

Selecting Films for ESL

By Inger Smith

While a film can certainly enhance an English as a Second Language (ESL) lesson, using it effectively isn't as simple as one might think. Getting a projector, screen and film to the same room at the same time is only a small part of the process a teacher must complete in order to make the effort worthwhile at all. The most complex, time-consuming part of using film is selecting an appropriate film.

Consider film literacy. For most Canadians, seasoned film and TV viewers, the complex language of the cinema poses few problems. We easily untangle the time distortions of the medium. We recognize flashbacks and dream sequences for what they are. Strange shooting angles, unusual lighting, distortions of scale, montage, collage, animation techniques don't confuse us — we grew up with them as we did with our mother tongue. The analogies and cultural symbols of western cinematography speak a language which we absorb automatically, to such a degree that we want our film fast, with so many jolts per minute, and if the screen doesn't deliver we turn off.

However, ESL students come from varied cultures and many haven't logged the number of viewing hours we have. For some of them, the language of film may present as many difficulties as does the English language. The fact is that people do have to learn how to put the pictures together to create a story, how to "read" a film, as Robert Flaherty said he had to teach native Samoans to do. Flaherty's experiences while making *Nanook of the North* tell an ESL teacher much. While making the film, he screened part of it for his Eskimo subjects who had never seen film before. They called to the figures on the screen, ran to them and tried to touch them. When a frame contained only part of an arm, they assumed the arm itself had been cut off.

Depth perception also is learned. Studies in which Zambian illiterates were asked to interpret line drawings (Hudson, 1962, and Holmes, 1964) revealed that the interpretation of perspective cues isn't automatic — just because something is smaller doesn't mean everyone will think it's further away. Pieter Bruegel's paintings show a lack of awareness of additional cues — color and tonal contrasts which diminish in intensity as they recede from the viewer's eye.

This is not to suggest that all ESL students are film illiterates, but rather that an ESL instructor must not assume a consistent level of film literacy in a class, and must be constantly sensitive to situations where explanations of cinematic technique are needed. Such sensitivity can be developed by watching a variety of foreign films and studying the differences in pacing, symbolism and technique. Or considering one's own difficulty with other visual languages — how many of us relate to abstract painting, or to the symbolism in the work of Norval Morrisseau, the Ojibway painter?

No two people experience a film in the same way; nowhere is this more true than in an ESL class. Perception is filtered in ways which we can often not predict. We can guess at some of the filters — age, sex, intelligence, formal education level; the degree to which the viewer can identify with the people in the film depending on their skin color, body language, dress and role in society. Certainly the viewer's experience as well as present emotional state affect what is perceived.

In our department we've used the NFB film, *Steel Blues*,

successfully for years. It's a realistic portrayal of the problems of a Chilean refugee in Canada. It contains a very short scene from a Chilean prison. Recently I showed it to a class containing a large proportion of refugees from Eastern Europe, many of whom were outraged — why was this "Communist propaganda" allowed in the capitalist school system? They petitioned the head of the department to have it removed from the school. Tremendous material for class discussion, certainly, but no teacher would want to arouse such emotions in students who don't have the language capabilities to discuss the issues. Instead of inspiring them to learn English, this film turned these students off.

Violence in film can have a similar effect by causing students who have recently come from war-torn areas to relive traumas. A case in point is *Neighbors*, the well-known NFB short. It's a superb teaching tool in many ways, but the violent scenes with which it tells its story sometimes contradict the message of the film.

Humor also demands careful selection because it's so easily outdated and highly cultural. Certainly the NFB films made especially for ESL, *The Heatwave Lasted Four Days* and *Star* are oblivious to this fact.

It's also important to remember that some students may simply not be accustomed to sitting quietly and paying attention to a film. Some of the first teachers to work in remote Eskimo communities reported that their students often got headaches from the rapid eye movement and nightmares from the violence. A student may not like film at all, but be too polite to say so. Huge amounts of effort and enthusiasm on the teacher's part might develop some appreciation for the art, but will this further the cause of teaching ESL?

Film selection takes a great deal of sensitive previewing, as well as a considerable knowledge about the intended audience. In addition, it requires having a clearly-defined teaching objective and a plan for meeting these objectives. Some films can meet many objectives — stimulate discussion and research, give cultural information; act as starting points for practicing grammatical structures, notions, idioms, vocabulary. Some objectives may require elementary film dialogue, others complex. Yet others may require that there be no dialogue at all — perhaps the objective is to allow students to create suitable dialogue.

Of course, just watching a film isn't going to meet a lot of objectives. After all, for many people film is an escape, a passive entertainment, not a teaching tool. Students may wonder how it relates to learning English. Indeed, it may not, unless ways have been provided for them to interact meaningfully with the medium. Unless their focus is directed and they know precisely why they are watching a film and what they are expected to gain from the experience, that film's impact will be minimal.

For this reason, I suggest planning film use in three stages: preparation, viewing and follow-up. (See chart on next page for details.) When this general framework is used, specific ideas follow — types of written or oral exercises, activities, role plays, discussions... I am always excited by the endless creativity a discussion of film use stimulates in workshops I do with ESL teachers. No other teaching aid does this to such a degree. Therefore, in spite of the drawbacks, I can't help feeling it's worth the effort.

The more I use film, the more aware I become of the complexities involved (not to mention the hours of labor). But the challenge is an exciting one. For those who wish to accept it, I offer two aids. One is the chart on the next page with which teachers may wish to start a department film file to share viewing experiences and save viewing time. Secondly, the NFB teaching handbook, *Teaching ESL with the Aid of Selected Films*, discusses 60 NFB films (20 in detail with exercises) which can be used in the adult classroom.

Inger Smith, B.A., is presently C.D.A. co-ordinator at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. She has worked as an E.S.L. teacher in Alberta and has previously studied film at York University.

Title: _____	Order Number _____
Length: _____	Style: _____ Drama _____ B&W _____ Animation _____ Documentary _____ Color _____ Stills Other: _____
Language Level: _____	Without words _____ A few words which need not be understood to understand film _____ Low level vocabulary _____ Intermediate vocabulary _____ Advanced, complex vocabulary which must be understood to understand film _____ Other _____
Problems to Anticipate: _____	_____ Dated content _____ Poor sound track / Poor quality print _____ Dream sequences, flashbacks, etc. needs explanation _____ Too violent or otherwise offensive _____ Too long _____ Doesn't meet teaching objectives _____ Other _____
What teaching objectives can I meet by using this film? _____	
How can I use this film?	
	I. PREPARATION
_____	Teach grammar, idioms, vocabulary, gambits, conversational fillers which will be reviewed in the film, eg. _____
_____	Study, read, dramatize parts of dialogue or narration
_____	Discuss/research themes/ opinions which will be seen in film
_____	Give out specific exercises about film which will direct students to look for specific answers
_____	Other _____
	II. VIEWING EXERCISES
_____	Take notes
_____	Complete a partially written outline
_____	List specific types of items seen in film, ie. animals, verbs, etc.
_____	Turn off sound, create your own
_____	Turn off sound, hold frame, ask questions, discuss, repeat words
_____	Stop film, let students predict outcome
_____	Show film to only half the class who will explain it to others; then show it to others
_____	Complete blanks in written narration
_____	Look for answers to questions assigned in preparation
_____	Other _____
	III. FOLLOW-UP
_____	Make questions for other students about film
_____	Write summaries, outlines, paragraphs, compositions
_____	List/classify things seen in film
_____	Re-tell story (changing person, tense...)
_____	"Eye-witness". Describe a scene from memory. Write on board. Check as a group.
_____	Do research/find newspaper articles about subject
_____	Discuss title, think of other titles
_____	Discuss, debate different or opposing views in/about film
_____	Create/fact out skits
_____	Other exercises: matching, filling-in blanks, sequencing, true/false, sentence completion, giving opinions, organizing ideas, interpreting charts/additional information
_____	Other _____