
- More Efficient Reading for ESL Readers* (14½ min.)
- American Pattern of Writing for ESL Writers* (12 min.)
3. *At Home, 2001* (1968) 12 min., color J S C, McGraw-Hill Films. Demonstrates how increasing self-sufficiency within the household will lessen the need for people to leave home to conduct everyday affairs.
 4. *Communication: The Non-Verbal Agenda* (1975) 30 min., color, S C A, CRM Educational Films. Eye contact, posture, facial expression, voice tone, and other aspects of "body language" may be used to give totally different meanings to the same set of words and can produce radically different responses in the listener.
 5. *Consumer Education: Buying an Automobile* (1973) 14 min., color, S C A Aims Films. Deals with these aspects in buying a car: financing, insurance, dealing with salesmen, buying used cars from private parties, etc.
 6. *The English Language: Story of Its Development* (1952) 11 min., color, J S C, Coronet Instructional Films. A visual history of the English language from its roots in the Anglo and Saxon tongues, through its infusion of French and Latin, to its emergence as a printed language which is still growing and changing.
 7. *Families and Learning: Everyone's a Teacher* (1967) 10 min., color, P, McGraw-Hill Films. Deals with the ways youngsters learn and teach as members of their families. Shows how children first learn from their parents, learn from each other in a teaching-learning process, and sometimes teach their parents.
 8. *Interpersonal Perception* (series) (1964) 10 min. each, color, C, University of Utah Educational Media Center.

AA Presents an interview with a widowed meter maid regarding religion, current events, and famous people.

BB Presents an interview with a married restaurant owner regarding religion, current events, and famous people.

DD Presents an interview with a divorced music teacher regarding religion, current events, and famous people.

F Presents an interview with a single college girl regarding religion, current events, and famous people.

I Presents an interview with a single college girl regarding religion, current events, and famous people.

P Presents an interview with a married policeman regarding religion, current events, and famous people.
 9. *It Must Be Love 'Cause I Feel So Dumb* (1975) 30 min., color, J S C A, Learning Corporation of America. This touching film captures the awkwardness of adolescent first love in a warm and witty manner. A thirteen year-old loner, a pretty cheerleader and a quiet young girl convey the entire scene from painful rejection through important decisions of personal values to the job of a shared emotional experience.
 10. *Job Interview: Whom Would You Hire?* (1967) 17 min., color, J S C, Churchill Films.

Film A: A hidden camera records three young women being interviewed for jobs; the viewer is asked to evaluate each applicant on dress and manner, previous experience and reasons for leaving, current and long-range goals, and education.

Film B: Actual job interviews, photographed with a hidden camera, are presented; the viewer is asked to evaluate the three young men interviewed.
 11. *Listening Beyond Words* (1973) 23 min., color, I J S C A, Brigham Young University. Points out the need to listen to the audible

communication around us, but also stresses the need to listen via actions, moods, etc. Failures and successes in communication are shown.

12. *Loneliness . . . and Loving* (1973) 17 min., color, J S C A, Learning Corporation of America. Excerpt from "Five Easy Pieces" with Jack Nicholson. The Theme is the individual's search for meaningful human relationships and love.
13. *Non-Verbal Communication* (1976) 23 min., color, S C A, Harper and Row Media. This film documents current theories on the ways people communicate without words. Leaders in the field are probed on topics including the range of behaviors encompassed by the field, the functions of non-verbal communication and laboratory findings.
14. *TV News: Measure of the Medium* (1971) 16 min., color, J S C A, BFA Educational Media. Television news is the major source of information for most people. How much confidence can we have in it? This film provides a frame of reference for critical judgment of news content and affirms the need to employ many sources of information to be well-informed.
15. *Village In the Sun* (1978) 20 min., color, J S C A, CISV, Casstown, Ohio. Eleven year olds go to International Summer Villages and learn intercultural understanding and communication under the direction of Doris Allen.

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