

'Reel Life:**Using Cinema To Engage Young People With Citizenship'****James Clarke**British Council: 13th December 2011**Report by Scott Sherriff**Introduction

James Clarke began working in community media filmmaking, predominantly with rural communities. He then moved into university lecturing relating to Film Studies, teaching script writing for the short film and also courses on Japanese Cinema, Film Genres and animation culture and history. Clarke recently returned to the world of life as a freelance and this precipitated his involvement with the British Council in 'Finding Home', a film collaboration with the Refugee Council that documents the experiences of those arriving in the UK. His most recent book has been *Movie Movements: Films That Changed The World of Cinema* and he is currently working on a new book project.

This journey has led Clarke to a greater understanding of the issues involved with ESOL and enabled him to identify the wider benefits of incorporating film into ESOL teaching and how the medium is well placed to address broader issues surrounding not only life in the UK but also global citizenship.

Clarke's seminar sought to demonstrate the most effective techniques to harness film viewing in the classroom to aid language learning and how students themselves might become filmmakers.

Toward 'Cine-Literacy'

Clarke began by investigating the essence of what it is to be 'cine-literate' and how tutors might equip their learners to 'read' films. There is no doubt that students are more media savvy than ever before. Clarke described how the proliferation of tech-devices over an array of platforms has impacted on the teaching agenda. The prevalence of such hardware in the typical ELT classroom compared with only a few years ago indicates how the sector has tried its best to keep up with the pace of change and ensure that a student's learning environment mirrors the world outside.

Our concept of literacy, Clarke averred, is shaped by cultural influences. Learners will bring different frames of cultural understanding to any given cinematic text. Similarly, responses to literacy are critical and students will be guided by their own taste in art.

Judgements will be shaped accordingly. However, the unifying element is that literacy is creative.

The Charter for Media Literacy, 2010, (<http://www.euromedialiteracy.eu/charter.php>) greatly informs discussions on using film in the classroom. The framework of this charter copies smaller UK structures such as 'First Light' and 'Film Literacy', which discuss what it might mean to bring a group of students together to create a film.

Influenced by the work of Andrew Burn in his book 'What Is Media Literacy?', Clarke outlined how teachers should best unpack and deliver class work relating to cine-literacy and film.

Pertinent Film Texts for the ELT classroom

Film, Clarke espoused, can become another vocabulary through which to explore the issue of citizenship and prompt students to articulate the emotional demands associated with arrival to the UK, their efforts to find work, integrate with the community and establish a whole new network.

Clarke listed a number of films that he thought effectively dealt with the notion of global citizenship - 'Bend It Like Beckham', 'Schindler's List', 'The Apple', 'Land and Freedom', 'Azur et Asmar', 'Persepolis', 'The King's Speech', 'When The Wind Blows', 'East Is East', 'Hoop Dreams', 'Powaqqatsi' and 'A Room For Romeo Brass'.

From this list, Clarke principally recommended Ken Loach's 'Carla's Song' as being a film that deals eloquently with human rights issues and 'Hoop Dreams' as being particularly relevant to the theme of education.

An enchanting sequence from the animated film 'Azur et Asmar' was presented to the audience and the film was identified as being suitable to frame discussions on faith and belief. Indeed, Clarke credited animated films with a distinctly effective quality to address such issues, given the subtlety inherent in the genre. Animation, Clarke attested, is able to abstract the real world and present it in ways that are more vivid, accessing the heart of the matter differently to a live action film.

Films as a Teaching Resource

Clarke described how films can be used in the classroom to generate exercises relating to speaking, listening and writing skills.

The discussions and debates that film viewing stimulate can, Clarke believes, be used to increase the levels of learners' language confidence. ELT classrooms routinely use written texts to act as catalysts for discussion. Films offer an equally effective, perhaps even more dynamic, springboard.

Clarke advised tutors to ensure they provide a clear structure for those discussions. They may, for instance, revolve around clarification and delineation of the message intended by the text and the message *actually* received by the viewer. Clarke described how students' responses will likely manifest themselves in either a top-down guise, in which learners approach the material through established ideals and received wisdom, or bottom-up, representing an engagement with the material that is more authentic, perhaps more personal. Whatever the nature of the emanating conversations, they will provide a valuable forum for students to develop skills of enquiry and communication.

Additionally, film extracts presented in class could be tailored to suit the current language focus of the session or module. Learning could be reinforced through seeing and hearing the language used in realistic scenarios.

Screenings could be associated with a range of written exercises, such as note taking and the writing of a synopsis or an essay review. A given extract could provide the basis for a set of related comprehension questions that might invite students to identify the locations and events portrayed.

Tutors who might want to focus on lexical segmentation may blank the screen and just listen to the dialogue.

Learners could look at the relationship between literature and cinema. A class might be given an extract of a novel and then presented with the screen adaptation of the work. Discussions might follow that analyse the way meaning is constructed in the written and visual medium.

The 'Grammar' of Film

Groups will be of mixed ability when it comes to 'reading' a film, just as they are when presented with a written text. To address this, Clarke highlights the value in teaching students the 'grammar' of film-making. The central tenets of this grammar are the wide-shot, used to establish time and place, to spark our curiosity and to reel the audience in; the mid-shot, used to clarify the details established in the wide-shot; and the close-

up, used to reveal moments of deep feeling and response. (On the subject of film grammar, James Monaco's book 'How To Read A Film' is recommended.)

Once equipped with this grammar, learners may be keen to storyboard their own film, replete with illustrations and accompanying dialogue. The natural next step from here would be to invite students to actually make a short film of their own.

Students as Filmmakers

Clarke strongly advocated student filmmaking as a way of empowering learners and generating multiple benefits for their language learning.

Tutors who initiate such a project with their group are advised by Clarke to encourage students to establish a theme, perhaps one which relates to the learner's own autobiography or is at least rooted in the experiences of the group as a whole.

The necessity for a script will generate a further writing activity in itself. Beyond this, students should also be invited to write a critical response to their film and the films of their classmates.

Whilst forays into filmmaking will present the learner with a product, it is the *process* of that journey that Clarke stressed as being the most crucial element of the learning, and it is that sense of participation in, and ownership of, the material that is most important.

Final Thoughts

ELT practitioners are engaged in a perpetual search for new ways to profoundly engage their students and enliven classroom learning. This seminar saw Clarke illustrate, with enthusiasm and passion, means by which this can be achieved through film. The leap from written text to film text in terms of their employment as a classroom resource is actually quite small; the underlying tenets are the same and it is more a transposition of methodology. Clarke had effectively outlined the capacity film has to allow students to project their own experience onto the material they view (or, indeed, make). The dialogue that emerges can lead to enhanced language skills and self-actualisation. I am sure many tutors left Spring Gardens either keen to add film to their teaching tool bag or harness the instrument more widely.