

# The Imagery of Rhetoric: Film and Academic Writing in the Discipline-Based ESL Course

*Film can be incorporated into discipline-based lessons and used to develop academic skills in written discourse.*

by Loretta F. Kasper

## Introduction

As the population of ESL students in American colleges and universities increases, helping these students become literate users of English is ever more important. Research has shown that literacy best develops by exposing learners to texts of different genres, using a multidisciplinary perspective (Benesch; Costanzo), and encouraging students' inquiry through reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing (*Standards 3*).

Discipline-based ESL instruction views language acquisition and content learning as interdependent. This instructional model promotes classroom learning contexts in which ESL students acquire knowledge of language and multidisciplinary content "through an abundance of language-mediated activities and projects" (MaeGowan-Gilhooly 52). These activities and projects use academic texts to teach ESL learners how to use English to acquire and articulate complex interdisciplinary knowledge.

Research has shown that film imagery helps ESL students deal successfully with sophisticated discipline-based texts, and offers them a visual model for various rhetorical modes of written discourse such as comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and argumentation (Kasper and

Singer; Stempleski). Film facilitates learning in several ways. It provides students with a graphic illustration of relevant content information and exposes them to authentic natural language. Film sequences can be isolated and replayed. Each subsequent viewing enables students to clarify meaning and discover new elements to examine in detail through classroom discussions and individual written responses. Finally, film appeals to the viewer's emotions, so that linguistic connotations not readily apparent on the printed page become so through voice intonation and body language.

This essay describes how to integrate film imagery into a discipline-based high intermediate ESL course. The instructional model consists of two key elements: discipline-based print texts and related film texts. In the ESL classroom, I use visual literacy as a complement to verbal literacy by having students analyze a visual text—a film—to help articulate the content of a print text—an essay or a book. In this course, ESL students have multiple opportunities to process and produce interdisciplinary texts, so that they gradually become familiar with academic discourse in a variety of rhetorical modes.

A description of three separate reading/writing lessons will illustrate how I use film to teach academic writing skills. The

first lesson derives from the discipline of linguistics, where the topic under study is language acquisition. The linguistics lesson uses two print and one film text and targets the rhetorical mode of *comparison and contrast*. The second lesson derives from the discipline of environmental science, where the topic we study is the causes and effects of earthquakes. The environmental science lesson uses one print and one film text and targets the rhetorical mode *cause and effect*. The third lesson derives from the discipline of anthropology, and the topic studied is Darwin's theory of human evolution. This lesson uses two print and one film text and targets the rhetorical mode of *argumentation*.

### **Linguistics: The Imagery of Comparison and Contrast**

The linguistics lesson focuses on developing written skill in comparison and contrast. I use two print and one film text to offer students a general introduction to language acquisition, including its stages, the critical period theory, the language acquisition theories of Noam Chomsky and B.F. Skinner, and the processes of first and second language acquisition. The first print text, "Language Acquisition in Humans"<sup>1</sup> (21-25), describes the case of Genie, a young girl who was deprived of exposure to language from the age of 18 months to 13 years. The second print text, "The Civilizing of Genie" by Maya Pines, provides a highly detailed account of the various aspects of the Genie case.

The film documentary *Secret of the Wild Child* helps students comprehend the print texts by providing them with the opportunity both to see and to hear the young girl Genie. The film depicts in graphic detail Genie's life after her discov-

ery, introduces the many doctors and teachers who worked with this young girl, and describes the linguistic theories surrounding her case. Because it states a problem, explores various solutions, and expresses a preference for one solution over another, the film documentary reflects exposition in the form of comparison and contrast and provides students with a highly accurate and detailed model for this rhetorical mode (Barsam 22).

After students watch *Secret of the Wild Child*, the reading material makes more sense to them, and they are better able to write an essay in which they formulate and test their own hypotheses about language acquisition. They compose an intertextual comparison and contrast analysis in which they consider Genie's language development within the framework of the theories of Chomsky and Skinner. Students must include information presented in the two print texts and in the film in their essays.

In the following essay excerpt, a high intermediate level ESL student addresses the question of how human beings acquire language, contrasting the theories of Chomsky and Skinner and then applying those theories to the Genie case:

The question of how people acquire language has been analyzed by some scientists and experts. Among them were the linguist Chomsky and the psychologist Skinner, who developed two different theories of language acquisition. The main idea of Chomsky's theory is that all children had an innate knowledge of the grammar of their native language. They speak without thinking of the word order. According to Chomsky's theory the human being has a hidden mechanism to start using the native language [. . .]. In contrast, Skinner's theory is that nothing can come by itself. Nothing can substitute parent's love and attention, normal communication, and strong process of study. People reach dif-

ferent levels of language acquisition because they grow up in different environments.

Examples like Genie represent that language should be studied in the human environment with certain relation from parents, adults, and teachers [. . .]. These cases show that methods like punishment, abuse, harassment could cause very serious problems in acquiring language, possibly even brain damage. Vice versa, when children are surrounded with love and care, they accept language with positive emotions and big interest. The brain cannot advance without a normal environment [. . .] both of these things are necessary for acquiring language.

As this excerpt demonstrates, students are able to use the print and film texts from the linguistics lesson to write an essay with stimulating intellectual content. The texts help induce them to think, make connections, and find relationships among events, skills critical in producing a well-developed and organized comparison/contrast essay.

### **Environmental Science: The Imagery of Cause and Effect**

The lesson on environmental science focuses on developing written skill in causal analysis. This lesson uses one print and one film text to explain the causes and effects of earthquakes. Students begin with a prereading activity that presents them with several questions for discussion: Have you ever experienced an earthquake? If so, how did it feel? What did you do? How long did the earthquake last? What happened in your neighborhood or community after the earthquake was over?

Students read the “The Causes of Earthquakes” (35-39), which describes several theories about their causes, in particular those deriving from a study of plate tectonics, or the movement of the earth’s

plates along geological fault lines. This text discusses both strike-slip and thrust faults and describes the earthquakes that have resulted from pressure along each type of fault line. To illustrate these concepts, I draw a diagram depicting a strike-slip and a thrust fault on the chalkboard. While viewing this visual, students go step-by-step through an analysis of what happens when the earth’s plates glide along each other sideways (a strike-slip fault) or when one plate pushes over another (a thrust fault). The diagram facilitates comprehension in two ways—as a visual prereading exercise and an imagery link to the complex scientific concepts presented in the reading.

After reading “The Causes of Earthquakes,” students view the film documentary *Savage Earth: The Restless Planet*. This film describes the role of plate tectonics in earthquakes, focusing the camera on both actual and simulated situations. Students travel visually to San Francisco, site of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, a magnitude 6.9 quake caused by pressure along the San Andreas, a strike-slip fault. Next the documentary takes students to Northridge, California, the site of a magnitude 6.6 earthquake caused by pressure along the Davis, a thrust fault. One of the key sequences in the documentary is a visual depiction of the causes and effects of pressure along these fault lines and the damage caused by resulting earthquakes. The documentary also describes what scientists have learned about earthquake prediction through observation and analysis of precursor events. The film is effective because it creates a feeling of “being there” as it chronicles the causes and effects of earthquakes step-by-step through spoken narration and powerful visual imagery. In this way, the film bears a close relationship to expository writing in the form of a cause and effect essay.

Film imagery presents a difficult scientific concept visually. I ask students to synthesize what they have read and viewed as they respond to the following essay prompt: "Consider the damage caused by the Loma Prieta earthquake that hit the San Francisco Bay Area in 1989. In a well-developed essay, describe the causes and effects of this earthquake and the resulting damage. What steps, if any, could have been taken to lessen or prevent some of this damage? What did scientists and government officials learn from this earthquake?"

In the following excerpt, a high intermediate student examines the causes for some of the damage in the Loma Prieta earthquake:

In 1989 there was a very terrible earthquake near San Francisco. This earthquake was called "Loma Prieta" and it was caused by pressure in a large strike-slip fault called the San Andreas. The "Loma Prieta" earthquake caused a lot of damage and many people died. Most of the damage happened in the Marina district of San Francisco. Houses here were completely destroyed.

The reason for all this damage in the Marina district was that houses there had been built on landfill. Landfill is soft earth rather than rock. Many structures on landfill were destroyed including the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge and the Nimitz Freeway. The energy of the earthquake caused the landfill to collapse and this destroyed the buildings. This happened because the landfill was too soft to support the building during the earthquake. On the other hand, structures like the Golden Gate Bridge that were built on bedrock or solid earth were not destroyed.

The results of the "Loma Prieta" earthquake made scientists and government recommend changes for buildings. They understood that the damage could be prevented if the buildings were not built on landfill. In cities where there are earthquakes, they said that structures should be built on bed-

rock. That way they would be safer and would probably survive a serious earthquake.

By calling upon powerful images, ESL students are able to use film as a visual foundation for the written analysis of cause and effect. Film enables them not only to understand, but also to explore and articulate complex causal relationships.

### **Anthropology: The Imagery of Argumentation**

The lesson from anthropology uses a multidisciplinary approach to teach students how to develop an effective written argument. The argumentative mode may be the most difficult for ESL students to master. Nevertheless, proficiency in argumentative writing is a skill these students must have if they are to succeed in college. In fact, this skill is often measured through institutional writing assessments required for students' continuation in degree programs.

Effective argumentation requires that students be able to observe carefully and then describe honestly and accurately what they have observed. Film can be a most effective tool in engaging student interest in discipline-based issues and in providing the raw materials for argument (Keyser 11). Just as the filmmaker shares his or her vision of a problem or issue with the viewing audience, so too does the student writer learn to share his or her vision with the reading audience.

The anthropology lesson uses two print and one film text in a progression of increasingly complex linguistic activities culminating in the development of a written argument. Students begin the lesson with a discussion of Darwin's theory of human evolution, the Scopes Monkey Trial, and turn-of-the-century American

culture. They then read, "Physical Anthropology and Darwin's Theory of Human Evolution" (135-40). This reading provides general information on anthropology, more specific information on Darwin's theory and the anthropological discoveries that followed, and background on the scientific side of the evolution issue.

The class discusses the religious and political controversy which resulted in the Scopes Monkey Trial and which provides the backdrop for the film *Inherit the Wind*. The film raises many complex issues, and to help students understand them and prepare them for viewing the film, they read the text, "A Dramatization of Science: The Play, *Inherit the Wind*" (144-48). This reading introduces students to the characters and provides them with background on the religious and legal issues dramatized in the film.

After watching the film, students write a summary of the arguments made by the two lawyers. They discuss the effectiveness of each legal position as they identify and evaluate the statements they found most persuasive. The following student excerpt, reprinted with permission, illustrates:

*The Scopes Trial* was a very hot issue in the U.S. back in the 1920's because it was dealing with new evolutionary beliefs [ . . . ]. In this trial, there were two different points of view represented by the law prosecutor Matthew Brady and the defense attorney Henry Drummond. Brady represented the Creationist viewpoint, and Drummond represented the Evolutionist viewpoint. Brady argued for the Creationist position by saying that science cannot explain the most basic of God's creations. Brady believed that since God made everything on earth, he could change everything, even the natural law. Brady quoted Bishop Usher who said that the earth was created in the fall of 4004 B. C. at 9:00 AM as evidence for his argument. This is not the kind of

evidence that is usually presented in the court of law because this kind of evidence is not physical evidence; it is a religious belief.

Drummond represented the Evolutionist viewpoint. Drummond's legal argument was different and was based on scientific law. Drummond argued that the individual mind is holy and that an idea is a greater monument than a cathedral. He asked Brady, "Why, if we must accept everything on faith, did God plague us with the power to think?" Drummond countered Brady's argument that we should only believe in things that are in the Bible by using Brady's own theory to prove that evolution can be blended with a belief in creation.

I believe that Henry Drummond's argument was more convincing because it was based on logical evidence and convincing dialogue. Drummond said that God created the power of thought for humans. Also, Drummond stated that we should not take the Bible literally, and he gave an example of Copernicus' theory of natural law to support his statement. The Bible says that the sun stood still and that the sun moves around the earth. It is well known that this theory is not correct. Drummond also used the million-year old fossil remains of a prehistoric marine creature, and he asked Brady if it were possible that at the time of creation, a day were longer than 24 hours. Drummond's argument was strong enough to make Brady admit that he did not know how long a day was at the time of the creation. Although Drummond's arguments were very convincing, he lost the trial. The judge found Scopes blamable and fined him \$100.00 for his offense.

In conclusion I can say that the Scopes trial represented religious beliefs versus science. It was unusual for teachers in many of the public schools in the 1920's to teach any theory that violated the theory of human creation as it is taught in the Bible. Drummond and Brady both made powerful and passionate statements in support of their respective opposite positions.

As this student excerpt illustrates, watching and analyzing the opposing arguments presented by the attorneys in

*Inherit the Wind* help teach students the elements of a persuasive argument, from the emotional to the intellectual and provides them with a springboard for taking a firm written stand on other issues. I ask students to choose an issue about which they have a strong opinion and to write a persuasive essay to argue their position. They must be sure to include a rebuttal of the opposing viewpoint in the essay. I use multiple drafts and revisions to facilitate genuine growth for these students as writers.

The following excerpt comes from an essay on racial prejudice written by a high intermediate ESL student. It demonstrates this student's ability to take a stand and argue a point of view:

In our history from earliest years to our time, some people don't like other people; some of them even hate others who are different from them [. . .]. Time has passed from old times and now we are living in a cruel and difficult world. At this moment, one would think all nations have to be together and live without hating each other, but some people up to today still hate others who are different from them. Many times they hide this hate deep, deep in their souls.

When I think about it, I become very angry. I want to meet these people and argue with them up to when they will finally understand that all people are like anybody else. When I was in school, I had a friend who was kind and good, but people would always be cruel to her. They would say mean things to her because she was different from them. I wanted to tear them, but my friend calmed me down and always said, "You have to respect all people." But how could I respect them when they hated her for nothing, just because she was different from them? [. . .]

All people in the whole world have to be together, they have to live without hating or killing. If for example, the whole world blows up and just two persons survive, these two people will help each other

to survive, and they won't see which nationality they are because they will need to be together like ground and grass. They will need each other even if they are different from each other. But now people don't understand that. I will never understand how there can be so much hatred and cruelty in our world.

## Student Feedback and Performance

Film imagery improves comprehension of discipline-based information and is an effective tool to develop and strengthen the critical thinking skills necessary for written exposition and analysis of key issues. The usefulness of film as a visual resource for clarifying content and developing academic writing skill is supported both by students' feedback and by their progress as writers. When asked to complete questionnaires on the use of film, ESL students' responses are overwhelmingly positive. They say that the films make the work clearer and help them to understand the texts better. They say that if a concept is unclear when they first read about it, seeing the film enables them to visualize it. In addition, students say that the films add interesting variety to the course and "let them study the material in a different way." They say that after they see the films, "it is easier to write about the topic because the film gives extra material to talk about in their essays." Finally, when asked if they believe that the films help them to write better, students say that the films, "show them how to put an essay together" and "how to talk about similarities and differences, and also causes and effects." Students' feedback also indicates that they believe the films help them learn "how to collect evidence, form an opinion, and make an argument for or against an issue."

In terms of their progress as writers, on a qualitative level, students' writings

become more critical and insightful as they use images and information from the films as support in their writing. By providing several perspectives from which students may articulate and analyze conceptual relationships and issues, film leads them to explore topics at a deeper level. On a quantitative level, pass rates on final reading and writing assessments increase from 72% to 95%. These improved pass rates enable students to progress more quickly to higher levels of English language use and mainstream discipline study.

### A Final Analysis

For ESL students to succeed in college, they must develop proficiency in both linguistic and academic skills. By establishing strong connections between dis-

cipline-based visual and verbal media, we help to give ESL students the tools they need to construct meaning, leading them to increased levels of English language literacy. As it supports language and content learning, film imagery enables ESL students to visually process comparative and casual relationships between and among issues and events and encourages them to take and support a point of view on these issues and events. By examining the discipline-based interrelationships among a variety of print and film texts, ESL students become familiar with academic discourse and acquire the cognitive language proficiency required for college work. In this way, they gain the varieties of knowledge they need to take their place in an English-speaking academic community.

### Note

1. All page citations refer to readings in the course text *Interdisciplinary English* by Loretta Kasper (McGraw, 1998).

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Loretta F. Kasper is an associate professor of English at Kingsborough Community College/CUNY. Her most recent book is *Content-Based College ESL Instruction* (Erlbaum 2000). Her current research involves the use of multimedia and computer technology in ESL instruction.