

## **TEACHING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: USING MOVIES IN EFL CLASSES**

**Laura Ioana Leon**

**Assoc. Prof., PhD, University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Grigore T. Popa", Iași**

*Abstract: Using movies or videos in EFL classes is not a new thing. Since the 1960s specialists in EFL methodology have emphasized the importance of such an activity during foreign language classes. Besides being an enjoyable activity, it also provides students with an effective way of learning about culture. Movies contain cultural elements and foreign language teachers have to make students aware of the presence of the element of culture in language. Therefore watching a movie in an EFL class may become an opportunity for students to experience both language and culture together. Our paper will focus on the American movie, *Wonder Boys* (2000), directed by Curtis Hanson and based on the novel with the same title written by the Pulitzer winning award writer, Michael Chabon. Film critics have depicted the movie as the most vivid and accurate description of the American campus life (the plot concentrating on the life of a college professor, an award winning novelist, and his troubled student, throughout a whole weekend during an annual literary festival at the University). Thus the students will be introduced to the atmosphere of an American college and they will be able to observe details concerning teacher-student relationship, atmosphere in classes, friendship and so on. But, besides all these elements, they will also learn about American symbols and American social life. However, in the end, students will realize that the purpose of such classes is not only to teach about culture, focusing on the idea of contrasting cultures, but rather to teach them that no culture is superior to the other.*

*Keywords: EFL, culture, cultural differences, movies, Wonder Boys.*

It is a surprising thing that not even today, almost 30 years after the moment when theories on teaching culture as part of foreign language training has become a problem of debate among methodologists, our students are rather unsure about all these things. They immediately understand the concept of culture as part of foreign language teaching, but it is harder for them to understand how this element can be taught in foreign language classes. Undoubtedly nowadays we speak about generations of students who began their studies of foreign languages learning from authentic materials (written and designed by native speakers). Thus, unconsciously or not, they have been exposed to cultural elements, though they may have not been explicitly made aware of this presence. They know we have to learn the four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) in order to be able to call ourselves good users of a foreign language. However they seem hesitant when it comes to giving the answer to the question of what would really make us proficient users of a specific foreign language. Gradually, though, by means of some carefully chosen examples that may prove that, no matter how fluent you may be in a foreign language, there may still be contexts in which you will find it difficult to understand some things or situations (buying a subway ticket, understanding a shop assistant in a specific context). In other words, coping with real life situations may prove to be harder than it seems and this would definitely require more than linguistic skills in a foreign language. Undoubtedly we speak here about the so-called "5<sup>th</sup> skill" in a foreign language. This cultural element could be definitely studied and discussed separately, but we do consider that a better approach is that in which it is not studied separately but, on the contrary, it is seen as an omnipresent element. Because we do

find it in almost every word we say, in every gesture we make. All aspects of our communication will reveal, sooner or later, our cultural background. Verbal communication (the actual exchange of words between people) will reveal us as non-native speakers. Likewise nonverbal communication, in its whole complexity, will send enough clues to our interlocutors about our cultural background. Language cannot be separated from culture. Any use of language, any gesture will convey a message that will finally lead to a cultural element or perspective. When discussing about foreign language teaching we can see how the cultural element (or cultural awareness) becomes an important aspect. Students will immediately be able to make the difference between the so-called “Big C Culture” (things that are important in a culture, important names, personalities etc.) and “little c culture” (everyday life things that definitely become very important when it comes to finding your way or surviving in a different cultural background. Culture has thus become an important element in the process of learning a foreign language. Students will become proficient users of a language only when they master both linguistic and cultural norms. Because understanding a foreign language means understanding the cultural norms (habits, perspective upon things, beliefs) that sometimes may hide behind the actual use of words. One cannot understand the real message delivered by a native speaker unless he / she can have a representation of the native speaker’s culture and what lies behind the actual meaning of a word.

Many foreign language teachers find it hard to teach about culture in their classes. They all understand the necessity and importance, but somehow there is not an agreed way upon the way this should be done in EFL classes. Specialists have emphasized some techniques, but it is hard to say which one offers the best solutions. Luckily enough, today, with all the technology and our almost permanent online presence, we are, voluntarily or not, under a big assault of cultural elements coming from all sorts of sources, but mainly from the internet. All the internet resources we use, starting with the online magazines or journals (sites from where we take our news, for example) and going on to the social networks that we constantly use provide us with authentic and updated information that can help us to understand other cultures. However this is not a controlled or target way to learn about a foreign culture. If teachers use the internet in their classes, but when they do, they have a purpose in their mind. Whether they teach about writing emails, or about writing for the internet by and large, they have a target and things may thus be directed towards a very precise scope. Otherwise, if we concentrate only on linguistic facts, without taking into account the element of culture, communication will be misleading and miscommunication will occur. Ultimately, of course, it all comes down to the purpose for which our students learn a foreign language. Will they ever find themselves in that particular cultural context? With the ever growing movement of people, it is expected that our students will travel and even decide to settle in a different cultural context at a certain point. Then it will be important for them to know the social aspects of the community if they want to be able to survive and last, but not least, accepted by the new community.

Though there are several techniques by means of which teachers may introduce the cultural element in their foreign language classes (reading, having a foreign guest, listening to music, presentations of culture capsules), films or watching films during classes will probably always remain at the top of the activities. Films offer a glimpse of the reality and they present language as it is used in contexts: Learning from movies is motivating and enjoyable, provides authentic and varied language, gives a visual context and exposes students to *spoken language*. Films are also useful in teaching vocabulary as they contextualize language through the flow of images, making it more accessible. Ultimately, films offer an enlargement of our knowledge of

the world and the culture that it contains (<https://www.scribd.com/doc/296241864/Working-with-Movies-in-EFL-Classes>). An interesting description of how movies came to be used in EFL classes is given in Kusumarasdyaty's study entitled *Listening, Viewing and Imagination: Movies in EFL Classes*: "Interest in oral and aural language skills has gathered momentum in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) since audio lingual method which highlighted such linguistic production and perception, reached the peak of popularity in the 1960s. In the subsequent years, language educators have continuously dedicated increasing amount of time spent on listening and speaking. It is important that learners listen to the foreign language they are studying approximately twice as much as they speak it (van Duzer 199, Nunan 1998); consequently, the role of listening in EFL learning can hardly be downplayed because the acquisition of this receptive skill becomes a vital prerequisite of good speaking ability. To promote the learner's mastery of listening skills, teachers need to carefully select and prepare a variety of quality teaching materials and aids to be used in a language laboratory, ensuring that the learners will gain optimum results from listening lessons" (Kusumarasdyaty 2004). Having said all these, it obvious that watching a movie in a foreign class will always be a good choice. Besides developing students' listening and speaking skills (based on authentic materials), films can also teach about culture: "Films in video format should not be regarded as merely a peripheral <<extra>> in a listening class; on the contrary, they can function as the core content and become an integral part of the curriculum (Sommer 2001). Appropriate, creative exploration of the movie videos can reveal the potentials in fostering the acquisition of listening skills (Eken 2003), therefore their use as instructional media in listening lessons should be encouraged due to at least four exposures to the real language uttered in authentic settings and the culture in which the foreign language is spoken (Stempleski 1992, Telatnik and Krese 1982). In addition, they assist the learner's comprehension by enabling the learner to listen to exchanges and see such visual supports as facial expressions and gestures simultaneously (Allan 1985, Sheerin 1982) which may boost their insights into the topic of conversations. Another benefit relates to motivation: films about issues that draw the learner's interest can possibly affect their motivation to learn (Stempleski 1992, Allan 1985, Lonergan 1984)" (Kusumarasdyaty 2004).

**Wonder Boys** (2000), a movie directed by Curtis Hanson and based on the novel written by Michael Chabon is that kind of movie that will always be a good choice for the EFL class. Besides all the above-mentioned advantages (of developing students' speaking and listening skills based on authentic materials), the movie presents the American campus life and critics have always referred to it as the "most accurate movie about campus life /.../ becoming a touching story that contain dead dogs, Monroe memorabilia, a stolen car, sex, adultery, pregnancy, guns, dope and cops, but it's not about any of these things. It is about people and especially about trying to be a good teacher. Could one weekend and a real campus possibly contain all of the events? Easily, given the tendency of writers to make themselves deliberately colorful" (<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/wonder-boys-2000>). Obviously the movie is about a lot more other things than teaching about culture, but it manages in doing the latter as it captures so neatly important aspects of American social life by and large. Working with my 1<sup>st</sup> year students in Pharmacy or Dental Medicine, at the "Grigore T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi, I have come to realize students enjoy this activity, but also the movie. My technique is to start playing the movie, warning the students that I will stop it after 20 minutes or so, knowing that there will be enough American cultural elements that will be introduces. As they watch the first 20 minutes of the movie, students are supposed to put down all the elements they perceive as being unfamiliar, things they are not used to. The first 20 minutes of Wonder

Boys introduce us to this eventful weekend in the life of Professor Grady Tripp, a creative writing teacher at the University of Pittsburgh. He is having a bit of a bad day – we learn that his wife has left him that morning, something that she has done before; nonetheless this time it seems to be more serious. He is having his workshop on creative writing with his 2<sup>nd</sup> year students in English Literature. Students are not afraid to talk, they speak up their opinions when it comes to their colleague's piece of writing, James Leer. We also learn about the University's annual literary festival where students are invited to participate along with some important personalities in the field. Professor Tripp's short remark to the fact that some students will be driving VIPs from the airport shows us the fact that students are going to interact with the University guests. Professor Tripp himself has to go to the airport to wait for his editor who is also going to be in town for this event, though, we learn soon enough, he is also eager to get hold of the long overdue novel that Professor Tripp is expected to write after 7 years from the coming out of his successful novel, *Arsonist Daughter*. On his way to the airport we can see Professor Tripp getting high in his car, an old car that looks unfit for the winning awards writer, Grady Tripp. At the airport he meets his editor, Terry Crabree, who is accompanied by the transvestite Antonia Sloviak. They all go together to the party hosted by Professor's Tripp head of the English Department, Dr. Gaskell who is married to – we learn soon enough – Sara, the University Chancellor, and also Grady's lover. Nonetheless, Dr. Gaskell doesn't have a clue about that. During the party, Sara manages to tell Grady that she is pregnant with his child. Going outside for a smoke at the party, Grady discovers in Dr. Gaskell's yard his unusual but very talented student, James Leer, holding a gun in his hands. James tells Professor Tripp that it is a cap gun. This is an important moment in the movie as it marks the beginning of the relationship between Professor Tripp and his student James Leer. The Professor wants to show him the most prized pieces of memorabilia that Dr. Gaskell keeps in his bedroom. As they are in Dr. Gaskell's bedroom, with Professor Tripp showing to James Marilyn Monroe's jacket (the one she wore on her wedding day), things get more complicated with the appearance of Dr. Gaskell's dog, Poe, which, although blind, manages to attack Professor Tripp. Panicking, James shoots the dog. At this point, I stop the movie and ask students to share their views on what could be interpreted as cultural elements, i.e. things belonging to the American culture. Students prove themselves to be good observers as they manage to detect most of the elements, though they seem to overlook the most striking ones, such as the fact that James has a real gun upon him, a situation that is uncommon in our country. Living in an environment where you may be unsure of how many of the people next to you can actually carry fire arms could be a problem, especially if you are not prepared to deal with that. Another important moment is the appearance of the transvestite, Antonia Sloviak, who seems to be easily accepted by all the people around her. People easily use the feminine pronoun to address her, something that would not be that easy in our background. Not being exposed to such things on a daily basis, people in our country may have more difficulties in coping with such situations, and there may still be unexpected reactions. Students have access to the Chancellor's house – where the party is thrown – and Hannah, one of James's colleagues, rents a room in Professor Tripp's house, another situation that would be unlikely to happen in our system. Along with all these details we have content references to American symbols in various forms: old movies, names of actors or personalities that are regarded as American symbols (Marilyn Monroe is a content presence in the movie, with her jacket which is stolen by James, Erol Flynn and many others who may be even unknown to us, though they are representative American figures – sometimes it is even hard to grasp the meaning of a joke or to decipher the whole message behind a certain statement that contains such

hints to some elements of culture; for students it will be thus obvious the need to get familiarized with such things if they ever think of visiting the US for a while). After the first observations regarding the way in which they should watch the movie in order to get the most of it from the perspective of the cultural analysis, the movie is resumed without any other stop till the end. Because of the length of the movie, discussions and analyses usually take place a week later but this is a good thing as students find the time to think and sit on their ideas.

There are several levels of the movie that can be discussed. Probably the most important is the one related to the teacher-student relationship as it develops from the beginning to the end of the movie. The two definitely admire each other. Later in the movie James says that Professor Tripp was the reason why he came to study at that University - another cultural difference for the Romanian student who might find James's reason more than surprising. You will very rarely find in our system prospective students who will choose their universities based on such facts as being taught by a certain professor. Most of the times Romanian students are not aware of the teaching staff universities have and, moreover, they choose their universities mainly based on the proximity to their hometown. Our entrance examination at the universities does not require candidates to write personal statement that would have to contain the explanation or the reason why you chose to study at that particular university. James tells Professor Tripp that he wanted to come to the University of Pittsburgh after he had read *The Arsonist Daughter* that really meant something to him. That would be a good opportunity for the EFL teacher to tell his / her students something about the personal statement, the application form that weighs a lot in the whole process of being admitted in a university in the Western system. By and large students are relaxed when they talk to their professors, and the same thing can be said about the atmosphere in the courses. When needed, professors say sorry to their students (Professor Tripp says he is sorry, right in the beginning of the movie, when he says to James, in Dr. Gaskell's yard, that he let things out of control during the workshop when James's colleagues criticized his short story just "because James is ten times more talented than anyone in his class". Another thing that we can notice and this could seem quite surprising when looked at from the Romanian perspective. When one of their students is in danger, the American system seems to offer some protection to the student in need. This thing can be seen as soon as James shoots Dr. Gaskell's dog as Professor Tripp prefers to take the action upon him, saying he has got *tenure* (another cultural element that is worth being explained to Romanian students – this could also help them in better understanding Professor Tripp's actions, as he is no longer challenged, he no longer needs to prove anything – *tenure* is that permanent contract you can get from a university once you have reached an important level in your career, especially academic careers). But this can also be seen towards the end of the movie, when the whole faculty fights to get James out of trouble (of course, the solution is given by Crabtree who chooses to publish Dr. Gaskell's book, *The Last American Marriage*, on condition he no longer presses charges. In one of the final scenes we can see even Sara, The University Chancellor, coming to try to rescue James. The problem lies at a different level, though. Getting into such a scandal won't do any good to the University, so, by protecting James, they actually protect the University. Americans do care about such things, as Sara is honest with Grady when she says "*I wonder if this is what the university has in mind when it promises a liberal education*" (1' 28"). Nobody would see things the same way in our system as the student's image does not overlap with that of the university. Even when Professor Tripp tries to call James's parents, to take him home for the weekend, his gesture can also be interpreted as an act of care for James. Likewise things are relaxed on campus. Professor Tripp has no problem to ask Traxler (the janitor) to give him a ride home (when he is left without a car,

by Crabtree and Q), Traxler is comfortable to ask about some weird sexual habits that Erol Flynn might have had (he assumes Professor Tripp is reading Erol Flynn's biography, a book that is in James's backpack. Towards the end of the movie, Professor Tripp gives his entire weed to Traxler (some stuff that is not for amateurs). Hannah Green, the student renting a room in Professor Tripp's house does not hesitate to give an honest opinion on the novel that the professor has been writing for a while.

Details on American life are omnipresent in the movie. The constant reference to American symbols such as *Coca-Cola*, *Holiday Inn*, *Howards Johnson*, *Bell Atlantic* etc. are also useful for the EFL student who wants to learn more about the American way of life. The characters' behavior or reactions under some circumstances are also worth being mentioned. As far as Professor Tripp's relationship with Sara is concerned, we can learn a lot of interesting details. Sara's unexpected pregnancy does not lead to break up (as one might expect to happen especially because of the characters' ages). On the contrary, they divorce their spouses and have the kid, Sara being quite a mature mom. It is true we do not learn anything about her age from the movie, we just assume she is in her 40s (in the novel we do know that Sara is 42 – an age that, in our system, might be regarded as rather old to become a mom). Americans do not worry that much as Europeans, maybe this is another important detail we learn from the movie. With all his burdens (experiencing the writer's block and having his editor in town, being constantly high, feeling responsible for his troubled student, James, having a wife who has left him, and equally a relationship outside the marriage), Professor Tripp chooses to handle all these without worrying excessively. When James is taken out by the police, he says he is not worried and he even adds "*Professor Tripp, even if I go to jail, you are the best teacher I've ever had*" (1'26"). Cheating on his wife, Professor Tripp can still face his wife Emily's parents who are nice to him, though they know he is not the best husband for their daughters. This attitude can hardly be understood in different cultures. In the same manner we should see Professor's Tripp gesture to call Dr. Gaskell, in the middle of the night, to admit his relationship with his wife. One may say that he has smoked pot before, but the next day, when he comes to his senses, Professor Tripp knows exactly what he did. From the point of view of cultural differences, even the relationship between an author and his / her editor should be explained because things do not work the same in the Romanian system. In the American system a good author will have his / her editor, and most of the times it is the editors who discover a good book or a promising talented author, betting on him / her. Eventually, James' decision to quit school would be hard to digest for a Romanian student. James is a talented student who manages to find an editor to publish his first novel, and we learn, in the end of the movie, that he quit school to go to New York to rework his novel for publication. Such a gesture would be difficult to be swallowed by family and friends in our system. But it's all about following your dream in the American system, the American dream.

These are only some hints on how this activity should be approached in an EFL class. Of course *Wonder Boys* is such a complex movie that can be interpreted on so many levels, but we have stopped here only on the analysis of cultural differences. The purpose of such an activity with medical students is to show them a glimpse of the American culture by and large, with the scope of becoming familiarized with some of the aspects of the American life. With all the people movement around the world, we can travel much more easily and chances are high, even for Eastern Europeans to get to the United States. Once there, people may find their ways more easily if they are more aware of the things they should expect from and encounter in a different cultural context. Most of the students understand the concept of cultural differences and they can

easily detect cultural elements in any didactic material we use in our classes. Movies probably have the advantage of presenting all these in a very enjoyable way. Nonetheless, “it is strongly recommended that this activity of contrasting be followed by an assertion from the teacher that cultures simply differ and none is superior to the others. This is especially vital as some learners may tend to hold an inaccurate opinion that their culture is ‘right’ and ‘full of politeness’, whereas the others are wrong and full of unacceptable values” (Kusumarasyaty 2004). Students should learn how to value these things, while learning that language cannot be separated from culture.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/wonder-boys-2000>  
<https://www.scribd.com/doc/296241864/Working-with-Movies-in-EFL-Classes>  
Allan, M. (1985). **Teaching English with Video**. Essex: Longman.  
Eken, A. N. (2003). “**You’ve Got Mail**”: A Film Workshop. *ELT Journal* 57 (1), pp. 51-59.  
Kusumarasyaty (2004). **Listening, Viewing and Imagination: Movies in EFL Classes**, 2<sup>nd</sup> *International Conference on Imagination and Education*, Vancouver, Canada, July 14-17, 2004.  
Lonergan, J. (1984). **Video on Language Teaching**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
Nunan, D. (1998). **Approaches to Teaching Listening in the Language Classroom**. Paper presented at KOREA TESOL Conference, Seoul.  
Stempleski, S. (1992). **Teaching Communication Skills with Authentic Video** in S. Stempleski & P. Arcario (eds). *Video in Second Language Teaching: Using, Selecting and Producing Video for the Classroom*, pp 7-24J.  
Telantik, M. A., Kruse, W.D. (1998). **Cultural Videotapes for the ESL Classroom** in M. Geddes & G. Sturtridge (eds), *Video in the Language Classroom* (pp 171-181). London: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc.  
Van Duzer, C. (1997). **Improving ESL Learners’ Listening Skills: At the Workplace and Beyond**. Washington DC: National Claringhouse for ESL Literary Education.