

# Using Closed Captioned Videos in the ESL Reading Class, Anne R. Friedman, Borough of Manhattan Community College

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**Abstract** Closed captioned videos can be motivating and powerful tools for improving the vocabulary and reading comprehension skills of English as a Second Language (ESL) students. This article provides a brief review of research to support using closed captioned videos in the ESL reading classroom and offers examples of specific reading/writing activities which the author has used successfully with her students.

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In closed captioned video the captions for English-language films appear like subtitles in a foreign film but the text appears verbatim on the screen. A device called a captioning decoder is required to make the captions visible. Although "captioning" was originally created for the deaf and hearing impaired, preliminary research indicates that it is a valuable tool for improving reading skills (Bean & Wilson, 1989; Koskinen, Wilson, Gambrell, & Neuman, 1993) and can be particularly effective with second language learners (Markam, 1989; National Captioning Institute, NCI, 1990a, 1990b).

There are a number of advantages to using videos in the classroom. They are a familiar and nonthreatening medium for students and are therefore easy to introduce. The motivating power of film to stimulate discussion and debate and to generate topics for writing has long been recognized by educators. Videos can provide background knowledge and can be used as springboards to reading literature and non-fiction related to topics and themes that are studied in a particular course.

Adding printed captions provides a third dimension to the visual and auditory cues provided by the video and further encourages students to think in English. Research has shown that ESL students can and do read the captions (NCI, 1990a) and that the use of captions can improve reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Bean & Wilson, 1989; Koskinen et al., 1993). Students

can also use closed captioned video outside of class to improve their command of written English because every television set over 13 inches manufactured after July 1993 is required by law to have a built-in decoder.

As with all reading material, the instructor should choose videos that are accessible and intellectually challenging to students. Selections should relate to themes that would normally be examined in the course. It is particularly useful to show videos that are based on published texts. For example, in an ESL reading class that I taught, the broad theme for one semester was "Changes." Within this theme we studied the issues of social and family relationships, gender roles, and ethnicity. Students viewed the video *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1987) and then subsequently read the original play version by Neil Simon (1968). They saw *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) and *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1992) and read selected chapters of the novels on which the films were based. For instructors who wish to base an entire course on the use of film and who would like to avoid compiling reading material from varied sources, the student text *American Picture Show: A Cultural Reader* (Mejia, Xiao, & Pasternak, 1992) will be of particular interest. This book is divided into seven chapters, each with a particular theme based on a popular American film. For example, Chapter 6 is entitled "So, What About the Children?" and the movie that students view is *Kramer vs. Kramer*. Reading and writing exercises are based on the films as well as on text material related to the theme of the chapter.

In addition to using printed texts, teachers can develop their own reading comprehension and vocabulary activities based on the videos. These may be generic or content specific. For example, a colleague of mine developed a worksheet which could be used after viewing any film. It asks students to list what they remember from the movie including (a) scenes, (b) characters, (c) lines spoken by the characters, and (d) any questions they have about the film. They are also asked to put an asterisk next to the character and scene that interested them the most and to explain why they chose each one. I have developed a specific worksheet for responding to the first part of *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1987) and Act One of the Simon (1968) play. It asks students to note as many differences as they can find in the film and the play, of which there are many. They are asked to predict what they think will happen in the second part of the film/play. In preparation for an oral reading activity, students are asked to choose one or two scenes that they would like to act out in class and to choose the character they would like to be. Students are then divided into small groups in which they agree on a few scenes to read aloud, with each member taking the role of a different character. Groups that wish to read for the entire class are invited to do so. Another interesting activity for instructors to try while students are viewing a film is to turn off the sound during certain segments. Students can then be challenged to see if they can read and determine what is happening.

A range of activities can also foster vocabulary development. Selected captions can be typed on a worksheet with target words underlined to provide practice in using context clues. Students can be asked to identify nonstandard forms and their equivalents in standard English. They can be asked to interpret idiomatic expressions used in film dialogues and to generate lists of adjectives that describe different characters.

Nonfiction videos also provide a rich resource for the college ESL instructor. The collection at Borough of Manhattan Community College includes ten Public Broadcasting Series (PBS) documentary videotapes. One that I have used quite successfully is entitled *Gender: The Enduring Paradox : Smithsonian World* (1991). It deals with traditional and nontraditional male/female roles, examines stereotypes, and explores multicultural perspectives on the gender issue. A follow-up assignment I have given asks students to explain and react to the meaning of quotes from the video. These include such statements and questions as "Boys are boys and girls are girls. What does this mean in American culture? in your native culture?"

Although use of closed captioned video can enhance learning in the reading class, instructors should be aware of a few potential problems. Sometimes sound and print are not always well synchronized. Certain words may be omitted from captions, and when dialogue is rapid, the rate of caption presentation may be of concern. Additionally, instructors should abide by copyright laws when taping off the air or when printing and distributing captions.

Many educators see television and video as enemies of literacy because this technology can encourage passive rather than active thinking. Videos should never become a substitute for reading printed text material, and the selection of films should always be pedagogically relevant to the goals of the course. Activities which encourage active thinking should precede and follow the viewing of films in class. Keeping these caveats in mind, the use of closed captioned videos with ESL students can be a motivating and powerful vehicle for improving vocabulary and reading comprehension skills and for fostering an interest in reading related fiction and nonfiction material.

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