Using Film to Teach ESOL Students
William Carter
Falls Church High School
Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools
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Introduction

Falls Church High School started its school year in mid August, two weeks earlier than most high schools in Fairfax County. I was hired to teach ESOL in late September. The person who held the job before had left a couple weeks into the school year and the students were being taught by a substitute. Before starting, I had the opportunity to observe ESOL classes at Falls Church for two days. This gave me an idea of how the department functioned and what subjects the students were studying.

On October 5, 2001, I started teaching at Falls Church High School. I was responsible for teaching three ESOL 3 (highest level) classes and two ESOL 2 social studies classes. Starting six weeks into the school year presented many unique challenges and opportunities. It also created a sense of urgency and desire to teach the students as much as possible in a limited amount of time. How could I use my education and experience to help improve their English skills? As their third teacher in less than two months, what could I do to make sure they learned the skills necessary to exit the ESOL program?

Through the use of an after school film group, students devoted extra time to studying English. While providing after school support for ESOL students, the group also enabled me to discover additional, effective lesson plans to be used during class. These experiences made my first year in teaching an entertaining, productive and thought-provoking experience.

Challenges

Less than a week into my teaching career, I was informed of standardized tests, such as the DRP, or Degrees of Reading Power. ESOL 3 students had to achieve a minimum score on the DRP test in order to exit from the ESOL program. Since I taught all the ESOL 3 classes at Falls Church, I was responsible for recommending which students could exit, and which students needed more time in the ESOL program.

This was a difficult situation for a first-year teacher. When I asked the classes, all the students said they wanted to exit ESOL. Some were as old as 21 and ready to graduate. Some had been in ESOL for more than seven years and were losing motivation. As a first-year teacher, how could I help them learn the skills necessary to be successful without the support of ESOL classes? How could I prepare them to pass the DRP test and move on?

The students’ writing samples gave a solid indication of their skills. Many times, their written ability did not correspond with their levels of oral proficiency. Some students who spoke as if they had been born in this country read on a second-grade level. Others were not able to write more than a couple
sentences. These were obstacles that would have to be overcome if they wanted to exit ESOL, and move on to classes with the general population.

The Film Group

To acquire the skills necessary for success in mainstream classes, some ESOL 3 students at Falls Church would need extra help, beyond what could be covered during class. I sought to create an after school group where I could help students practice their English skills, while sharing some of my knowledge and experiences.

In January, I held the first meeting of an after school group focusing on screen writing. I had studied film and script writing in college and figured it would be a fun way to help students work on their writing. Before the first meeting, I used flyers to advertise meetings and reminded students regularly during class. Many expressed interest in learning how to write a script, or how a script is converted from print to the product seen at movie theaters.

The purpose of the group would be to practice reading, writing and speaking English. Film was a medium that interested most of the students. Their interest combined with my experience would allow for fun and informative meetings. If we worked hard, the students might be able to write their own script.

Group Meetings

Around fifteen students came to the first meeting. We talked for about 45 minutes about what kinds of activities they might want to do. Everybody wanted to watch movies. Some suggested that we bring food. Only a few were interested in writing an entire script. That night, I thought about the students’ suggestions and tried to figure out how it could be used to improve their writing, reading and speaking skills. In other words, how could this help them reach their goal of exiting the ESOL program? Beyond ESOL, how might this help them be successful in “regular” classes?

Attendance for the next meeting was not as strong. Only six people showed up, and some of those six arrived late. I had prepared an assignment for them: they were supposed to watch a movie – any movie – and write how long it took them to make a decision on it. Simply put, how long did it take them to decide if it was a good or bad movie?

Although less people came to this meeting, the group was more enthusiastic. Each student had suggestions and ideas to be incorporated into future meetings. We spent more than an hour talking about the next meeting and what we might want to cover. Still, we had not done much writing or reading. Almost all the students were Hispanic and we talked mostly in Spanish. I knew that I needed to come up with strategies that would allow the students to practice English, while having fun in a low-pressure environment.

Almost all the students came to the next meeting with their assignments. I was happy to see that many of them had written more than a paragraph. Although their written English was not perfect, they were practicing and devoting time to writing outside of class.
At that meeting, I had planned to teach them how to write a movie review. I passed out some reviews from the Internet and The Washington Post. We read out loud and discussed the format. This provoked quality discussion as many of the students had seen the films that were being reviewed. Each student had his/her own opinion about the review and the movie. By discussing movies – a topic that interested the students – we were able to practice speaking and writing English. This also promoted discussion and sharing of ideas, activities that ESOL students are sometimes reluctant to perform in the mainstream classroom.

The assignment for the next meeting was for students to write their own review. The attitude was enthusiastic and provoked a lot of discussion about what movie to review, or whether that movie was good or bad. Although this was extra work, the students seemed willing and enthusiastic.

This also gave me material to use during regular class time. The movie review was an excellent way to teach how to write a multiple-paragraph essay. I devoted two classes to this and it worked well. For the first time, some students were separating their thoughts into paragraphs. Others were writing more than a page and, judging by their writing, seemed interested in the subject.

By the end of April, we finally were able to look at a real Hollywood script. I printed copies of *The Princess Bride* and distributed them to the four students at the meeting. They chose roles and read the parts out loud. This allowed students to practice both reading and writing. Everybody enjoyed the activity and there was no problem with motivation.

As we watched part of *The Princess Bride*, students followed the script. The words they had been reading were coming to life in film. Judging by their reactions, this was the best part of the film group. The entire group was reading along with the story, shifting their eyes from script to screen. This was an activity where students were reading, writing and speaking English. Most importantly, it was an activity that all the students enjoyed.

**Special Problems Related to ESOL Students**

With each successive meeting participation in the film group was declining. We talked in class about how important it was to participate. As they left that day, I asked students if they were interested in coming to the meetings. I targeted students who had not yet come to any of the after school sessions.

Almost everybody was interested in the group. Many, however, were unable to attend because of commitments at home or at work. These commitments were “real life” commitments such as babysitting, taking parents to the doctor, translating for parents, picking up family members from work, working a full shift after school, and paying bills. How could I suggest they come to an after school film group instead of minding their family responsibilities?

I wondered how these responsibilities affected their other classes. I could tell that they enjoyed ESOL class. Many had told me they felt more comfortable in ESOL than in classes with the general student population. Were their grades suffering in their other classes? How did they find the time to do their schoolwork and take care of their responsibilities? As much as I thought being a teacher was hard work, many of my students were taking on schedules far more demanding
than mine. This kept attendance for the film group relatively low and made it difficult to constantly suggest participation.

**Conclusion**

By the end of April, there were four students who regularly came to meetings. Two other students came to most meetings, and another showed up about once a month. The combination of family and professional responsibilities, along with the workload in other classes, made it difficult for some students to consistently participate in after school activities.

Although participation was low, the film group was a success. Those who participated practiced writing, reading and speaking. As a teacher, I discovered lesson plans that worked in the classroom. Participants also were able to see how a written script translates from paper to screen. While some of these skills may not be practical in the classroom, the meetings allowed the group to work on English skills in a fun, low-pressure environment. Toward the end of the school year, when all ESOL 3 students had the opportunity to evaluate the class and teacher, two students wrote that the film group was “cool” and “fun.”

As far as standardized tests, it is impossible to say if participation in the film group translated into high DRP scores. Some of the highest DRP scores came from students who never attended a group meeting. Each student who did participate, however, improved his/her DRP score. It is not my intent to suggest that coming to the film group was the reason these students improved, but it is worthy to point out that the students who did attend were also successful in the classroom.

**References**


