



Non-Fiction Film in the Oral Communication Class

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Introduction

This article draws on the author's 5 years' experience of teaching film at university level to explain what an excellent resource non-fiction film is for the language classroom, and to show how it can be successfully used to get students to study a wide range of social and global issues.

Rationale

Culture worldwide is now dominated by images, and particularly moving images, which teachers from many disciplines have been keen to exploit in class. The language teacher has been wise to capitalize on this, as modern generations show an obvious readiness to work well with the medium. The impact of visual information 'dwarfs other mediums' (Maley in Stempleski, 2001). It may not be too much to say that we are faced with a generation of students who respond better to short sound bytes, 'manga' and movie-clips (You-Tube and Vine) than to the written word.

As educators, we should embrace this and harness it to achieve our pedagogical ends. The interest in non-fiction films based on or inspired by real events is growing, as evidenced by 6 of 9 films nominated for best picture at the 2014 Academy Awards, with one of them - *12 Years a Slave* - going on to win. Inspirational stories are arguably more inspiring if they are true. Feel-good films feel better if the events they depict actually happened. Films with messages of social import have more impact when anchored in reality.

Method, Presentation, Discussion, Follow-up

The university EFL course that I teach aims to raise awareness about social and global issues. This 15-week course starts off with introductory lessons on film analysis, research and data collecting, work with a template, then model presentations by the teacher. Students are then required to present a film based on a true story, selected from the teacher's extensive list of documentary and feature films. Students work on their films individually or in pairs. They soon become accustomed to making clear links between excerpts and the discussions they intend to prompt. They quickly learn that clip-viewing can precipitate lively discussion. Students are assigned a maximum of 90 minutes to present their film, during which time they 'teach the class'. There is no pressure for them to use the whole time available, as the teacher prepares supplementary discussions and

activities for use if time remains.

Students are given total freedom to choose which excerpts they will show to the class, and how they will use these to stimulate discussion and language activities. This control is very much appreciated by students who show a lot of creativity in their presentations. They are offered a list of books to use as support and models, and can also get help from the teacher in reviewing and developing their work. A handout must be made for class members. Table 1 shows what students should cover in their presentations.

Organisation	Content
Geographical Context	Maps
Background details	Release date / Director / Actors
Summary	Full with spoiler alert, or abridged
Memorable Quotes	Select for impact / use-fulness in discussions
Significant Parts of the Film	Limit to 3-5 excerpts
Pertinent Vocabulary	Introduce in quizzes or other exercises.
Pre / Post-viewing questions / activities	Favour materials which will interest peers and motivate discussion
Discussion Questions	Focus on the issue

Table 1 Film presentation preparation

In follow-up studies for their final assignment, students choose any of the films studied, (but must not use their own), then research and write about an issue that they identified in the film. The summary of at least one original professional review of the film must be included in this report. However, it is intended that students explore the issue in the wider context and use the film only briefly as reference or supporting material when writing their reports. Depending on learner level, a teacher can provide the thesis-statements from which students must write the report. More confident or advanced students will choose their own themes and generate their own statements.

As examples of possible research themes, the film *Supersize Me* would lend itself to research on modern phenomena (e.g. obesity as a social/global issue), advertising policies (children as consumers: a

global issue) and junk food (a social issue). *Dallas Buyers' Club* invites research on homophobia, the *Pursuit of Happiness* on poverty and so on.

Readers may already see what excerpts of their favourite films they would show students and how they could use these as a base for discussion and language learning. For interest, here are some movie titles with issues that the films address:

FILM	ISSUES ADDRESSED
<i>Awakenings</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ medical research ▪ food and drug safety
<i>The Blind Side</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ social integration
<i>Bowling For Columbine</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ gun control
<i>Boys Don't Cry</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ gender / gay rights / rape
<i>Catch Me If You Can</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ identity theft
<i>Dallas Buyers' Club</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ homophobia / health care
<i>Dead Man Walking</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ capital punishment
<i>Elephant Man</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ welfare / human rights
<i>Erin Brockovich</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ corporate responsibility ▪ pollution ▪ single parenting
<i>The King's Speech</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ disability
<i>Magdalene Sisters</i> <i>Philomena</i> <i>Rabbit-Proof Fence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ institutional abuse
<i>Pursuit Of Happiness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ poverty ▪ homelessness
<i>Schindler's List</i> <i>Hotel Rwanda</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ war ▪ genocide
<i>The Social Network</i> <i>Citizenfour</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ privacy ▪ cyber bullying
<i>Supersize Me</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ obesity ▪ advertising to children ▪ junk food addiction
<i>Titanic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ social disparity / classism
<i>What's Love Got To Do With It?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ domestic violence

Table 2 20+ films to Get Students Thinking

Conclusion

In my experience, students unfailingly rise to the challenge of exploring difficult questions. They enjoy putting together a presentation to share their passion for a particular film with their peers – the most dedicated will prepare a power-point presentation - and they appear to revel in the fact that they get to choose not only the film itself, but excerpts and quotations for study, the pertinent vocabulary they will teach and the themes and discussions they will engage their classmates in.

From the teacher's point of view, it is also very satisfying to know that when students are presented

with thought-provoking film clips, the prospect of researching and writing an assignment becomes challenge rather than chore. I like to think that by using film in the classroom, unwilling readers become engaged and essentially *tricked* into doing good reading and research.

Finally, there is often concern about copyright and using film in class, so it is good to report that the United States - probably one of the most strict regarding copyright laws - allows professors to use film clips for educational purposes without fear of penalty (Kolowich, 2010). Those of us in Asia should have even less to fear.

Afterword

Please note that while the university course I teach focuses on the use of film for advanced EFL students, this has also been used successfully with lower-level learners. Omitting the presentation section required of students, teachers can choose to select excerpts themselves to exploit from the language-learning point of view or to stimulate thinking and discussion. Discussions will naturally be less developed and the research element more elementary, but no less valuable. I believe that we should never forget that just because students may have difficulties expressing themselves in English, it in no way means that they are unable to think about issues. I consider it one of my most important roles as a teacher to facilitate this.

References

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