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AUTHOR MacDonald, Gina; MacDonald, Andrew
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ABSTRACT

A carefully-planned course in English as a Second Language (ESL) based on film can be a highly effective and enjoyable way to introduce students to both language and culture. The ready availability of videocassettes makes film a viable teaching tool. Film naturally combines a variety of language skills as students decode dialogue, read criticism, discuss perceptions, and write commentary. Popular film is authentic, features culture, and is in language appropriate to social class, profession, age, region, and background. However, the successful film course depends on the following: (1) goal-defined criteria for film selection; (2) development of thorough, helpful support materials; and (3) assignments and evaluative methods that motivate, encourage reference to support materials, and release student enthusiasm. Films can be selected to supplement an existing course, particularly a reading course; provide an overview of U.S. culture; prepare students for future literature courses; introduce students to different forms of writing; teach film study; achieve linguistic goals; or investigate cultural attitudes intriguing or disturbing to students. Each film should be accompanied by program notes and by other available materials and activities such as texts, speeches, and cultural events. Course development is guided by student ability level, interest, and response. (MSE)

# Variations on a Theme: Film and ESL

By Gina MacDonald and Andrew MacDonald

The proliferation of cheap, readily-available video cassettes has made viable a new and enjoyable teaching tool: the video film. This is not to say that film has not been feasible in the past, but now it is easier, cheaper, and more acceptable as an alternative teaching form. The time is close when even a teacher going abroad may be able to pack up a portable VCR and video screen and include a dozen or so films for use in places which do not have video equipment available. This ability might prove more useful than carrying books, which are heavier to pack and are more limited in their ability to reach a large audience.



A film or video course offers a variety of useful and valuable experiences. It naturally combines across the board skills --listening, reading, speaking and writing -- as students decode dialogue, read criticism, discuss perceptions, and write about conclusions. Moreover, popular film is authentic, the medium millions of English speakers enjoy, in the diction appropriate to social class, profession, age, region and background. Film teaches culture, especially conventions of problematic behavior, conflicts and cruxes, private lifestyles, casual speech-- all authentic experiences difficult to convey in classroom settings It raises themes and concerns, sometimes of universal interest, sometimes of special interest to our culture. In fact, films might be carefully selected for one focus or the other: what concerns Americans have in common with others, what concerns are unique to or typical of the American psyche Moreover, film courses introduce students to an English-learning medium

enjoyable over a lifetime for its own sake. Many of our students report the joy of going home to watch English-language films in their countries, as an on-going part of language learning from Costa Rica to Japan or Norway. More importantly for ESL classes, film is an accessible, common, conversational currency for the shy and reserved, usable as a social link with English speakers. Reticent young Japanese girls will wax eloquent and enthusiastic discussing their responses to a film, and, especially if it is current, will have a ready-made basis for conversation with English-speaking peers. Yet despite these clear and valuable reasons for using film in ESL and EFL, film courses seem less than common in many programs (given convention reports), with only occasional films or scenes used.

The pitfalls suggest why. Our experience shows that, unless care is taken, an ESL film course can fall flat. Students arrive expecting fun --a popcorn and Saturday night atmosphere--and find work; they expect the most up-to-date modern films and watch older ones instead. They bring with them preconceptions of what good films are and are disappointed when these preconceptions are not met. In fact, different culture groups have different expectations about films that may vary even more widely than individual preferences. As a result one might find a wide discrepancy between what various groups within the class want and expect. Many of the Japanese students with whom we have had contact, for example, prefer "happy endings", the classic two-handkerchief movie of their culture. This preference even holds true when the film is not Japanese: the favorite foreign film actor in Japan is Harrison Ford; the films that gross best are by Steven Spielberg, with E.T. topping the list and Star Wars running a close second.)[1] Clearly cultures with distinct cinematic

traditions such as India, France, Sweden, and the Soviet Union will shape their students' ideas about what film is or should be. Sometimes, for example, there is great confusion about the ending of western films like *Shane*; since, while the hero riding off into the sunset is a positive ending in our culture, for many Asians it may be movie shorthand for a movement toward darkness and death. A teacher must be ready to explain and elucidate without invidiously undercutting the values and approaches of other cultures. Another problem is that what a native speaker sees as accessible might prove far too difficult for the student who tries to understand every word of the dialogue or who cannot understand the cultural basis of the situation, conflict, or character interaction. Movies that seem to have the right theme or conflict or approach for a teacher's purpose may, on second viewing, turn out to be too difficult linguistically or too alien culturally. This means previewing is necessary, for what is remembered with pleasure by a native speaker might not be at all pleasureable for students. Ultimately, the teacher of a film course must be willing to be flexible. If an idea is not working, the teacher must be ready to change the course with little notice.

It is our experience that the successful ESL film course depends on (a) goal-defined criteria for film selection; (b) development of thorough, helpful support materials; (c) assignments and evaluative methods that motivate, encourage reference to support materials, and release student enthusiasm. Without this combination, film courses often generate into simple viewing sessions, with the teacher showing more and more films, and discussing them and teaching from them less and less. The number of films covered may vary, with two a week being the top limit (even for advanced students nearing university proficiency) and one a week or even

one every two weeks allowing more room for a more intense learning experience. Intermediate-level students require the longest period of preparation and of post-film work. In fact, with a difficult film, the teacher might choose to break it up into units, prepare students for the unit, view the unit, discuss what students have seen and what they know at that stage, and then speculate about what will come next before viewing the second unit. Though slow and time consuming, such an approach can prove very valuable. The final decision about number and approach should depend on student interest, ability, and response. However, in the long run, if a film does not work, instead of trying to beat a dead horse and recoup one's loses, it is best to just forget it and move on.

First of all, films should be selected according to the goals of the course. A) They might be selected to supplement an existing course, particularly a reading course. The films selected would then act as support materials, to present the ideas and topics read about and discussed in class in a new format. In a reading class which included a selection on the history of Louisiana, for example, one of our teachers showed the film *The Bucaneers* to bring to life an alien cultural phenomenon. Another, requiring outside reading of classics rewritten for intermediate level students, arranged to make available the corresponding films (*Jane Eyre*, *Dr. Jeckl and Mr. Hyde*, etc.) for viewing after the reading had been completed. This assignment, of course, depended on having readily available a video cassette player and student access to it during non-class hours. Such films might be difficult for an intermediate-level student to understand without the initial reading, but after the reading they usually prove challenging and fun; they provide a good lesson: that understanding

every word and every nuance is not necessary to general understanding and to the enjoyment of English-speaking experiences.

B) Films might be selected to provide an overview of American culture. That is, a film course might, film by film, provide a survey of various themes of current interest: the role of minorities in the U.S., business, religion, family, westerns, and visions of the future. This approach is successful on its own but is doubly successful when a reading teacher and a film teacher work together, particularly when the reading class covers a text like *The American Way* ( subtitled An Introduction to American Culture, Edward N. Kearny, et al, Prentice-Hall, 1984) and the film selection corresponds to the chapter headings of that text. C) In addition, a film course might try to prepare students for the approaches and goals of future literature courses they might need to take as undergraduates. If this is the goal, it will provide a study of the different genres represented in film, their unique qualities, their characteristics: the historical film, the romance, the western, the adventure film, science fiction, comedy, and so forth. It will also introduce approaches and terminology a literature teacher might use (imagery, symbols, characterization, structure). D) A film course might be used to introduce students to the different forms of writing: summaries, biographies, letters, character studies (description), comparison/contrasts, cause/effect arguments, hypothetical projections, and argumentation (a persuasive paper--arguing a thesis, discussing the pros and cons). Students might also do research on critical commentaries, agree or disagree with critical interpretations, and report about them either in oral or written form. In this course the films should be selected according to how well they lend themselves to a particular written form. For example,

a film with a remake (the two versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) would provide the basis for a good comparison/contrast, an adventure/suspense film (*Dead Calm*, *Shadow of a Doubt*) would allow a study of character or, if only the first half is shown before the writing assignment, speculation about the final outcome, and a film involving a modern controversy (*Kramer versus Kramer*) would work best for argumentation.

E) Film might also be taught as film, with attention to the uniqueness of the medium and with an introduction to the special vocabulary and techniques of the film industry. Films would be discussed on their merits of combining story and character with sound effects, visual effects, cutting and so forth. The choice of this approach would depend on the nature of the student body, with would-be communications majors benefitting the most from it. F) More commonly, film might be taught to achieve linguistic goals: to promote conversation, idioms, and discourse analysis. To do so, it might involve reading a script or a play (*Death of a Salesman, Our Town, Sounder, Shane*) and then using the film to reenforce listening comprehension skills. The film might serve merely as a stimulus to conversation, with students viewing the film with their American tutors or teachers and then discussing it with them afterwards. In such a case, the teacher might provide a series of thought-provoking questions or queries about opinions--"What did he mean when he said . . .?" "How do you think she felt when . . .? Why?".

G) We find it most effective to investigate cultural attitudes that disturb or intrigue students. For example, our goal one semester was an investigation of the "outsider" in American tradition and culture. The films were selected to begin with obvious types of alienation and to move on to

more subtle forms. We began with a readily accessible film that is exciting, that calls attention to culture differences, that presents an American group that is outside the norm and that frequently is considered alienated from mainstream America: *Witness* Harrison Ford and Kelly McGillis keep students of both sexes intrigued. The action is exciting, the cultural contrasts are distinctive and interesting, and the differences are presented in a balanced way so one can see the virtues and vices of both cultures: urban America versus rural America, conservative Protestant values versus non-religious values. Since we are located in New Orleans, with a fifty-five to sixty percent Afro-American population, a visible and distinct group that the students come into contact with regularly and about whom many of them have questions, we next focused on the plight of blacks in America. Students enjoyed this very much because it provided a formal format for discussing conflicts that disturbed them. We ran films about the rural Southern black (*Sounder*) versus the sophisticated urban black (*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*), about historical conflicts (*To Kill a Mockingbird, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman, A Soldier's Story, Mississippi Burning, Murder in Mississippi*), and about science fiction projections of conflicts (*Brother From Another Planet* -- a strange but funny film that provides a chance to talk about dialects and subcultures). The science fiction projection led to speculation about science fiction as a way Americans explore conflicts concerning alienation. Films that helped us explore this theme included *Alien Nation, Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (both the 1956 and the 1978 versions), *Enemy Mine*, and *Close Encounters of a Third Kind*. The course ended with a look back at the Western gunfighter/loner as an alien who can assist in times of need but who can never truly belong (*Shane*) and with a simple modern story of

class alienation, a working class young man in a college town dominated by upper-middle-class snobs (*Breaking Away*). Ending with these two films was most effective since their conflicts are simple and clear, their main characters attractive, their language accessible, their plots compelling. The idea of confronting a bully, of dealing with class differences, and of undergoing the pains of maturation are universal and appeal to both adolescent and adult experience. In addition, they provided a basis around which the themes and conflicts of the semester's work could coalesce: two outsiders, one because of his choice of profession and lifestyle, the other because of his family and cultural background. The films we covered over the semester allowed us to explore the difficult concept of the outsider in America while providing useful cultural information about a variety of interesting groups, all fairly painlessly.

Our main point is that teachers should not just select films because they personally enjoy them but should instead select them according to goal-oriented criteria. Furthermore, a theme-oriented criteria provides the strongest basis for oral discussion, for multiple writing possibilities, and for providing a sense of cultural complexity and cultural values. Theme-oriented approaches might focus on the emigrant experience (*Moonstruck, Crossing Delancey*) or attitudes toward business ( *Wall Street, Tucker, Death of a Salesman, The Boost*) and might be supplemented with trips to museums or business centers, guest speakers, research, contrasts with home cultures, and so forth. Whatever the approach, the goals should be multiple--related to cultural content as well as language acquisition--and clear. They should be stated clearly at the beginning of the course, and should be referred to throughout each section

of the course. The final paper or final exam should, in some way, involve an understanding of or achievement of the original goals--a letter to a friend summarizing what students learned through film during the semester, an application of themes and conflicts discussed over the semester to an analysis of a final film, a final class debate pro and con on an issue or a film, incorporating techniques and information learned over the semester.

The next step in the creation of a successful ESL film course is the development of thorough, helpful support materials. Each film should be accompanied by program notes which provide key information about the film: title, date, length, cast, basic concerns, partial plot summaries so students can have an idea of what to look forward to, descriptions of important themes, recurring concerns, key characters, interesting techniques, actions, or ideas and other pointers, including key lines typed out for students to be able to think about at home. The key problem, of course, is lack of a text. Carefully selected critical reviews are helpful, and a library assignment involving finding and summarizing reviews, could be expanded to another assignment involving judging or criticizing reviews on the basis of student experience with the film in question. For example, students might argue that critic X comes closest to their view of the film when he argues this or that . . . or that critics X,Y, and Z are wrong because of this and that . . . or that all three critics help readers understand . . . . The McGill's film series (*Survey of American Film*) is especially useful for finding a good, concise, advanced level reading. A teacher might have the students take turns reading the McGill's summary aloud in class, define the difficult vocabulary, and use the summary as a launching pad for a discussion of themes and characters. McGill's is an extremely valuable

source because it is written for a high school level audience and as a result has challenging vocabulary but fairly basic sentence structures; it provides clear critical perspectives, and most of its reviews are short enough to be read aloud in class in fifty minutes. In addition to McGill's, most libraries have lots of books on film, sections of which, when photocopied, might form an interesting basis of discussion, though these should be carefully selected or even rewritten with the student level in mind. Our section on blacks in film was supplemented by selections of speeches on black alienation by such famous personalities as Martin Luther King, by student reports on such people, by visiting black speakers from the university and from the community, by encouraged attendence at a black church service (with prior permission of course), by listening to black musicians (jazz and blues) in the French Quarter, by watching television programs on the black experience, and by attending a local television talk show where there were black guest speakers. In other words, all sorts of activities, atypical of the ESL classroom experience, but interesting, exciting, and goal-directed are possible in such a course.

Finally, a good film course should not be a passive experience. It must involve assignments and evaluative methods that motivate, encourage reference to support materials, and release student enthusiasm. The course focused on the OUTSIDER, for example, began with some of the multiple terms English has for such a person and discussion of the variations in connotations. Students were asked to look up words like "foreigner," "alien," "stranger," "outsider" in their language-to-language dictionary and then in a large English language dictionary to notice differences and to try to become sensitive to the connotative meanings. Class discussion focused on the results of the students' investigation, the

implications of the English terms, and the listing and discussion of terms for outsiders in the language groups represented in class in order to get a sense of how people often think of and relate to strangers. Each film was followed by a short quiz which focused on simply understanding what happened. Homework exercises involved looking up new vocabulary and completing short 'viewing exercises." Class discussion centered around thematic concerns that would lead to a written assignment. A viewing of *Splash,* for example, might begin with a discussion of the mermaid's difficulty adjusting to human (New York) culture, society, and ways of doing things: what the intrinsic problems involved in learning a language by imitation are, what the proper way to eat a lobster is and how one knows, what one does if one doesn't know, what attire is suitable for what occasion, and so forth. Inevitably, a discussion of the mermaid's plight leads to parallels with the students' own situation: the difficulties they had and are still having knowing what is polite and what is not, what to imitate and what not to imitate. References to Gerald Ford eating the corn shuck in which a tamale was wrapped or to other famous American gaffes add to the fun, and prepare students to write a comparison/contrast of their experiences adjusting to the eccentricities of U.S. culture with those of the mermaid in the film. Students write most easily about thematic concerns. If the films have been carefully chosen, major papers discussing thematic concerns through a series of films become possible. The course focused on the Outsider, for example, might end with a final paper discussing the various ways in which Americans respond to outsiders, as revealed through their films. A classification, setting up categories in which to divide up films viewed, would be most effective.

Again, what one does will vary with student level, student interest, and

student response, but a good film course should provide students, not just with the pleasure of movie-going, but with the sense of a learning experience: a culture and a way of thought interpreted for them, new idioms learned, new critical, oral and written skills acquired. According to the needs and abilities of the students, we have had them do dramatic readings of selections of movies where scripts or novels were available (*Sounder, To Kill a Mockingbird, Shane*), actually stage a scene and tape it on a videocassette for later class viewing, see different versions of the same film and discuss the significant differences. In some cases they have done library research to gather more information about the Amish, for instance, or about urban violence, as background for viewing *Witness*. In other cases they have done role-playing: extending the character into other situations (how would she react if . . . , what would happen if . . . , how would she dress for . . . ), explaining motivations (why did she/he do what she/he did?), predicting futures (They will get married; he will feel guilty, etc.). The key is to encourage students not to worry about understanding every word, but to get a feeling for character and idea and to come away from a film with the satisfaction of understanding the writer's purpose or argument.

It is our experience that a carefully planned film course can be a highly effective and enjoyable way to introduce students to both language and culture, to writing and speaking. However, unless the films are selected with caution, are goal-directed, and are prepared for by supportive aids and followed up with exercises, discussion, and writing, it can be disastrous. The difference between success and failure is flexiblity, tolerance, and a lot of hard-work.

**Gina & Andrew Macdonald**
**Loyola University, New Orleans**

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1"Hot Hollywood Combo in Japan," *Parade Magazine* (March 17, 1991): 14.