

Raynotes Home Page

My name is Raymond Weschler, creator of **Raynotes: The English Learner Movie Guides**, tools which I believe can be a significant educational breakthrough in the learning of English as a Second Language. I think you'll find that they are a truly user-friendly, enjoyable and innovative method of quickly acquiring real-world vocabulary while exploring American culture.

In brief, each individual guide is a detailed synopsis of a popular movie, which consists of the following:

- a summary of the plot
- a list of the major characters
- an extensive glossary of vocabulary and various references that even advanced ESL learners would often not understand

In addition, many of the guides include relevant notes on useful cultural information, as well as questions that test general understanding of the movie and encourage discussion of film-related topics. Finally, all of the synopses also have links to other sites on the web, where the movie or entire screenplay can be purchased, or where more information about the movie topic can be acquired. On average, the guides print out at about 18-22 pages.

An Introduction for ESL Learners

I remember a few years ago when I was teaching English in France, slowly but surely working my way toward competence in French. About nine months after I arrived in Paris I decided I was "fluent." I could pretty much say anything I wanted to (with a ridiculously charming American accent), and I was getting close to understanding most of what people said to me. As far as I was concerned, I had almost accomplished my goal of true bilingualism. How wrong I was!

The Movie As Teacher

The fact is, I didn't recognize just how little I understood until I began going to French movies. I felt lost and humbled. And what I quickly realized is that while you may fully comprehend what your native friends and acquaintances are saying to you, it's quite possible that these same people are often dramatically more difficult to follow when they are speaking to each other, especially outside of your presence.

People will often modify their communicative styles when speaking with foreigners, both by talking slower, and much more importantly, by reducing the range of colloquial vocabulary they use. As an ESL student, you've probably noticed this phenomenon. And as your English has improved, many of your friends and acquaintances may have sub-consciously responded by conversing more quickly and increasing their level of vocabulary.

All of this may be helpful, but in the real world, not everyone is so accommodating. To put it bluntly, actors and screenwriters couldn't care less that you're a foreigner! Nor should they. Indeed, movies are difficult to understand precisely because they are so "real world," at least from a linguistic perspective. This may make watching them incredibly frustrating, especially if you're at that level where you feel fluent, but still can't follow a lot of the dialog. And yet, the fact remains that there is probably no better source of linguistic input than a good film, if, paradoxically, you could just understand what is being said! It is for this reason that I created The English Learner Movie Guides.

A Tool For Fluent Students

Before continuing, I should clarify that these guides, or synopses, were ideally written for those English language learners who fall into the linguistic zone of "frustrated fluency" discussed earlier. In other words, they are designed for upper level ESL learners, for the simple reason that they'll be most effective as learning tools if you already understand English well enough to generally hear where one word ends and another begins.

Of course, the more vocabulary you study and the more English you listen to, the faster you'll reach a point where individual words become discreet sounds and meanings in your head. It is at that point on the learning continuum where viewers can most effectively exploit the information in this website. In doing so, movie watching can become a much richer experience, where native levels of comprehension gradually fall within reach.

The Best Strategy for Understanding Movies

I remember back in the 1970s when my mom once asked what kind of car she should buy, and I told her to get a Honda Civic. She said that she had never heard of it, and so she was skeptical. I told her that they were good cars and even showed her what one looked like. The next day, she said, "You know, it's weird, but ever since you recommended them, I've been seeing Honda Civics everywhere."

Words and expressions are like Honda Civics. They often fly through the air with such overwhelming speed and variety that when you aren't sure what a particular expression means, it's possible that you may not have even noticed that the words have entered your ears. But, if you actively go out and memorize a word, you may suddenly realize that such vocabulary pops up all the time. It then becomes internalized, hopefully stored in your long-term memory.

The point of all this is to emphasize the most efficient way to use these synopses: Print them out and study them well, before you see the movie. At a minimum, the guides will give you a good feel for the major characters and plot development. Of course the words and definitions are the key. They are the "Honda Civics," some of which you may encounter

here for the first time in writing, before you actually recognize them in context. Actively review them. Take notes in the margins. Watch the movie. Listen for them carefully.

Most of these guides can probably be reviewed in about an hour. In order to maximize the ease with which you'll watch the movie, you should try to know every word you read, including those in the plot summaries as well as the definitions themselves. The most efficient way to review would be with a good bilingual dictionary. While I've tried to explain the vocabulary with clearly written definitions, it's OK to rely on an occasional bilingual translation.

Ultimately, you will be able to fill in the linguistic puzzle of each film with one of the most effective tools in learning: familiarity. Indeed, by viewing the accompanying movies shortly after studying the guides, you will be reinforcing your learning with rapid-fire efficiency. And if you're especially motivated, you can go back over the new vocabulary you've learned after watching the film. After that, just keep your ears open.

The Goal of the Guides

The movie synopses on this website are not entire screenplays. They're simply language guides, and as such, the words that are included are merely my best estimate of the vocabulary and cultural references that many advanced ESL learners would not fully understand. Obviously, every learner will have a different set of words that he or she already knows. And given this, I fully expect that many of the more advanced learners will already know a great deal of the vocabulary discussed.

If this describes you, that's fine. But you may want to read the entire synopsis, anyway. In fact, I chose much of the vocabulary not so much because it is difficult, but rather because it is often said so fast during the film that it will still be hard to catch. By reading the guide completely, it will serve as a mental guidepost, allowing you to follow the film with a greater sense of context.

You should also be aware that these synopses are indeed selective, and thus I haven't attempted to list every possible expression that may cause problems. I chose to ignore some unimportant words, simply because they are so rarely used that they aren't worth your time to memorize. In any

case, studying the synopsis should make the entire film more comprehensible, which in the end, is as important a goal as the internalization of any particular word or expression.

Obscenities, Idioms and Hollywood

That being said, I should make a few more comments on the contents of these reviews. You may have already noticed that some of the vocabulary is considered crude, or even obscene. Certain people may not wish to study such language, and may even take offense at the idea. That's your choice, but the material here is based on dialogue which reflects the way people speak in the real world.

While you may feel more comfortable in a typically sanitized ESL class, you should realize that overly sensitive ears impede real-world comprehension. No one is suggesting that you actually say things like "You're such a son of a bitch!" However, if your American girlfriend does tell you this, it's at least better to understand what she's saying rather than just smile blankly, and then wonder why she's implying that your mother is some sort of dog.

In any case, much of the vocabulary that you'll learn is extremely useful, and indeed, I've specifically highlighted the words and expressions that I feel you might try to actively adopt in order to give your speech a more "native-like" feel. You'll notice that a large percentage of these expressions are the phrasal verbs that foreigners often avoid because of their incredible complexity and subtlety.

Understandably, you may find it easier to say "He charged me a lot more than the fair price" instead of "He ripped me off," but guess which one the native speaker will use! Personally, I think that these idiomatic verb+preposition combinations are your greatest barrier to native level speech and comprehension. By emphasizing them here, it's my hope that these films will help you rapidly internalize as many of them as possible.

Of course the synopses review more than just phrasal verbs. They reflect the entire range of everyday conversational English. And thus, by mastering their contents, you will hopefully make the movies upon which they're based as comprehensible as if you had spent several additional months "acquiring English naturally." So study well, enjoy the films, and of course, don't forget the popcorn!

Some Thoughts for ESL Instructors

Before offering some general guidelines on how to maximize the educational value of these materials, I would suggest you read the Introduction for ESL Learners. There is no need to repeat everything said there, but I would like to restate that as an instructive unit, the synopses and movies would probably be too advanced for lower level ESL students. You should also be aware of the "indecent" issue before working with them. Although I am personally an avid believer in the imparting of real world language, I recognize that both teachers and students have their reasons for avoiding certain types of speech.

Before the Movie is Shown

Once you've decided that you have students for whom these guides and the corresponding films are appropriate learning tools, I would strongly encourage you to not let the movies stand on their own, but to embed them into an instructional unit. Obviously, the guides themselves can and should serve as a foundation for pre-film discussion, and there are, in fact, various ways that you can do this.

At a minimum, your students should study the relevant synopsis in the days before seeing the movie. You can then review them in class before the actual screening. One possibility is to engage in a general conversation concerning any of the themes that the film will be exploring. As you'll notice, there is a list of possible subjects for background readings and class exploration that follows the discussion questions at the end of each guide. Thus, for example, you may want to pass out an article on the religious beliefs of the Amish, in the days before viewing **Witness**. Unlike discussion issues that would come after the film, the pre-screening topics should simply introduce the most general themes of that particular movie. This should be easy to do, even if there are no pretenses about the film exploring profound or troubling questions.

For example, **My Cousin Vinny** is a comedy that deals with the travails of two college students from New York who are wrongfully accused of murder while driving through Alabama. Before showing it, a general topic of conversation could be whether anyone in the class has been falsely accused of any crimes, or if they know such a person. Depending on how much interest that generates, you can discuss the criminal justice system in

the United States as compared to that of your students' own countries. Any topic can be useful, so long as it serves as a natural lead-in to the movie.

After an introductory discussion, you may want to quiz your students on the more important colloquialisms listed in the synopsis. Depending on how seriously they want to internalize new words and expressions, and depending on how much time you have, you could in fact use the entire glossary as a springboard for discussing whatever relevant vocabulary is triggered in your head.

For example, in the synopsis for **Forrest Gump**, the students learn that "I have to pee" is "to urinate," which is certainly worth knowing. But you may want to add that "to take a leak" is the most common colloquial alternative to the above mentioned phrase (at least for American males!), and as long as you're on a roll, you could move beyond bathroom terminology and throw in that "leaks" are both literally "drips," and a colloquial term for the information often released to the press by an anonymous person in a government organization! I can't cite studies which show the efficacy of this type of "stream-of-consciousness-word-spewing," but my own experience is that those students with true motivation to improve their colloquial English will devour whatever you have to tell them.

After the Movie is Shown

After viewing the movie, it would probably be best to initially create a situation where students can express their personal reactions without feeling that "they have to say something intelligent." In his book, **Seeing With Feeling: Films in the Classroom**, Richard Lacey suggests using "image-sound-skims" in which students initially are asked to mention visual or sound images that first come to mind. You might also suggest that students write down some immediate personal reactions after the movie ends, such as whether they were surprised, pleased, or upset. If nothing else, they could note whether or not they liked it, and for what reasons.

Another possibility would be to review some of the more difficult vocabulary that popped up in the movie, giving the students yet one more opportunity to internalize the synopses. This would also be a time in which you could review alternative ways of saying certain things. In other words, post-film discussion is an excellent opportunity to go over both the movie itself as well as the language that is used within it.

Finally, you can move on to more specific issues concerning the topic of the film. As you'll notice, every synopsis has a list of suggested questions, some of which may be directed at measuring whether specific points in the movie were understood (you'll also note that most of these lists have general questions that could serve as pre-film discussion topics).

Of course there are very generic questions that could probably be asked of just about any movie, including some of the following:

- 1) Is ____ an admirable character? Why, or why not?
- 2) What would you have done if you were in ____'s situation?
- 3) What was ____ really thinking when he said ____?
- 4) What would people in your country think of ____?
- 5) What does this movie tell us about Americans?

Any motion picture, even just an "action thriller" like **The Fugitive**, can instigate stimulating conversations that focus on a variety of interesting topics. Although the synopses emphasize colloquial acquisition, the viewing experience in class would probably be a richer one if there were an attempt to put the movie into some kind of cultural context.

Language, Film and the American Experience

Depending on the film being discussed, you may wish to become more of a facilitator than an ESL instructor. If the movie deals with sensitive topics such as social issues like AIDS, as in **Philadelphia**, it's probably best to adopt an attitude in which you are no longer the language expert, but just another person struggling with the issues presented. As always, an important goal should be to strike a balance between setting a specific agenda and allowing the conversation to become a free-for-all.

Beyond the structuring of any particular type of class conversation, many of these films may yield other types of projects that can be incorporated into the classroom setting. For example, journal writing allows students the time to reflect on what they've seen before actually having to express

themselves. Particular essays can also be assigned, with selected passages reviewed for further class discussion.

Do not hesitate to give assignments that deal with relevant topics, as a way of exploring the issues raised from a variety of perspectives. For example, before the viewing of **Lost in America**, you may want to find an essay or two on yuppies and their angst. Be creative. Role-playing by volunteers could serve as a basis for further conversation, and even post-viewing field work in which students do outside research and interview relevant people could later serve as a basis for presentations on the major topics in question.

Ultimately, these synopses are designed to assist your students in improving their English skills. To that extent, they focus primarily on the difficult colloquial vocabulary within the accompanying films. If the students study them well, they should experience dramatic progress in overall comprehension. But as an ESL instructor and facilitator, you should strive to use the movies as more than just a tool through which to generate language acquisition. Indeed, it is my hope that because of their growing linguistic abilities, your students will converse with ever greater fluency on all aspects of the films they watch, and thus understand with ever greater insight the culture in which they're produced.

Why These Movies?

If you've already browsed the list of films that are treated on this web site, the first question you may ask is "Why these movies?" Indeed, many of my friends have also asked this as well, and then, before allowing me to answer, proceed to give me their own list of the definitive, absolutely necessary movies that must immediately be included on this site. I've therefore decided that I should explain my logic. In brief, all of the synopsized films on this site will generally meet the following criteria:

- 1) The dialog contains a lot of useful, colloquial English.
- 2) The movie itself reflects various aspects of modern American life.
- 3) It was popular enough to be widely available on video.
- 4) I personally think it's a good or even great movie.
- 5) Most of my ESL students would agree with me on all of the above.

Of course, there may be several hundred films that could meet these standards, but that's OK, since I hope to keep synopsizing more and more films. For now, it's fair to ask whether there is anything in particular that the movies have in common? More specifically, is there a theme here?

I would say that these motion pictures offer advanced ESL learners, and particularly those foreigners who are living in the United States, a pretty decent look into the lives, culture and language of the American people (Of course, because we are talking about movies, it's fair to say that few real people experience as much excitement as many of the protagonists do in these films). As a group, they often explore the consistent themes that form the foundation of the so-called American dream, as well as the dilemmas that people face when that dream turns sour.

Thus, many of the movies take serious and not-so-serious looks at our endless pursuit of material wealth, as well as the various social issues of our day, from crime and punishment to the break-up of the family to the fight against AIDS. In so doing, they explore Americans from all walks of life in their constant struggle to better their situations. Within these films we see characters who "seize the day" with their enthusiasm and spirit, and underdogs who can only serve to inspire us with their courage and decency. Of course there are those who disgust us, some who simply amuse, and some whose very lives point out the absurdity of the human condition.

Taken together, these films hint at the enormous diversity of background and life experience that form the American people, and to that extent, they are windows into a multidimensional society that you may want to know more about. Indeed, if you eventually get to see a lot of them (after studying your synopses!), you should end up with a much greater familiarity with the English language, as well as with the American culture in which it is spoken.

How to Read These Guides

The synopses are fairly self-explanatory, but you should note the following:

- 1) Underlined words are those referred to in the definitions. If no word is underlined, the definition refers to the entry as a whole.
- 2) Bold faced words are excellent colloquial vocabulary that you are encouraged to adopt as part of your active speech, in order to help you sound more like a native English speaker.
- 3) The symbol :: in an entry is used to divide the words of two different speakers.
- 4) Obviously, all words and expressions are listed in the order that they occur in the movie. The vocabulary section of each film has plot references to let the reader know approximately where they are, but since the synopses are meant to be read before seeing the film, defined vocabulary is not noted with either the precise time it occurs in the movie nor the particular character who says the words.
- 5) Please be aware that the explanations in these synopses focus on how words are used in the context of the film. While there is frequent mention of the varied ways in which a word or expression may be more generally used, there has not been a systematic attempt to give complete dictionary definitions of the words that are defined. For clarification and further discussion of any given word, you are encouraged to consult a good English dictionary.