Using Films in Class: The Best Way to Motivate ELs?
by [Rick Haill](#)

> *Scene one*: A man and a woman, both wearing hats, arrive at tea-time in a restaurant where a string quartet is playing…

> *Scene two*: Several people of mixed nationalities arrive for work at a hotel, looking up at a camera as they enter in order to identify themselves.

These are brief but significant moments from two films made more than 50 years apart (*Brief Encounter* in 1945 and *Dirty Pretty Things* in 2002)—and each can be used in class to illustrate aspects of society and prompt a lively discussion about the nature and meaning of change.

Cinema is an infinitely flexible and accessible medium that can appeal to students at any level of language ability. For many years, I taught a course entitled Modern British Cinema and Society at a university in the United Kingdom. This was for both native speakers and international students. My aim was to show my students aspects of British culture and society while also motivating them to watch closely, share their findings, exchange views, and improve their language skills.

In my experience, the stimulus of a good film prompts even the less proficient language speakers to wish to contribute to the postfilm discussion. In using film—just as when dealing with a written text—there is a range of techniques that, given careful planning and preparation, can encourage a class to improve all these key skills:

Transferable Skills	Language Skills
• observation • cultural awareness • interpretation • analysis • cooperation • creative thinking	• listening comprehension • vocabulary development, both passive and active • awareness of accent varieties • intonation as a conveyor of meaning • expression of opinions

All of these skills can be encouraged and developed whether watching a complete feature film or just a short clip. In this article, I'll make suggestions about which films you might use and share techniques I have found effective in the classroom as well as follow-up tasks that students might complete in or out of class.

Ideas for Teaching Film

When teaching the aforementioned course, I had the luxury of being able to show the films a week before we actually discussed them. The students were given an introduction to the film, a worksheet of a dozen or so questions about key aspects of the film, plus a list of essential vocabulary (taken from the film's subtitles).Thus, when it came to the class seminar, most students came prepared with ideas, opinions, answers, and more questions.

Here are a few of the ideas and approaches (for pair and group work, to suit different levels of language ability) that I have used in my classes and which might suit other teaching contexts, including remotely on digital platforms. (For more ideas, see my website, Teach British Films.)

Using Short Clips

First, play the clip with no sound, and ask students the following questions:

- What is the relationship between the characters? Where are they? What might they be saying?
- How many different shots or camera movements are used in this scene?
- What is the mood of the characters in the clip? How can you tell?

Second, play the clip with sound, and ask the following:

- What language are the characters speaking? In which country does this scene take place? Any clues?
- Why do you think music was (or wasn't) used to accompany this scene? If used, was it effective? How?
- What is the attitude of the characters toward each other in this scene? Positive or negative? How can you tell?
- Where do you think this scene comes in the whole structure of the film? What might precede—or follow—this scene?

For added language focus in these discussions, you may choose to highlight sentence structure or intonation patterns, specific lexical items, or features of register and appropriacy.

Using Full-Length Feature Films

After viewing the full film, have students complete any of the following activities in writing, in class:

- Create a table with a column for each main character. Fill in the table with each character's good and bad actions or attitudes.
- Write a paragraph: If you could introduce another character into the film, who would it be? Give reasons for your choice.
- Write an angry or appreciative letter or email from one character to another.
- Imagine you are the main character's boss: Write a letter of reference for them.

The following prompts are great for discussion in pairs or small groups.

- What for you is the key scene in the film? Why is it important, do you think?
- Do the filmmakers show their *own* point of view on the topic or theme of the film? If so, how?
- Can you think of a better—or alternative—title for the film?
- What is film's overall "message" for us, the audience, do you think?
- Does the story proceed in a linear way or are there jumps forward or flashbacks? If so, why are these used?

In the preceding tasks, more holistic skills are required: general comprehension of story and character, interpretation of actions and motives, and imaginative thinking. Relevant language focus might target the clear expression of opinions and the relevant structures and phrases to enable this, such as "in my view…", "Yes, but why then did …?", or "I totally disagree!"

Try the following development activities for group tasks or as assignments for homework:

- Discuss how the main characters' lives might develop after the end of the film.
- Write a journal entry by the main character looking back on the events portrayed in the film.
- Hold a class debate based on a main theme from the film: for or against, for example, the monarchy, space exploration, or euthanasia.
- Work on specialised or idiomatic vocabulary from the film, for example, from the field of politics, sport, or cooking.
- Using short quotes taken from reviews of the film, rebut or agree with the critics' views, adding your own written review.
- Design a (better) poster for the film.

This last set of activities again encourages students to think outside the box, to analyse, discuss, and deploy a full range of language skills in working collaboratively on tasks in pairs or groups.

Choosing the Right Films

Of course, any number of films might be chosen to stimulate interest, a lively discussion, and creativity among your students. Much will depend on what you wish to achieve: whether to work on specific language items, to encourage students to look at aspects of their own country, or to show them a film made elsewhere in the world that reveals a different culture to their own and with different (or maybe common?) attitudes and emphases.

Here are just a few examples of films (British, given the nature of the course I taught) that I have used. My criteria in choosing them were

- quality (well received by critics—and I liked them too!);
- showing in a dramatic and engaging way aspects of contemporary British life, history, or culture;
- appeal to a young audience in relation to the films' themes or content; and
- scope for development in terms of follow-up questions, group tasks, and spin-off activities.

I make no apology for the age of some of these films: Quality is what counts!

- *In Which We Serve* (1942)
- *A Hard Day's Night* (1964)
- *Kes* (1968)
- *If...* (1968)
- *Local Hero* (1983)
- *Hope and Glory* (1987)
- *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994)
- *Billy Elliot* (2000)
- *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002)
- *The Queen* (2006)
- *Once* (2007)
- *Made in Dagenham* (2010)
- *Dunkirk* (2017)
- *Bait* (2019)

In Conclusion

Films are a rich source of material, whether you are seeking to increase students' vocabulary; develop their listening; improve observational skills; or arouse their interest in the culture, society, and history of a country. Through their dramatic vividness, films have a special ability to communicate ideas and to move us. Though texts can achieve this through stimulating the reader's imagination, films convey their message more immediately through imagery and composition, as well as language.

So, if you have the chance to introduce films as a regular part your syllabus—or even if you wish only to use the occasional full-length film or just a short clip, then there is pleasure ahead—both for the student and the teacher! And if you're short of ideas, then here is a short collection of available film-based material:

Useful Sources

- *Teaching with Film*: A Resource Book Series and Seminars for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language, by M. Bradley
- *Film in Action* (2015), by K. Donaghy
- *Film* (2001), by S. Stempleski and B. Tomalin (Resource Books for Teachers series)
- British Film Institute
- Teach British Films (Rick Haill)

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__Rick Haill__ lectured for many years at Oxford Brookes University, where he taught language teaching methodology, study skills, and British Studies. Before that, he taught for the British Council in France, Croatia, Egypt, and Singapore. Since his retirement as Professor Emeritus, he has been working on his website for teachers worldwide: www.teachbritishfilms.com. His aim, as you may deduce from this article, is to encourage teachers to use films in and out of class!