



Film in the Classroom

by Kitty Johnson, USIA English Teaching Fellow

Introduction

Films are an excellent source of authentic spoken language in context – a resource for both language and culture. This is especially true when it's American language and culture. Hollywood not only reflects American society; in some cases, it also creates it. Whether you're showing short clips or full-length features, though, it's important to structure the film-related activities so that viewing becomes a language learning experience rather than just a passive break from the normal classroom routine.

I've used films to enhance learning in many ways from isolated listening comprehension exercises to – at the other end of the spectrum - integral parts of a theme based curriculum. However I use films, I like to apply the principles of the Into-Through-Beyond approach that I use in my reading oriented classes. In the case of film, this can be translated as Pre-viewing, Viewing and Post-viewing. Following are some ideas for film activities based on this concept.

Pre-Viewing

Activate the students' background knowledge before showing the film.

Some suggestions:

- Have a large group or small group discussion of the theme.
- Ask what they know already.
- Ask what they'd like to know.
- Ask them to predict from the title what they think the film will be about. Will it be a comedy? A drama? A documentary?
- Ask them to predict the story line.
- Introduce students to the general vocabulary: one way of doing this is to assign a reading activity based on the same theme as the film.
- Show a scene without the sound. Have students write or discuss possible dialogue.

Viewing

Whether you show clips or the entire film (either straight through or in parts), try giving the students a specific task while watching the film.

Some suggestions:

- Assign individuals or groups to follow the actions of a particular character.
- Give students a set of questions about the content: characters, plot, specific bits of dialog, etc. (Be sure to go over the questions *before* viewing so students understand what they're looking for.)

- Depending on the language level of the students, you might want to show longer films in logically separated segments. Review the completed segments before going on to the next ones.
- Also try having students revise and expand their predictions (from *pre-viewing*) as they gain more information.

Post-Viewing

The big picture. Relate the film to the students' own lives or the world in general.

Some suggestions:

Writing activities:

- Review the film. (As models, give them reviews of other movies that have appeared in newspapers and magazines.)
- Choose a character. Compare that character's life/actions/ideals with your own.
- What happens after the movie is over?

Class or small group discussion ideas:

- How would the movie have been different if certain characters had taken different actions?
- Debate the pros and cons of a controversial theme in the movie.
- How do cultural norms influence the action? (Would the plot be plausible in another culture? Why or why not?)
- What happens after the movie is over?

Grammar practice ideas:

- Choose a grammatical structure that's used several times in the film and create your own exercise. One possibility: if a particular scene uses future conditional tense, transcribe the scene and omit the verbs. See if students can fill them in.

For more ideas on teaching with video, see "Video in Action" by Susan Stempleski and Barry Tomalin in the ASC library.

About Film-Making: My Personal Experiences

Many students are as intrigued by the process of movie-making as they are about the movies themselves. I'm usually able not only to answer their questions, but also to add interesting side-bars the viewing of any film, because I worked as a costumer in Hollywood for eleven years before changing careers. Through a succession of feature films, television movies-of-the-week, situation comedies, and episodic series, I was on the set many times for 10 to 14 and occasionally 16 hours a day. I also attended my share of production meetings and "dailies". What follows is a list of FAQs from students and colleagues who want to know what it's really like behind the scenes.

How long is a typical working day?

Many crew people have 'guarantees' of a minimum of 54 or 60 hours of work per week, averaging about 10.8 or 12 hours a day. Since that's what we would get paid for anyway, that's generally at least how much we would work. It depends on, among other things, what kind of job you have, what kind and how much work needs to be done and whether or not it's a union shoot. As a costumer, I usually would have to report at least a half-hour before the rest of the crew,

sometimes more, depending on how much help the actresses and actors needed with their costumes. Hair and make-up people have to report earlier, too, as does at least one of the assistant directors. We were the ones responsible for getting the actors camera-ready.

If the crew is slated to start shooting at 8 am, for example, everyone will report at 7:30, latest. The actors may have to be in by 6:30; hair, make-up and sometimes wardrobe will be in at 6:24 or 6:18 (everything is measured in tenths of an hour). IATSE union regulations guarantee that if we don't break for lunch within six hours of beginning work, we would either get a half hour 'breakfast break' during the morning or get paid a "meal penalty" for each half-hour over six hours without a break. Then we could work another six hours before either going home or having a dinner break. Union regulations also required a turnaround (time between leaving work one day and reporting the next) of at least 10 hours at the studio or 8 hours on distant location.

Do they film in sequence?

Sometimes. I like to think that most production companies would prefer to film in sequence so the actors can at least have some continuity in their character development. Often, however, budget and time do not allow such a luxury. If several scenes scattered throughout the beginning, middle and end of a film take place at a donut shop, for example, it is much easier to spend one or two days on location at the donut shop shooting all of those scenes than to return and set everything up all over again.

There's also the question of actors' schedules and contracts. Actors are paid from the time they report for their first scene (or rehearsal) until they complete their last scene. If a supporting actor is in two scenes, one at the beginning and one at the end of the film, it would be very expensive, and sometimes inconvenient, to keep him or her on hold while the middle scenes are being shot. Sometimes, then, all of that actor's scenes are shot within a shorter period of time.

Do they really say 'Lights, Camera, Action'?

No. They say *Speed, Rolling, Action*. Sometimes it's *Speed, Rolling, Background Action, Action*.

This is how it goes:

After the Assistant Director (AD) tells everyone to settle down, he tells the sound mixer to roll sound. The sound mixer then says *speed*. This means the recording equipment is on and recording.

The camera slate person slates the scene and says *marker*. Then the first A.D. says *rolling*. This means the camera equipment is on and recording. Sometimes he says this into the walkie-talkies to let the crew who are not right on the set know that they shouldn't be yelling or starting up any truck engines for a while.

The director says *action*. This is the cue for the actors. (As mentioned above, this is sometimes preceded by *background action*. This is the cue for the extras, if there are any involved in the scene.)

What exactly was *your* job?

As a costumer on the set, I basically made sure the actresses (and sometimes actors) wore what the designer, key costumer or director wanted them to wear. Sometimes I accessorized the costumes (jewelry, belts, scarves, whatever) and often I had to come up with alternative selections if the costume that was prepared for the scene somehow didn't 'work'. Reasons for an

outfit not working can range from the actress being in a bad mood to the color fading into the walls of the set to the director having a new idea to....ad infinitum.

I was also responsible for wardrobe continuity. For example, if the star was seen in the hallway opening the door to her office with her sleeves pushed up to two inches below her elbow and two buttons undone on her blouse, she must have the sleeves pushed up and the buttons undone to the same places when she steps into the office even though that part of the scene may be shot four days later. She must also be wearing the same outfit! That may seem obvious, but there are a lot of wardrobe bloopers out there!

What kind of show is the most difficult to costume?

For me, this depends on the definition of difficult. If difficult refers to the amount and quality of work involved, then a period show is difficult, but it is usually also the most fun and the most rewarding. There is always so much to learn about the costumes (and life-styles, etc.) of the era. Getting everyone dressed and accessorized - and keeping them that way - also takes more time. This means we're busy all day which is far more interesting than sitting around 'waiting' all day. On the period show 'Somewhere in Time', we occasionally had call times of 3 to 4 hours before filming began just to dress the hundreds of extras for 1912.

What might seem like an 'easy' show to costume to many was for me more difficult, in the sense of tedious. These were those glamorous episodic TV shows where all the women look like they just stepped out of the same stores in Beverly Hills - all wearing the same style of earrings, sweaters, shoes, etc.

What are some other jobs on a movie set?

The *camera operator* operates the camera. Most camera operators have worked their way up from third camera assistant or *slate* (he or she slates - 'scene 13, take 4'- and keeps track of each scene that is shot and whether or not it is printed) and then second camera operator or *focus puller* (he or she is responsible for the focus of the camera).

Grips move and set up the camera equipment. The *key grip* is exactly that, the key (or number one) grip. The *dolly grip* is in charge of moving the dolly that the camera is on.

Electricians move and set up the lights and other lighting equipment. The *gaffer* is the number one electrician and the *best boy* is number two.

Overseeing the camera operators, the grips, and the electricians is the DP, or *Director of Photography*. The DP works closely with the director on creating the look of a film.

The *sound mixer* is in charge of recording all the sound. The mixer is the one who says 'speed' before every take to indicate that the sound equipment does indeed have 'speed'. His assistant, who sets up the microphones and wires and cables, etc, is the *cable* person.

The *Assistant Director (AD)* is more or less the foreman of the crew. He or she sets up the logistics and work schedules and everything else that needs to be done 'below the line' (the so-called 'non-creative' part) to carry out the director's visions. The *second assistant director* assists the AD. He or she does everything from making sure the actors get from the make-up trailer to the set on time to ordering breakfast for the early crew to whatever else comes up. On some shows, there is often a third assistant director.