

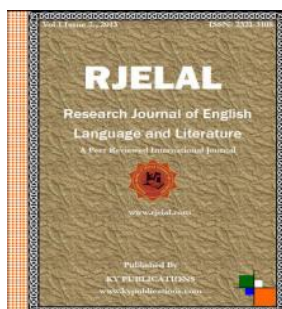
RESEARCH ARTICLE



## USING FILMS AS AUTHENTIC MATERIAL IN ESL CLASSROOMS: A SNAPSHOT

**Dr. M.R. VISHWANATHAN**

Assistant Professor of English, NIT Warangal



Article Info:

Article Received:02/09/2014

Revised on: 14/09/2014

Accepted on: 16/09/2014

### ABSTRACT

The restorative impact of films in the ESL classroom is an idea that is only now beginning to be appreciated as ideal and desirable; this is largely because of the arrival of technology that makes possible the conversion of English language lab into a mini theatre where films can be shown. It is a challenge to educate students while commanding their unflinching attention, unwavering interest and utmost devotion to what is being taught. In English language labs in engineering colleges, it is a common occurrence for students to be directed to desktops that have software installed in them with exercises in phonetics, grammar, G.D. and role plays. Students are left on their own to *master* the skills with help every now and then from teacher. There is thus a disconnect between what ought to be learnt and what actually is since the learning happens under laboratory conditions. It is the article's contention that language learning becomes fun and an activity to look forward to if films were part of the language learning process. This is because films exercise one's imagination, promote critical thinking and lead students to debates and Group Discussions as few activities can. Speaking, writing and listening are cultivated as one watches a film. The potential of films to educate must be recognised in teaching-learning English.

Key words: Films, ESL Classroom, authentic material, ELCS lab, language activities.

© Copyright KY Publications

### INTRODUCTION

It is a truth universally endorsed, proved, and happily disseminated that there is no medium like the visual medium to propagate ideas, influence minds, and dictate particular mind-sets, aggressively market ideologies, and appropriate ideas to guide humanity to pre-determined ends and directions. Movies in particular exercise an allure on the collective imagination of youth across countries and cultures; it won't be an exaggeration to claim that Indian movies bind the people of India and Pakistan at an emotional level better than bilateral ties. Hindi movies are smuggled into Pakistan while English movies find their way into

the dark alleys of Iran and the bullet ridden homes of Somalia and Eritrea, signalling their universal appeal and ability to transcend barriers of geography, ethnicity, race and religion. It is the rare young man or woman sworn to austerity who avoids movies.

While concern has been expressed of late at the deterioration in quality and morality of movies, they continue to attract the human psyche like no other with their guarantee to thrill, motivate, shock, entertain and render the masses powerless to resist the temptation of the silver screen.

The student community in particular derive solace and 'salvation' from movies; they visit the cinema

before and after the exam, celebrate an event with a trip to the theatre; exhibit happiness at being chosen for a job or at a university abroad for higher studies by taking friends to the cinema; in short, movies have the same significance for the IT and Facebook generation that temples had for the generation that inherited a free India. The reason movies have come to play such a pivotal role in our lives are fascinating as well as depressing: in an age where human relations are fast disappearing or are false, movies provide the anchor by promising the realization of true friendship, love and security; at a time when recession and layoffs seem the only end products of loyalty and hard work, movies dismiss the possibility by showing glamour and wealth as the by-products of diligence; in a time of crisis, when nothing seems to go right in an individual's life, movies assure one that all unhappiness is a passing phase and that all setbacks are but temporary; when an individual feels depressed or suicidal because of poor academic achievement, there comes a movie like ' *Three idiots*' to put him/her on the track with the assurance that being brilliant is not the end of story!

To sum up, films play an important role for the following reasons.

1. Movies are popular and have universal appeal across cultures, providing current language usage
2. They present visual content in which the dialogue takes place, action accompanying speech, and
3. They show gestures, facial expression and other body language appropriate to the dialogue. (Gebhardt, 2009)

In sum, the power wielded by films on the collective subconscious is enormous and frightening. It is evident that "because of considerable student interest in movies, learners always seem to benefit from watching the trailers that appeal to them and discussing their thoughts of them afterward" (Heffernan, 2005). The flip side of course is that films have the power to educate, inform and influence an individual's mind for the better. Films are popular as authentic material since "... they have high potential for teaching grammar, social language and pronunciation, and also for practising notional areas to do with daily

life and human behaviour" (Sherman, 2003, pp.46-47).

#### The study:

The National Association of Software Services Companies (NASSCOM), a trade association of Indian Information Technology (IT) and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry, came up with a startling revelation that only 10-12 % of engineering graduates in India are employable, the chief reasons for unemployability being poor communication skills and poor soft skills. *Aspiring Minds*, another employee assessment service provider, estimated that only 14% of graduates have what it takes to get into gainful employment. The solution that NASSCOM came up with was to make graduates industry ready by introducing soft skills in the curriculum, a decision that led to state universities in Telangana State and A.P. revamping the English curriculum.

In 2005 or thereabouts, it was determined that to cater for the ever increasing need to hone the communication skills and soft skills of graduates, theory alone was not enough. Students needed practice in being able to use English in a variety of situations and that a language lab was the need of the hour. Accordingly, the revised English curriculum had English Language Communication Skills (ELCS) for students of first year and Advanced English Language Communication Skills lab (AELCS) for students of third year. Phonetics, G.D. interview skills, debates and presentational skills form part of the syllabi of the lab.

Like any teacher of English I was using chalk and talk or white board to explain rules of word stress and rhythm, used projector to put up rules of intonation, and would ask students to take the rules down; I would also ask them to copy down exercises from the computer and work on them at leisure. I would reach them help occasionally while choosing to remain aloof as much as I could since I had imagined that lab was entirely a student affair with teacher playing the role of facilitator. The initiative had to come from the students and I would act on their cry for help.

It was in the context of teaching third year students of third year that an epiphany occurred to me. One day, after a particularly difficult start to the lab where I found students highly distracted and

restless. I encountered a group seated in the last bench carrying on an animated conversation, oblivious to my presence and instructions to them to take down what I had just put up on the board, and that was when I proceeded to the scene of commotion to give them a piece of my mind. The *leader* of the gang, a sprightly girl with a mischievous smile and readiness to participate in any activity I devised for the class, disarmed me by apologising and explaining that they were so caught up in discussing a movie that had just been released and enjoying rave reviews – *Taare Zamin Par* – that they were unable to listen to me or obey my instructions. It was in sum a group discussion where each one got on to the soap box.

In answer, I could muster only a weak smile and attempt to hide behind the copious notes I was carrying to dictate to the class. Here I was, a veteran of long years of teaching, armed to the teeth with notes and PPTs culled from the Internet on the do's and don'ts of G.D.s and debates while a bunch of young ones had already been putting into practice for the last 30 minutes the dos and don'ts of G.D. and its nuances, in a natural setting. I owed them a debt of gratitude.

That was when I reasoned how useful films can serve as a tool to teach learners language with. I wish to discuss the use of films in English language lab with specific reference to two movies: *My fair lady* and *Escape to Victory*. Teaching phonetics can be hard work, especially if one needs to bring out the importance of stress, rhythm and accent to students in an isolated context. Indian languages are syllable timed and it is an onerous exercise to use sentences in isolation and teach supra-segmental features. *My Fair Lady* takes away some of the monotony and *stress* (to pun a little) connected with teaching phonetics. The film is one of the best samples of how meaning making is done in the context of native speaker speech and why stress and intonation are important. It may also be used to talk about native and non-native varieties of English and how Indian English differs from British or American.

The film can also be a talking point for students about the necessity of using English that is comprehensible and why one get one's

pronunciation correct. The questions after the movie can be:

- (a) Is there a necessity to speak English using R.P.?
- (b) What is the theme of the movie?
- (c) Do you agree with the message put out by the movie?
- (d) How is the language one speaks a marker of class/caste?
- (e) Aren't local varieties of English good enough for our purposes?
- (f) Should one have a norm at all?
- (g) In the film Eliza Doolittle comes to see Professor Higgins as a cold, hard faced human who has always viewed her as a flower girl and tells him that what distinguishes a lady from a flower girl is not how well she speaks a language but how well she is regarded and treated. Does this observation pertain only in the context of the film or is it universally true?

Such questions often make for lively debates and discussions in the classroom.

Yet another popular movie that combines sport with war is *Escape to Victory*. It is a fascinating tale of how a band of prisoners of war (P.O.W.s) outwit their Nazi captors by agreeing to play a football match in occupied Paris and making good their escape after the match. The film is often greeted with scepticism by students who wonder what the theme is all about. I use the movie to talk to students about the Second World War, its causes, consequences and the evils of racism.

In the movie, Major Colby, a football fan agrees to play a match with the German national team and assembles a ragtag team of players from among the prisoners, defying the British high command. He leads the team by being very supportive of his team mates and eventually builds a very strong team that takes on the mighty Germans.

I use the film to talk about *team work, leadership qualities, and persuasion* skills and of course *usage in terms of idioms, slangs, colloquialisms* etc. For example, when describing the levels of competence of the Allies for a match against the Germans, Colby says they are "*charging about like a herd of elephants*", meaning their style of play leaves a lot to be desired. When initially dismissing the

possibility of playing a match with Germans unprepared, he says the players would be “chucking their guts up,” meaning that playing for 90 minutes would exhaust them and when asking that one of his men be released from prison, he says, “One of my men is in the cooler...” , which is slang for detention. Again, when the superior officer admonishes Colby for agreeing to play a match with the enemy in the first place and that too in a famous stadium in Paris, the superior officer says to Colby “These men will be exhibited like performing fleas .....”, which clearly implies the hopeless position the Allied players find themselves in.

In the movie, the team of Major Colby plays out a draw with the team from the Wehrmacht at Colombes stadium; the jubilant crowd watching the match invades the field after the match and the players become one with the crowd, after which they easily merge into the thousands of men and women marching out of the stadium, thereby escaping the clutches of the Nazis.

The questions I ask students are: (a) why is the film called *Escape to Victory* when the match was drawn?

(b) How do you justify the decision of Major Colby to play a match against the enemy?

(c) Give instances of *team work, leadership skills and persuasion skills* in the movie.

(d) Whose role did you like the most in the movie? Why?

(e) If you were Major Colby what would you have done?

(f) Is there any message in the movie that one can use in real life?

These questions invoke a lot of heated exchange of views in English and I also invite views in Telugu and Hindi which are translated by students themselves. I must mention that it is indeed a fine and productive way to teach language to learners of any level of competence, while being assured of full cooperation from the learners themselves. It rests with the teacher to bring movies appropriate to the occasion and learning objectives to extract maximum advantage out of the movie showing/watching experience.

## CONCLUSION

While reemphasising the necessity of using films to teach language it is helpful if the following points are kept in mind:

- (a) Use movies that deal with contemporary themes and topics; *social networking* which talks about Facebook and friendship is a case in point.
- (b) Use movies that promise a lot of inputs in language by way of idioms, slangs, phrasal verbs, etc. Examples of such movies are *The Bridge on the river Kwai, Good Will Hunting, Dead Poets Society* etc. Students learn language in authentic contexts while also appreciating a good movie.
- (c) Movies that talk of social issues and evils such as racism, materialism, greed, corruption, etc. are useful in the language classroom since they initiate debates, Group Discussions and arguments around these topics. Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and *Modern Times* are classic genres in the category. While the former can be used to talk about the dangers of propaganda, hatred and prejudices, the latter can be used to initiate a debate on the dangers of industrialisation at the cost of human values.
- (d) Movies that are provocative, obscene, violent or ideologically loaded are movies that should not be played even if they have the power to compel student participation and couch vital messages for humanity. A case in point is *Blood Diamonds* which despite portraying the ruthless exploitation of Africa's resources also glorifies mindless violence. Yet another example would be *The Wolf of Wall Street*, a film that portrays the greed, lust and thirst for power in the financial capital of the world. The movie is however intended for adult audiences and therefore cannot be shown to students even if the message is very relevant for our times: avoid greed since greed brings about one's ruin and that of society too.

In conclusion, it may be said that as far as possible, one must choose movies that are politically correct

and very thought-provoking. Learning is most important and any film that helps one achieve this objective is welcome.

**REFERENCES**

Gebhardt, J. (2004). Using Movie Trailers in an ESL CALL Class (TESL/TEFL).

Heffernan, N. (2005). Watching movie trailers in the ESL Class (TEFL/TESL). The Internet TESL Journal, 11(3). Retrieved 10 September 2014 from <http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Heffernan-MovieTrailers.html>

Sherman, J. (2003). *Using Authentic Video in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: CUP.

The Internet TESL Journal, 10 (10). Retrieved 10 September 2014 from <http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Gebhardt-MovieTrailers.html>.

---