

Using Films for Writing Reaction-Response Essay: A Class-Room Action Research on Turkish ESP Learners

Begümşen Ergenekon

Abstract—The purpose of this study is to show how media films can function as authentic sources in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to first year students to write reaction-response essays. The constructivist approach used in Modern Languages Department allows students to build new knowledge upon the foundation of the previous one. It assures them first to write for an authentic purpose, second for meaning and third to achieve goal oriented writing unconsciously. So this class-room action study consisted of pre-, while- and post-writing stages. The sample consisted of 19 students with upper-intermediate-advanced English, studying at Middle East Technical University (METU). Results showed that watching acts coupled with listening are an effective, truly learner centered and meaningful way of gathering, using and transferring knowledge in “writing reaction and response essays”. Watching *Night Crawler* definitely engaged students intellectually and emotionally who wrote eagerly and creatively. And they also transferred this skill successfully in answering the reaction-response question in the final exam. So the author will demonstrate through a workshop how this task can be carried out in the ESP classroom to teach English as a second language.

Index Terms—Feature films, reaction-response essay, ESP workshop, teaching technology.

I. INTRODUCTION

Making first year ESP students, advanced learners of “English for Academic Purposes” is not an easy task in a Turkish cultural environment for Modern Languages Department (MLD). So, goal oriented traditional writing of paragraphs, writing essays in expository and argumentative genres are required based on scientific articles. Reaction-response tasks however are held at paragraph and presentation levels. So how can then the difficult concepts of writing a reaction-response essay as “agreeing- disagreeing partially or totally”, “acquiring evidence to accept and/or refute” in “unity and coherence” be made enjoyable? Goffman [1] suggests that classroom tasks should relate to the context of students’ own lives. It “develops thinking, researching, and writing skills needed for academic writing tasks...more realistically than...traditional instruction” according to Shih [2]. In this respect “film is an art medium that appeals to all no matter their background and previous education” states Fluitt-Dupuy [3]. So a media workshop is carried out in a class of 19 advanced level freshmen from three faculties who watched the *Night Crawler*¹ (2014), a

recent feature film in Ankara. They were then asked to write their opinions about this film by reacting and responding. The task was carried out in pre-, while- and post- and follow up stages as *the instructor designed task* (IDT) required in the curriculum. Therefore the aim of this mini-study is to display how a media film functions as an authentic source for content based and goal oriented reaction-response essay writing as well as serving unconscious learning in ESP.

II. CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING THEORY

This theory is based on «teaching while producing» and «learning by doing» through direct experience² as suggested by Atatürk [4], Dewey [5], and mentioned by Ergenekon [6]. This pedagogical approach has been the aim of the Modern Languages Department. Ferlazzo [7] mentions that “Learning by doing” together with “building relationships, accessing prior knowledge through student stories, developing student leadership, and reflection” help “English language learners master both content and language using high-order language skills” to communicate. According to Sam [8] “the learner is seen...as an active participant in the process of language learning in the classroom” so teachers using this approach have to “come up with activities that promote self-learning, authentic group interaction and peer teaching”. “Not restricted only to conversation they “may involve listening, speaking, reading, writing or an integration of some of these skills. For example films allow integration of all the four skills essential to learn a language. Fluitt-Dupuy [3] refers to films as “an art medium that appeals to all no matter their background and previous education”. It simply “provides room for imagination, linguistic creativity and use of appropriate situational language in the classroom. This is because movies bring “situations from real life into the classroom” according to Doff [9]. Undoubtedly films on controversial issues lend themselves as authentic sources to write essays. Reaction-response paragraphs are already taught to freshmen students but not essays. Therefore taking a step further the instructor carried out a workshop to teach a reaction-response essay writing using a feature film.

III. LITERATURE ON MEDIA

Films are reported to function as authentic teaching

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Begümşen Ergenekon is with the Middle East Technical University, Turkey (e-mail: berge@metu.edu.tr).

¹Gilroy, Dan (director) 2014, Summary: When Louis Bloom, a driven man desperate for work, muscles into the world of L.A. crime journalism, he blurs the line between observer and participant to become the star of his own

story. Aiding him in his effort is Nina, a TV-news veteran. (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2872718/>).

²Earlier used in Atatürk Forest Farm Project (1925 – 1950) and Village Institutes Educational Project (1937-1954) giving vocational training in rural secondary schools and adult peasants in contemporary agricultural skills.

materials for the writing class-room by Hanım [10]. Kılıçkaya [11] defines authenticity as “exposure to real language” not prepared for ELT instruction but in its original community and cultural content. He, also, states that such exposure increases learner motivation, provides authentic cultural information”, relates “more closely to students’ needs” and supports “a more creative approach to teaching”. Films, therefore, are used for purposes such as teaching vocabulary, enhancing listening, conversing, reading, texting and teaching essay writing. Such films are “easily available and contextually rich sources of authentic material” for “the language classroom” mean Voller and Widdows [12]. Films promote both the learning process and help fluency development. Likewise, they are effective in “developing students’ listening and communication skills” İsmaili [13]. They “attract students’ attention, present language in a more natural way”, “offer a visual context” helping students to understand and “improve their learning skills”. Movies also enable readers to visualize “events, characters, narration, story and words” in context. Next, they prove to be authentic teaching materials for writing informative [10], argumentative [3] and reaction-response essays for Baratta & Jones [14] and Roth [15]. Furthermore, Fluitt-Dupuy [3] compares films to elements of writing such as “camera shots and angles to words and sentences, color to connotation and symbol, scenes to paragraphs, and editing cuts to transitions” while the whole film serves as an essay. In this respect Hanım [10] states that “writing class-rooms need to be reconfigured so something serious looks fun, interesting yet authentic” in other words “something serious can be fun to learn and something fun is actually serious stuff!”

IV. THE PARTICIPANTS

The number of students who participated in this workshop were 19 (8 F, 11 M) mostly (14) first year, second semester students. Of the rest 3 were sophomores, one was a junior and another a senior student. They were from Engineering (13), Arts & Sciences (5) and Education (1) Faculties.

Regarding the distribution of female and male students according to faculties of METU, they were as follows: Seven female students and six male students, totally 13 attended Engineering Faculty departments (Civil, Chemical, Geological, Industrial, Food, Mechanical and Mining).

Then 1 female and 4 male students, totally 5 attended Art/Sciences Faculty departments (Biology, Chemistry, Philosophy) and 1 male student was from Education Faculty being a student at the Chemistry Education Department. All had attended the Department of Basic English a year to learn English. Their ages ranged between 18 and 22.

All students watched the film in class and took notes. Methodologically, the workshop consisted of four stages of pre-writing (repeating scaffolding by graphic organizers appropriate for writing reaction-response essay, film watching and outline editing; while-writing (reminders for authentic, meaningful and goal oriented writing), post-writing quantitative, qualitative assessments and getting feedback from students.

V. STUDY QUESTIONS

This case study is done to answer the question of “How can films be used to teach reaction-response essays?”

So two more questions are asked for a clearer explanation:

- (1) How can teaching writing reaction-response essays be authentic?
- (2) How can graphic organizers be utilized in such essays?

VI. WORKSHOP METHODOLOGY

A. Implementation of 3 Writing Approaches

To achieve authenticity the following three approaches are employed in this workshop: The strategic approach so that students could develop independent writing skills is suggested by Crawford [16] also mentioned by Hanım [10]. To achieve this (a) prior knowledge (b) making an outline, (c) scaffolding by graphic organizers, (d) watching the film, (e) discussing and comparing film notes with peers and (f) writing for an authentic goal are used in the workshop. Second, using the pragmatic approach the students are advised to use language meaningfully not for the teacher, but for the public to read. Thus, writing a reaction-response essay becomes a social activity for students according to Williams [17]. Third, the cognitive approach used, facilitated writing for a goal unconsciously when students did not realize they are learning states Hanım [10]. So teachers must keep in mind that writing is an active and repetitive process where students are using their critical thinking skills. Therefore, in the pre-writing stage the teacher instructed them about how to write the essay and prompted them to gather relevant information by taking notes when watching the film, then after making an outline to focus on the target audience while writing, revising and editing according to scaffolding instruction goals [10], [16]. By using these approaches, students respectively wrote for an authentic purpose, for meaning and unconsciously achieved goal oriented writing. This is because the urge to reflect on an extremely involving content became a goal, while techniques of writing the reaction and response were intuitively learnt.

B. Graphic Organizers

Students had earlier written a reaction paragraph and an expository essay through graphic organizers. So it was expected of students to be relatively easy to transfer their prior reaction-response paragraph writing skills to writing an essay in the same genre. They had already transferred their expository paragraph writing skills to writing an expository essay. This was achieved showing how a 5-sentence paragraph could be turned into a 5-paragraph essay by graphic organizers. Similarly, an essay graphic organizer was demonstrated so that students could independently write a reaction-response essay as seen below.

As shown in Fig. 1 triangles and squares were used for this purpose. The first sentence of the introduction denoted by an inverted triangle should refer to the details of the source and summarizes its story followed by a thesis statement reflecting the student’s opinion for or against the author’s. Thereupon, the student develops respective body paragraphs denoted by squares, through listing his/her agreement and/or disagreement partially or totally giving reasons/examples

mentioned in Gülen *et al.* [18]. The final triangle is upright and represents the conclusion where the student writes the main idea, namely rephrased thesis statement, and finishes with comments and/or suggestions for action. This mental map is then used to make an outline before writing. Below is an example of a 5-paragraph outline scaffolding from the workshop.

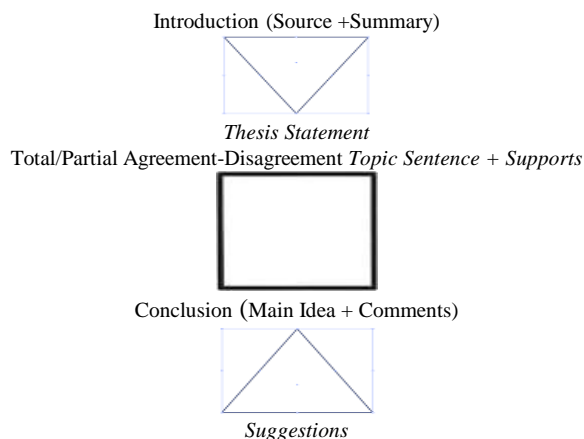


Fig. 1. Reaction-Response Essay Organizer.

Nightcrawler Outline:

Thesis Statement: I agree / disagree partially or totally that in a capitalist labour market with limited opportunities, ends justify the means in the media sector by establishing one's own business, indulging in an unjust market competition and gaining upward mobility to keep one's own enterprise.

Body paragraph: I agree / disagree partially or totally with Lou's (main character) method of establishing capital (stealing and giving low wages to his employee) because...

Body paragraph: I agree / disagree partially or totally with Lou's way of competing with his rivals (sabotaging, causing death, crime and news fabrication) because...

Body paragraph: I agree / disagree partially or totally with Lou's earned/unearned upward mobility (becoming the only supplier, and bargaining for a relationship with the female director) because...

Conclusion Main idea & comments & suggestions.

C. The Film

Building upon their reaction-response paragraph and informative essay experience the students were asked to write an essay reacting and responding to *Night Crawler* (2014) for the following reasons: Primarily its title was translated into Turkish as "Gece Vurgunu", i.e. "Night Loot". It is a title, attractive for and culturally familiar to Turkish audience. Its literal translation as "night worm" would not have made much sense *vis-a-vis* the film's theme. Secondly, it dealt with universal issues of unemployment, business competition, exploitation, criminality, double standards, misinformation and disinformation in journalism, making the film quite authentic. These key words were used to guide students in taking their notes. Third, while the American accent was a bit challenging, generally the language was intelligible for the learners' advanced level. Finally, the film's theme offered plenty of major and minor controversies to agree and disagree with. Students were told to watch the film critically and take notes on (1) its central argument, (2) major and minor issues,

(3) strengths and weaknesses; (5) possible pro- and counter-arguments to director's claims, (6) its relevance to real life, (7) its language (key words/phrases/sentences).

VII. RESULTS

A. Quantitative Results

The essay assessments were made according to MLD's Reaction-Response Essay Rubrics mentioned below [18]. The evaluation chart is divided into 3 slots as Content (quality of ideas), Organization (unity-coherence), Language and Mechanics. Each item, with respective marks, has to be assessed as Excellent (10-9), Good (8-7), Adequate (6-5), Fair (4-3) and Poor (2-1). The total grade included the essay (7.5) and note-taking and making outlines (2.5).

Therefore of a total of 19 (100 %) students, 14 (74%) received "Very Good", 3 (15 %) "Good" and 2 (11 %) received "Adequate" grades.

Fourteen (14) students received *excellent* therefore were found "Very Good" in quality of ideas, unity and coherence in organization and advanced use of language and mechanics while three (3) students were found *Satisfactory*, therefore received "Good". One student in the adequate slot lacked topic sentences for the body paragraphs, in spite of the presence of thesis statement expressing total disagreement with film's message. This had turned the essay into a plain summary. The other student in the same category who partially agreed and disagreed with the film's message fell under the *adequate* rubric in all categories of content, organization, language and mechanics.

B. Qualitative Results

Nineteen students had undertaken the task as instructed. In reacting and responding 11 (58 %) students disagreed totally with the film's central argument while 1 (5 %) agreed totally that "ends justified illegal/unethical means (in business)". On the other hand seven (37 %) students partially agreed and partially disagreed with the film's main idea.

Detailed feedback was given to students by reaction-response rubrics on their essays' content, organization, language and mechanics. They included the following scaffolding items³.

Content:

- The title is original, attracts the reader's attention and reflects the controlling idea of the essay.

- The *introductory paragraph* gives adequate background information, includes an effective introductory strategy, and has a well written thesis statement.

- Each *body paragraph* has a well-written topic sentence and is well supported with effective citations (not expected in this workshop) and clear, mature, and original ideas with no logical fallacies or redundancies.

- The *conclusion paragraph* rephrases main points and ends with an original and meaningful concluding remark.

Organization (Unity & Coherence)

- All ideas are relevant to each other and to the thesis

³It must, here be mentioned that all requirements expected in writing the reaction-response essay are taught the first two months of the semester with many exercises [18].

statement.

– Both sentences and paragraphs are logically ordered and smoothly connected to one-another.

Language & Mechanics

– Sentences are accurate and varied (good combination of simple and complex structures).

– Word choice is accurate and varied.

– Register is appropriate.

– Punctuation, capitalization and spelling are proper.

– The ideas have been properly cited with a variety of citation techniques (quotation/summary/paraphrase).

– In-text and end-text references are complete and in the right format (not included in this workshop).

– The typography font (Times New Roman) and font size (12) are correct; spacing (double), paragraphing, indentation and margining are proper.

– There are no typographical errors.

The following cases give an idea about parts of students' reaction-response essays in terms of titles, note-taking introduction, thesis statements, body paragraphs, conclusions and comments.

CASE 1 - Titles

Various Students wrote:

– “Deadly News’ Media Sector”,

– “The ways of Rising Career Ladder”.

– “How capitalism Comes Alive: Night Crawler”,

– “On the movie ‘Night Crawler’ and Moral Side of Human Behavior in a Capitalist System”,

– “Capitalism in the Darkness of Night”,

– “Being a Night Crawler”.

CASE 2 - Note -taking while watching

Student A – Notes through key words & sentences:

First Scene: “My motto is if you want to win the lottery, you’ve got to make money to get a ticket.”

Car fire: “Will this be on TV (Lou)”; “Morning news, if it bleeds, it leads (Cameraman).”

Hiring Rick: “Why should I hire you? Sell yourself. Go (Lou). “Okay, I’m Rick, of course. I took three busses to get here. I finished high school. I need a job. I will do just about anything. That’s me. Hire Rick.”

Road to horror in Echo Park: “Do you know what fear stands for?”, “False evidence appearing real!” (Lou)

Selling record and talking with Nina: “I learned that you have to have a business plan before starting a business and that’s what you pursue.”

Another talk with Nina: “I haven’t had what you’d call much of a formal education, but you can find most anything if you look hard enough.”

His competitor offered Lou a job: I feel like grabbing you by your ears right now and screaming, ‘I’m not fucking interested!’ Instead, I’m going to drive home and do some accounting.”

Dinner with Nina: “Friends don’t pressure friends”. (Nina) “Actually that’s not true because as you know Nina, a friend is a gift you give yourself.” (Lou)

Rick’s death scene: “You saw him. You saw him!” (Rick)

“I can’t jeopardize my company’s success to retain an

untrustworthy employee.” (Lou), “You’re crazy. You’re crazy.” (Rick) “You took my bargaining power Rick. You used it against me. You would’ve done it again. Just admit it.” (Lou).

Detective inquiry: “You filmed him dying.” (Fronteiri)

“That’s my job. That’s what I do, I’d like to think if you’re seeing me you’re having the worst day of your life.” (Lou)

Last scene: Lou Bloom brings the recordings which has Richard’s death to Nina Romina. She says “It’s amazing!”, He says “Thank you!”, She: “It’s amazing!”, He: “Thank you!”, “No, thank you!! Thank you for bringing them to me!”

CASE 3 - Thesis Statements

Student B – Total Disagreement

“Where there are limited opportunities ends justify unethical means in the media sector.” The student then ends thus: “All in all, no matter what the result is, ends do not justify unethical and illegal means... However, the film shows us the real face of the news fabrication in the media sector. Such journalists are ready for everything to get high rating. That’s all the capitalist job market prompts Lou to do no matter what”.

Student D – Total Disagreement:

“I totally disagree with Dan Gilroy in terms of establishing one’s own business in illegal ways, attaining mobility by bargaining, and fabricating news by criminal events to keep one’s own enterprise are correct strategies.”

CASE 4 - An Introduction

Student B – Partial agreement & disagreement:

“The movie night crawler which is written and directed by Dan Gilroy released in 5th September 2014 while the release date of the movie in Turkey was 28th Nov. 2014. It is produced by Tony Gilroy (*Night Crawler*, 2014). Lou Bloom as main character of the film survives by stealing stuffs, mainly iron and steel because he gets rejected from many working places where he appealed already. Then suddenly he confronts an incident and decides to record it by his own camera and makes a very good reputation by recording the real incident by risking lives. Those efforts and recording are to open his own news production company with the name VPN. Therefore I partially disagree with the idea that ends justify the means of the film where Lou, the main character satisfies his needs by stealing, sabotaging the rivals and fabricating the criminal events to keep one’s own news enterprise. However, there are affirmative points in the movie because there is a bright side of the movie as well, where it teaches us to fight against hunger. Furthermore it is a motivational movie where Lou constantly struggled for a better future. This point might encourage all those lazy people to come forward and do something for themselves. Following the main idea summary the essay ends with this comment “In my opinion, the movie would have been ideal if Lou was punished for what he did. I was expecting such ending.”

CASE 5 - Body Paragraph A

Student C – Total agreement:

“First of all, sabotaging the rival’s work as the main character did is necessary for being successful in business. If

you don't sabotage them be sure that they will, as soon as possible. The business life is so merciless. So there is no place for kindness and fairness. Secondly, the most important and the main part of running a business are being selfish and unfaithful. Always go after your profits. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't help anybody. Some helps and partnerships will come back to you with bigger profits, so there are critical and important limits of being selfish and unfaithful. Last but not least, like the main character did in the film; fabricating a criminal event for developing his media company is totally a correct move. After that move, he boosted his success and raised his worth and life quality in the society"

CASE 6 - Body Paragraph B

Student E – Total Disagreement:

"To begin with I disagree with Lou's stealing character to fulfill his needs. Since Lou is unemployed he steals iron gates. However showing such acts on the screen might provoke the adolescents to do the same in real life. For instance, according to a new survey there has been a dramatic increase in shoplifting mainly the adolescents. In general, over 27 million shoplifters have been caught by footage camera (shoplifting statistics, NASP, N.Y. nd.) This act can instigate all those employees to take dangerous steps like Lou did with other news recording with his rival news reporter which may cause a fatal situation. Lou should have been punished and ought to be heavily fined for his criminal act. Additionally, he even lies to his partner Rick to have the live footage of the criminal shooting him down. This idea might influence people and they might try to have just fame in recording real incidents by hurting public."

CASE 7 – Conclusion

Student C – Total Agreement

"In Conclusion, I think the main character in the film *"Night Crawler"*, did totally correct moves and we saw that he is happy and successful in the end of the film. Real life is the same as in the film. And as it is mentioned in the previous paragraphs, never think about somebody's problem if you won't have a profit about it.

Student F – Total Disagreement

"Main character Lou Bloom's actions are typical examples of people who demand employment and gain a higher social status in a competitive atmosphere and I believe that although these actions are far from being ethical, under those circumstances and psychology, they are pretty realistic. So I believe that once people like Lou, who has been living in a blank page for a long time, catch an opportunity to obtain money, success and reputation, they go after this chance no matter what it may end up like. In my opinion, *Night Crawler* manages to show the dark side of human nature by a specific example as is Lou's story."

Student G – Partial Agreement & Disagreement

"To sum up the film *"Night Crawler"* is about an entrepreneur who justifies his means while establishing his own business. I partially agree with this view because in my opinion, ambition is good up to a point. If Lou hadn't broken ethical trade rules, he would not have been able to establish his own company in a capitalist economy. However I partially disagree with this idea. Lou's ambition is dangerous because

he does not accept competition. Also Lou could use other options for making capital instead of stealing, sabotaging and causing his assistant's death.

As these samples indicate students had grasped the very essence of the content of the film *Night Crawler* and of writing a reaction-response essay.

C. Feedback from Students

Opinions about how students felt on the relation between using a film and learning to write reaction-response essay are as follows:

- 1) All 19 students (100 %) found the film interesting, enjoyable and meaningful meeting their needs to write the essay.
- 2) 17 students (89.5 %) found graphic organizers helpful in preparing them mentally before and aiding them to write for a goal to learn this genre. While 2 (10.5 %) did not because it was too abstract for them.
- 3) 16 students (84 %) said discussing issues and comparing their notes created an appealing class-room atmosphere to learn the writing task in English and 3 (16 %) did not because they were too reserved.
- 4) 17 students (89.5 %) said they learnt to write rather independently and felt in the center of this learning process while 2 (10.5 %) didn't. They said they needed more help.
- 5) All 19 (100 %) said they used their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills actively more or less at once.
- 6) All 19 (100 %) said they learned new vocabulary; language skills and idioms while watching the film and used them in their essays.
- 7) Follow-up: As far as the results of the final exam are concerned in doing the reaction-response task, all students transferred their knowledge by receiving high partial grades for that question.
- 8) All 19 (100 %) said they used their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills actively more or less at once.
- 9) All 19 (100 %) said they learned new vocabulary, language skills and idioms while watching the film and used them in their essays.
- 10) Follow-up: As far as the results of the final exam are concerned in doing the reaction-response task, all students transferred their knowledge by receiving high partial grades for that question.

VIII. CONCLUSION

To summarize: The quantitative and qualitative results indicate that within the constructive theoretical framework using strategic, pragmatic and cognitive approaches, the students can achieve to write first for an authentic purpose, second for meaning and third to achieve goal oriented writing unconsciously. In this case study, the film has functioned as an authentic source in context and content to learn writing reaction-response essays in English for Specific Purposes. In addition transfer of learning took place and scaffolding through graphic organizers enhanced students independent writing skills. Students' feedback shows that they enjoyed watching the film. This film made learning new language, vocabulary truly unconscious.

Comparison with Similar Research Results:

Hanim's [10] research affirms that films are enjoyable because students learn unconsciously while being entertained in a case study of Malaysian ESL learners. Films are also authentic sources because they relate to their real life and to social issues in the context of the target language in the writing classroom. For instance, students being trained as teachers of English in Turkey, agreed that integrating feature films in advanced oral communication classes served as authentic teaching materials initiating and sustaining a conversational exchange, and negotiating for meaning; using types of exclamation and "filling expressions; colloquial English in real-life contexts, and non-verbal communication" according to Seferoglu, [19]. In another research done by İsmaili [13] the author concludes that "movies offer visual context" which aid students to improve their learning skills. Fluitt-Dupuy [3] who carried out film summary writing in English learning class-room remarks that they "provide enjoyment in purposeful and authentic writing". Finally according to Baratta and Jones [14] even English native speakers benefit from films because feedback from them indicates an appreciation of visual teaching methods as a means to explain academic writing conventions. Authors also report that "a small increase in average student performance (pre- and post-instruction) is also noted."

Films with controversial themes where there are two sides of an opinion on an event, lend themselves well for the purpose of writing reaction-response essays. For example *Lord of Flies* adapted from Sir William Goldings 1954 Nobel Prize winning novel is filmed three times, twice (1963, 1990) in English and once in Filipino (1967). "Lost on an island, young survivors of a plane crash eventually revert to savagery despite the few rational boys' attempts to prevent that⁴. The film can be watched either only in English or with native language subtitles. *Atanarjuat* (Fast Runner) is another film (winner of many prizes), where tradition shuns out two members in the kinship group who have upset the internal peace. This means a death sentence in an environment where life outside of a group is impossible. However, it is in the local Inuit Language. So watching this film with subtitles improves English reading skills besides providing information for writing a reaction-response essay. Last but not the least *Into the Wild* is a very engaging film in English for students who would easily identify with the main character who leaves his comfortable urban life and heads for Alaska. To conclude, this workshop study above and similar research indicate that using tools of media such as films serve as authentic teaching materials. Both ELT and ESP curricula therefore should encourage teachers to use short videos or feature films appropriate for class-room use.

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Begümşen Ergenekon was born in Ankara, Turkey. She is a graduate of METU, with a Sociology BA degree in 1976, then she received the social anthropology of B.A., M.A. degrees from University of Bergen/Norway in 1986 and received a Ph.D. degree from Ankara University, 2006.

She teaches academic speaking and writing skills at the Modern Languages Department, School of Foreign Languages and instructs public weekend ELT courses in METU since 1990. She is also a part-time lecturer in Cultural Evolution at Archaeometry Graduate Program there. She worked as an interpreter in Bergen Municipality and at Ankara British Council, from 1989 to 1990. She was a consultant in the State Planning Organization, Ankara, from 1986 to 1988, in the Ministries of Local Government and Labor; Culture and Science, Oslo, from 1981 to 1982. She did anthropological and archaeological research till today. She delivered papers in international excavations, research and archaeometry symposiums in Turkey and published them in 1999 to 2007. She presented research papers at KELTA, Seoul, in 2012, CamTESOL, Phnom Penh, in 2013, Nepal ELT, Katmandu, in 2014 and ThaiTESOL, Bangkok, in 2015.

Dr. Ergenekon is a member of the editorial board of Bambu and Patika Magazines and authors popularized research results and documentary stories. She also writes on current issues, on dagarcikturkiye.com. Dr. Ergenekon received several awards in Effective Teaching within the top 10 % of academics at METU.

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_of_the_Flies