John Scacco
Morocco

Beyond Film: Exploring the Content of Movies

"*Action!*" Many of us have seen an English classroom where students eagerly sit before a monitor and watch a movie as part of their EFL class. But is there any learning taking place? Do the students really understand the language and content of the film, or are they simply being entertained? Teachers of EFL around the world are often faced with large classes, a shortage of materials (authentic or not), and a curriculum that does not allow time to be spent on anything but the approved textbook. But even in such environments, is there room for a foray into the world of cinema?

To Kill A Mockingbird, based on the novel that won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, hardly seems like the type of film young people watch today. There are no young heartthrobs (though Gregory Peck earned an Oscar for his performance); the film's themes are serious—racism, extreme poverty, coming of age, discrimination based on ignorance— and it was filmed in black and white. So, at a screening before a group of university students in Morocco, I was a bit apprehensive. Would these students enjoy the film as much as I do? Would they see past the enthralling story and focus on the serious nature of the subject matter?

I need not have worried. One hundred young people sat quietly for two hours, applauded as the curtain came down, and asked questions and discussed issues raised by the film until well after midnight. Most of the questions concerned race relations in the United States, particularly how the period depicted in the film differed from the current state of affairs. But students also wanted to know more about the issue of poverty—does it still exist in America, particularly in the South? They also discussed the characters and the American legal system, which is the setting for much of the film. They wanted to know: why does the jury system permit a man whose guilt has not been proven "beyond a reasonable doubt" to be convicted by a panel of white males who are obviously not his peers?

My experience indicated that using a book and its accompanying film can provide the language teacher with so many potential activities that an entire course could be built around just one title. You have, of course, many traditional classroom and out-of-class activities to improve the students' reading skills, and reading activities often can be accompanied by writing assignments. And all of the standard film-related classroom activities can be used to develop listening and speaking skills. *To Kill A Mockingbird*, however, has one other technological feature that brings it into the twenty-first century: several websites are devoted to using this film in the English classroom.

While most of these websites are designed for American secondary schools, where the book and film continue to be a part of the curriculum, most are also suitable for non-native-speaking students. This article, then, aims to introduce teachers of English as a foreign language to a sampling of what might be done using *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Of course, this presumes that everyone has access to videos or DVDs, is able to use the Internet, or can purchase copies of the book. In many parts of the world that is still an unreasonable expectation, but read on and discover what is possible in many places today and hopefully, in many others tomorrow.

To Kill A Mockingbird was written by Harper Lee in the late 1950s, but the novel's setting is Alabama in the Depression-Era 1930s, a time when African Americans were second-class citizens and, particularly in the South, not afforded the same legal rights as white Americans. The plot revolves around a widowed lawyer, his two children, and the trial of a "colored" man accused of raping a white woman. While this is a fictional event, it bears resemblance to the real trial of the Scottsboro Boys, nine black teenagers who were tried for the 1931 gang rape of two white girls aboard a Southern Railroad freight train.

Several websites explore this era in American history, and among them http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/FTrials/scottsboro/scottsb.htm stands out. A chapter in a large collection of famous trials developed by University of Missouri at Kansas City law professor Douglas O. Linder, this website features biographical information on all of the participants, details of the various trials which ensued, and excerpts from newspapers that show how events were portrayed at the time. Another good source is Afro-Americ@'s Black History Museum at http://www.afro.com/history/scott/scotts.html.

Because it was written during the 1950s, *To Kill a Mockingbird* may also have been influenced by the real-life murder of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black male who was visiting his relatives in Mississippi in the summer of 1955 when he was murdered for whistling at a white woman. This case is remarkable in that it resurfaced in the news in 2004, prompting a U.S. Department of Justice investigation. Thus, an Internet search of any U.S. news organization—CNN (www.cnn.com), The New York Times (www.nytimes.com), etc.—will uncover articles about both the original event and the recent investigation.

Even if you have no access to the Internet, but do have the film, there are still several activities you can use in the EFL classroom. My basis for using films in the EFL classroom, developed by my former colleague Elizabeth Mejia at Washington State University, is the "Six Critical Scenes" method. Since not many EFL students will understand every word in a movie intended for native speakers, this method demonstrates that if students understand the language and content of six (and the exact number can vary with the film) scenes, they will understand the overall film. My six critical scenes for *To Kill A Mockingbird* are described below.

1. An early scene, with Jem in a tree, introducing Jem and Scout to Dill Harris, a boy visiting for the summer. This scene also mentions the character of Boo Radley as the town "psycho"—someone to be feared and avoided.

2. The first confrontation on the courthouse steps between Bob Ewell, father of the alleged rape victim, and Atticus Finch, the defense attorney. Here we are introduced to the notion that racism will be a factor in the trial.

3. The scene at the jail when a group of poor white men arrive to find Atticus guarding the prisoner, Tom Robinson. In this scene, we learn that many of the town's white residents, including the father of one of Scout's classmates, have formed their opinions of Tom Robinson long before the trial, simply because of the color of his skin.

4. The testimony of Mr. Ewell at the trial, which introduces doubt about the guilt of Tom Robinson, the accused, by suggesting that Bob Ewell's recollection of events is not very accurate and is probably based on personal prejudice.

5. The closing argument of Atticus Finch, which suggests Mr. Ewell beat his own daughter in a drunken rage, thereby showing that Tom Robinson is innocent.

6. The nighttime scene in the woods when Scout and Jem are attacked and then rescued. We later learn the attacker was Bob Ewell and the rescuer Mr. Arthur "Boo" Radley.

With each of these scenes (or any other scene in the film), the classroom techniques commonly used with film can be applied. A few of the many activities that could be used are described below.

Pre-viewing

Provide students with background knowledge that will help them understand the film by engaging in activities such as those outlined here.

1. Have students make predictions based on the title of the film or the names of the main characters.

- The film's title. As the movie points out, mockingbirds are harmless and thus it is a "sin to kill a mockingbird." Students can discuss this idea and make predictions about what the mockingbird might represent in the film.

- *Scout* (daughter of Atticus Finch). This name suggests either a military or Native American connection to the character. In fact, we learn that she is a tomboy and has a difficult time behaving as a young woman in the South was expected to behave.

- *Atticus*. Students will not likely know that this was the name of a Patriarch of Constantinople in the 5th Century, but many will suggest he is "intelligent" and "strong," both of which are demonstrated in the course of the film.

2. Give students additional information about the characters and have them discuss that information to develop their knowledge and understanding of the characters.

3. Tell students about the plot of the movie and have them discuss it and make predictions about what they will see in the film.

While viewing

To give students the opportunity to develop their language skills, and increase their engagement with the film, use exercises in which you stop the film or mute the sound and encourage students to discuss what happens or imagine what will happen. Specific examples for *To Kill a Mockingbird* are described below.

1. Show half of the class the scene (9:00) in which Jem describes Boo Radley. Then have students who watched the scene pair up with students who didn't to retell the scene to their partners. After the pairs have finished their discussions, bring the class together to summarize what happened in the scene. You can use this technique with other scenes. Be sure to let students have a chance to be both viewers and listeners.

2. Show the beginning of the scene (17:30) where the Jem, Scout, and Dill

play with an old tire. Stop the film as the tire begins rolling and ask students to predict what will happen next. Choose other scenes and allow students to view only the beginning and the end of the scene; then ask them to discuss what happens in between.

3. Mute the sound during the scene when Atticus and Mr. Ewell meet outside of the courtroom for the first time (after first describing to the students the roles of the two characters), and ask them to create a dialogue. This can then be performed as a role play. After students have performed the role plays, show the scene with the sound turned on. Then compare and contrast students' dialogues with the dialogue in the film.

Post-viewing

Various activities that students can participate in after viewing the film will enhance their understanding and appreciation of the film and will increase their language skills. Sample activities include the following.

1. Have students role play a scene from the film. An easy scene to role play is the one that introduces the three children and takes place in or under a tree house. Another, more difficult scene, is the courtroom drama between Atticus Finch and Bob Ewell.

2. Have students work in pairs; one will be an interviewer and the other will pretend to be a character in the film or the actor who plays that character. For example, a student could pretend to be Tom Robinson, the accused, or Bob Ewell, the father of the alleged victim. Help students brainstorm about what questions they will ask. (You can write examples on the board.) The interviewer should take notes during the interview. After the interviews have been completed, students can report orally to the rest of the class about what they have learned about the character/actor they interviewed.

3. Have a class debate about the evidence presented in the trial, with half of the class taking the role of the defense and half siding with the prosecution and Bob Ewell.

4. For a writing assignment, students can write a summary of their favorite scene from the film. Or more advanced students could write a review of the film, imagining that the review will be published in their local newspaper.

5. For additional reading practice, students can read reviews of the film or articles on the film's historical or cultural background. (These types of articles can be found on the Internet.)

Internet follow-up

For those with access to the Internet, an excellent starting point for further research on *To Kill a Mockingbird* would be a Library of Congress Learning Page dedicated to this book/film: http://memory.loc.gov/learn/lessons/98/mock/intro.html. This site provides a thorough examination of the complex issues raised by the film, using resources from the *American Memory* collection of the Library of Congress and other online resources. It also allows students to explore the rich cultural heritage of African Americans through their literature: poems, short stories, and first-person narratives can all be found as electronic texts through links from this website.

An example of an extension activity from the Learning Page is an examination of two documents relating to mob violence, which is portrayed in the film when Atticus volunteers to guard the courthouse to protect Tom Robinson from a mob. By reading "A Sermon On Lynch Law And Raping," http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/murray:@field(DOCID+@lit(lcrbmrpt0a08div7)), students can learn about the phenomenon of mob violence and read actual reactions from black religious figures during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After reading these accounts, students will be able relate them to the Emmett Till murder (mentioned earlier in the article) and Tom Robinson's case in the film.

A WebQuest, a focused inquiry that uses the Internet as a source of information, would also be a good place to begin, and you can see good examples of this type of scaffolded activity, using authentic tasks based on the World Wide Web, at: http://oncampus.richmond.edu/academics/education/projects/

webquests. Here is an example of a possible WebQuest for *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

- *Background:* Millions of Americans failed to prosper during the post-World War II economic growth in the United States, including two large groups of Americans: residents of poor, inner-city neighborhoods and rural inhabitants of the Appalachian Mountains and the South. When President Lyndon Johnson declared a "War on Poverty" in 1964, he addressed both poverty and racism by promoting several programs to deal with the issues that challenged these two communities.

- *Task:* It is January 2009. The new U.S. President has just appointed you to a "Committee to End Poverty in America." Your committee will review the information found at the links listed below and will prepare a one- or two-page summary of possible anti-poverty programs for the President. (Note: In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson proposed a "War on Poverty" and created several new programs to alleviate poverty in America. Since these programs are part of the historical record, you can examine them and select those that have been effective, or you can propose entirely new ones.)

- *Resources:* Begin your search with a general reference work such as the Encarta Encyclopedia: http://encarta.msn.com/artcenter_/browse.html. Follow up with more specific websites, such as:

  1. http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1964johnson-warpoverty.html (President Johnson's speech to Congress proposing a "War on Poverty")
  2. http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1589660 (A historical look at the War on Poverty, broadcast on National Public Radio)
  3. http:// www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/lbjforkids/poverty.shtm (The Johnson Presidential Library's website, complete with information on the many programs involved in the "War on Poverty," designed for use in American schools)

- *Instructions:* Begin with the reading assignments, in order to better understand the background of the "War on Poverty." Next, work in groups to discuss which programs have been effective and which were not, proposing new programs where needed. Finally, prepare a brief (one or two-page) summary of your recommendations, to be given to the President.

An interesting website related to the Emmett Till case and its underlying theme of racism, is part of the Public Broadcasting System's American Experience website: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/peopleevents/p_till.html. This site features information on the geography, economics, and history behind the Till killing, including background on the so-called Jim Crow laws of the South, which mandated "separate but equal" facilities and treatment for African Americans. This website, like most featured here, is designed for classroom use by teachers, though not necessarily those in the TESOL field.

Another excellent website, designed specifically for non-native speaking students and thus focusing more on language than on cultural content, is www.eslnotes.com, which features synopses, character profiles, and vocabulary and cultural activities to aid the EFL student in understanding the many films profiled on this website.

To Kill A Mockingbird, although its richness of content might fill an entire semester, could also be combined with at least one other film: the documentary *Crisis*. This masterpiece by Robert Drew, now available on DVD, chronicles the 1963 confrontation between the Administration of John F. Kennedy and Alabama Governor George Wallace over the racial integration of the University of Alabama. What makes this film unique is that it is an intimate portrait of the Kennedy White House, filmed with the consent of both John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert, who was Attorney General at the time.

Conclusion

Are the activities described in this article, whether based on the Internet or not, really beneficial to the language-learning process? If we consider film to be a text without written words, then our students' background

knowledge is crucial to their understanding of the message delivered by a movie such as *To Kill A Mockingbird*. The issues of poverty, racial inequality and bigotry, fear of mental illness, and others are rich, complex, and worth exploring, even in an already busy curriculum. "*Cut!*"

References

Robbins, M. 1999. *A guide for using To Kill a Mockingbird in the classroom*. Westminster, CA: Teacher Created Material.

Staples, D., ed. 1991. *The American cinema*. 3rd ed. Washington, D.C., United States Information Agency.

Stempleski, S., and B. Tomalin. 2001. *Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Summerfield, E., and S. Lee. 2001. *Seeing the big picture*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press.

Williamson, J., and J. Vincent. 1996. *Film is content*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

JOHN SCACCO currently serves as the Regional English Language Officer for North Africa. Prior to joining the U.S. Department of State, he taught or directed EFL programs in Japan, Thailand, Yemen, and Kazakhstan.

Appendix Obtaining Films for Classroom Use

Beyond Film: Exploring the Content of Movies • John Scacco

Before beginning any project using film in the classroom, it is useful to examine the various formats available. While videocassettes are still common throughout the world, DVD is the current standard for new releases. And many classic films such as *To Kill A Mockingbird* are also available in DVD format. However, with disks encoded for eight different world regions, it is not simply a matter of buying a DVD, putting it into a player or computer, and watching a movie.

For information on your specific region and its DVD format, a good place to start is Amazon.com's DVD FAQ page, which shows each region's participating countries and also explains something called "Regional Coding Enhancement," which was added to Region 1 (the United States, its territories, and Canada) DVDs in 2000 to prevent piracy.

Another issue to contend with is the varied formats of the video content itself: PAL, SECAM, or NTSC can be found in different parts of the world.

And what if you can't obtain *To Kill A Mockingbird?* Are there other films, perhaps more recent, that demonstrate a link between cinema and social issues with which you can use the Internet as a source of material? The fourth film of the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, provides rich material for discussion. Tolerance.org, a web-based initiative of the Southern Poverty Law Center in the United States, has three activities based on the Harry Potter series, one each for primary, middle, and secondary grades. The site also provides a series of discussion questions linking the topics in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*—human rights violations, intolerance, activism, prejudice, and social stereotypes—to discussions based on actual historical events.