

Workshop Report:
Using Film in the ESL Classroom to Develop
Multiple Skills

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Twenty-three participants gathered to consider how they might use feature-length films (in their entirety, not just short clips) in intermediate and advanced level classrooms to foster the development of the four skills, and of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

Five modern films were selected as examples of the types of exercises and activities that can be generated: *Julie and Julia*, *The Incredibles*, *Secondhand Lions*, *The Blind Side*, and *Invictus*. Participants viewed the trailers for each film; subsequently, the presenter emphasized the importance of identifying major *themes* in film, and from those themes, of generating open-ended *discussion questions*. (See attached questions for *Julia and Julia*, and for *The Incredibles*.) This, the presenter felt, can be infinitely more meaningful for students than mere comprehension questions.

Having been presented with “a flying overview” of some of the possibilities for the classroom, participants then met in small groups to discuss what directions they might take students with one of their own favourite films.

Using Film in the ESL Classroom

Premise:

If it is true that “A picture paints a thousand words,” then *how many more* words does a two-hour, *moving* picture paint? One million? *Two million*? That’s *a lot of words!* and a rich, rich source from which to mine all kinds of language activities.

Steps to Preparing a Movie:

- 1) choose a movie that is ~ family-friendly; an engaging storyline (often, films that are “based on a true story” are the most captivating!); contains *useful* vocabulary (for me, sci-fi films are not so useful); rich in themes ~ there is enough in the story to generate A LOT of great discussion;
- 2) watch the movie, using closed captioning (you’ll catch more!);
- 3) search on imdb.com (or just Google the title of the film) for plot summaries, character lists, key words, and quotes ~ print these out, you’ll need them when it comes time to draft your activities!
- 4) think of the main events/circumstances in the story, and from these, spin out discussion questions. Effective discussion questions are *the heart* of your lesson. Students love to speak with each other ~ give them something they can really “sink their teeth into.” Have you ever ~ ~ ? What is ~ ~ ~? What do you think of ~ ~ ~? What are some of the advantages/disadvantages of ~ ~ ~? Some people do you agree or disagree?
- 5) generate other exercises, as below, but *** always draw your content (=the actual text of your exercise and activities) from the film’s storyline.**** *This is the advantage* of using film in the classroom: engaging content is very, very motivating!

Listening

“The jury’s still out” (= even the experts are still debating; they haven’t reached a final conclusion about this issue) on the question of whether to use, or *not* to use closed captioning.

Grammar

Write your own texts about various scenes/events in the movie, then use these to generate exercises such as the following ~

- ~ past unreal conditionals (I like to use matching exercises);
- ~ cloze exercises: supply missing *articles/prepositions/verb tenses* in one-para. scene summaries;
- ~ use scrambled sentences to practice *word order*;
- ~ students combine short, simple sentences into longer, complex sentences with *subordinate clauses*;
- ~ parallel structure: have students locate and fix the errors in sentences with parallel structure;
- ~ scrambled paragraphs: have students put sentences that are out of sequence back into the right order to practice paragraph organization;

Vocabulary

- ~ I like to do matching exercises (match words with definitions; for *phrases and collocations*, match the first part with the second part, as in “give them --- a piece of my mind”, then follow up with meaning);
- ~ for higher classes, you can ask students to “take ownership” by listening for 20 new words or phrases, noting them down, finding out what they mean, and teaching them to each other;

Pronunciation

Use scene scripts (dialogues or monologues) to practice any of the following points ~

- ~ [-d/-ed] verb/adj. *endings*;
- ~ patterns for linking words;
- ~ pausing and thought groups;
- ~ word stress and intonation;
- ~ reductions and linking (*gonna, wanna, hafta, I shoulda, alodda*)
- ~ clear vowels;
- ~ problem consonants (e.g., [l/n] and initial [th])
- ~ consonant clusters (*girl, world, early, surely, etc.*)

Speaking ~

- ~ with the lower (and with not-so-low) groups, hit the “pause” button ~ listen and repeat, especially utterances with useful collocations (“He said *whaaaat?!*”);
- ~ discussion questions (groups of 3 work well);
- ~ writing their own comprehension questions, then posing them to others;
- ~ role-play and interviewing ~ have students adopt various personas of main characters in the film ~ “How did you feel when . . .?” “What are you going to do now?”
- ~ oral summaries: “I just saw the most amazing film yesterday It was about a It was really great because”
- ~ leaving telephone messages with “the latest news”

Reading

My favourite activity is to assign different pairs or small teams to do some *background research* on the internet before we get into the movie, then have them share their findings with classmates who researched *other* aspects of the film.

Writing

- ~ a scene summary;
- ~ a story summary;
- ~ a movie review;
- ~ a news report about a key event in the story;
- ~ a letter to one of the main characters;
- ~ a personal response

A Final Note: Four “Must-Haves” ~

There are four components that I have found to be essential to every effective film-driven lesson:

- ✓ A set of *theme*-based discussion questions, relevant and “meaty” enough to keep students talking, before, part-way through, and after watching the film.
- ✓ A list of the primary characters in the film – this list facilitates all subsequent discussion and activities. Go to imdb.com for a comprehensive list of characters.
- ✓ Summary paragraphs – these may recap the highlights “up to this point,” or may summarize single scenes. Whether their focus is broad or narrow, summary paragraphs (written by the instructor) reinforce key ideas and vocabulary, and are the building blocks of many of your grammar, and pronunciation activities.
- ✓ Answer Keys: for all exercises that require more than a one-word answer, detailed answer keys – *with explanations!* – are a must. *They save time* in the classroom, they preserve your voice, and if initially you distribute just one key per student pair or small group, they engage learners by serving as a natural “information gap” activity as one student explains answers to the others.

Preparing a Film: Instructor's Worksheet

What film would my students enjoy? _____

How many classes will I need to cover the whole film?

What is one great scene in this film?

What exercises or activities can I roll out from this scene: some pronunciation work, vocabulary, and/or grammar?

What 3 or 4 themes are addressed in this film?

What discussion questions will I derive from these themes?

What kind of productive language (oral and/or written) do I want students to use as they engage the content of the film? (What kind of final task or personal response will consolidate everything we have considered?)

Julie and Julia: Discussion Questions

Do you enjoy cooking? How often do you cook? What's your best dish?

How old were you when you first started to cook? (*If you can cook!!!*) How did you learn ~ did someone teach you? Did you take a class? Did you learn by watching others? Did you learn by trial-and-error? (= by experimenting, and learning from your mistakes)

What's your cooking style? Do you like to try out new dishes, or do you stick with the same tried-and-true (= I tried it before, it worked, and so I keep returning to it again and again) dishes? *How adventurous are you in the kitchen?*

It happens sometimes that a hobby or weekend activity can eventually (= little by little, over a long period of time) pave the way (= prepare everything; lead to something new) for a major career change. (I once met a high school Phys Ed and history teacher *whose love of travel* eventually led to his starting up his own tour business – and leaving teaching completely!) Do you know someone whose hobby paved the way for a significant career change? Tell their story to your classmates.

What is your *work style*? Do you enjoy being part of a team, or do you prefer to work alone? Do you enjoy collaborating with other people on *large projects*? Why or why not?

Have you ever completed a *very major project*? How did you feel when you were part-way into it? How about **at the half-way point**? And how did you feel when you finally completed it? (Did you need to ask someone to **give you an extension**, that is, to extend your deadline by a couple of more days – or weeks?) How does completing a big project impact a person?

Have you ever **bitten off more than you could chew**, that is, have you ever agreed to a task or project that was so *big* that only later did you realize that there was *no possible way* you could ever complete it ~ have you ever done this?

Both Julie and Julia embraced something *huge* in the hope of finding significance, passion, and meaning in their lives. What gives *your* life meaning? What shapes *your* days and defines who *you* are?? *What is your passion??*

The Incredibles: Discussion Questions

The Incredibles are a family of “superheroes.” Each family member has a special power or ability, such as incredible strength, or the ability to make oneself invisible. If you could have one special power or ability, what would you choose? Why?

All around us there are people who perform amazing acts of kindness, courage, and sacrifice on a regular basis. They may be neighbours, friends, co-workers, or public employees ~ regular people, just like us. What “everyday heroes” do you know of?

In general, do you prefer to work with other people, or would you rather work alone?

Do you like to *work out*? How often do you work out? Where do you go? What are the benefits (physical, and *psychological*) of working out?

Were you a good child, or were you very naughty? Did you ever get “sent to the office” (= to the school *principal’s* office) because you were so naughty? (What did you *do*??!)

What adult did you *idolize* when you were a child? Do you know of any child or young person you know of who idolizes **you**?? What kind of responsibility (or, pressure!) comes to an adult when a child thus idolizes him/her?

Sometimes middle-aged people experience something called a “mid-life crisis,” and they run off and do something very impulsive, such as buy an expensive sportscar, or *run off* with the mailman, or the office secretary! *Why do some people have a mid-life crisis?* What is the cause(s) of it? What can be done *to help them through* the crisis?

Many, many people *have been burned* (= cheated badly!) by insurance companies, and have come to the conclusion that the insurance business *is a dirty one*. What kinds of practices do insurance companies have that cause clients to *resent* them? Do *you* have an insurance policy? Tell your classmates about it. (Have you ever tried to *file a claim*?)

Resources:

<http://www.script-o-rama.com/> Drew's Script-O-Rama is a comprehensive collection of free movie scripts "Drew" has done the transcribing for us!

<http://www.imdb.com/> The Internet Movie Database features trailers, reviews, plot summaries, character lists, trivia, and noteworthy quotes on just about any film you're curious about!

Film, by Susan Stempleski and Barry Tomalin; Oxford University Press Resource Books for Teachers, 2001. A wonderful collection of film-related tasks and activities.

Popular Films for Language Use 2, by Graham Workman; from the *Copy2Teach* series by Chadburn Publishing, 2006. A lovely collection of general film quizzes (but somewhat culture-bound), followed by ready-to-go classroom activities for 12 films, including *Forrest Gump*, *Pretty Woman*, and *Mr. Holland's Opus*.

(Try Googling this title ~ this is just one of a series of three!)