

ロバート・ゼメキスの映画を通して学生の
モチベーションを高めながら言語と文化を教える
Team Teaching With Marty, Roger and Forrest:
Teaching American Culture and
Increasing Student Motivation Through Film
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言語学習者として成功するには、学生は言語スキルを向上させ、対象文化についての知識を増やす必要があります。平均的な学生にとって、これらは非常に時間のかかる作業であり、学生が言語学習にかなりの量の自由な時間を費やさない限り不可能です。したがって、対象となる言語や文化を教えることに加えて、教師が生徒のモチベーションを高めることも重要です。この論文は、ロバート・ゼメキスの映画を通して学生のモチベーションを高めながら、英語と文化を教える方法の提案を提供します。

Keywords: Motivation, Independent learning, American Studies, Cinema, Youth Culture

Introduction

As early as 1972, Gardner and Lambert described the importance of instrumental and integrative motivation in language learning. They maintained that, “Learners who are integratively motivated want to learn the language because they want to get to know the people who speak that language. They are also interested in the culture associated with that language.” (Gardener & Lambert) On the other hand, they explained that people who are instrumentally motivated wish to use a foreign language skill to further their own goals in society, such as “getting a salary bonus or getting into college.” (ibid.) Some college freshmen may still be instrumentally motivated by the desire to study, travel or even work abroad. However, in Japan, many college freshmen lose their primary instrumental motivation for studying a second language when they pass university entrance exams. Nevertheless, many of these students end up in English classrooms, possibly taking English just because it is required. The best service that a teacher can render for many lackluster students, may not be helping them to learn new vocabulary, improve their pronunciation or brush up on their grammar. It may be to raise their motivation by interesting them in some aspect of the target culture. This paper proposes that introducing EFL students to materials such as the films of Robert Zemeckis can provide them with new integrative motivation, increase their knowledge of other cultures and possibly turn them into independent learners of English.

It is not unusual for successful learners of a foreign language to be drawn to that language by its music, literature or films. Many foreign students of Japanese claim their interest developed after they became fans of Japanese manga. Students of Korean sometimes follow Korean musicians or TV shows. German language learners include many people with an interest in German literature or history. Among successful English learners are many fans of various music groups, writers, actors, and movies. The theoretical background to the success of “fans” as language learners was explained the 16th CamTESOL conference in Phnom Penh, February 2016, on the theme “Creating Independent Learners” by the closing plenary speaker, Phil Benson of Macquarie University. Benson indicates that students who are not independent learners cannot attain fluency in English. (Benson, 2016)

It is clear that the time needed to master a foreign language exceeds the classroom time available to most students. The American Foreign Service Institute’s research on language learning indicates that English speakers need 2,200 hours study in order to master Japanese. (FSI) There is little research on this topic, but let’s assume that Japanese need at least an equal amount of time to master English. Japanese may actually need more study time. Writing in a 2017 Japan Times opinion piece, Ikuko Tsuboya-Newell cited a survey which reported that, “Japanese tutors at English Tutor Network who have a TOEIC score above 900 say that they, on average, spent 4,000 to

5,000 hours studying English to reach that level.” (Tsuboya-Newell)

How much time do typical Japanese students actually spend in English class? A college student taking 8 ninety-minute classes a week for 15 weeks will have 180 hours of instruction per semester. Following the standard Japanese syllabus, most Japanese college students have already received 720 hours of instruction over six years of junior and senior high school. (ibid.) Even if they spend every minute in every English class, from junior high to college, on task (studying English), the 720 hours of instruction before starting college and 1,080 college class hours, 180 hours in each of 6 semesters before job hunting, falls 400 hours short of the required 2,200 hours. Sadly, not all hours are equal. The FSI assertion that English speakers can learn even a very different language in 2,200 hours is predicated on intensive study. It does not allow for the review time needed when study is stretched out over 10 years, including 10 summer and winter vacations. Clearly, even a college curriculum heavy in English, twelve hours a week, is not sufficient to enable average students to become fluent in English. Students need more study time at a higher level of motivation than they usually experience to master the target language.

In order really learn a language, students must become autonomous learners. Successful learners must want to spend their free time actively studying or using English. In his closing plenary address at CAMTesol 2016, Professor Benson illustrated learner autonomy with a diagram showing three overlapping circles. These circles are labeled: Ability, Desire and Freedom. (Benson, 2016) The area in which all three of these circles overlap is where independent or autonomous learning occurs. (ibid.) What Benson refers to as “desire” may be part of what Gardner and Lambert labeled “integrative motivation”. “Desire” is the key to independent learning. Traditionally, foreign languages were mainly taught in college literature departments. Students with the desire to study, or enjoy, literature explored increasingly demanding works as their language ability increased. Students mastered the target language in their leisure time (freedom). Sadly, reading literature seems to be out of fashion throughout the world’s college age population today. Amy Watson reported in *Statistica*, that, “On average, Americans aged 20 to 34 spend a mere 0.11 hours reading daily, which amounts to less than seven minutes per day.” (Watson) In Japan, many universities; including Baika Women’s University and Kwansei Gakuin, the the universities most important in my career, have vastly downsized or even eliminated literature departments. Few modern students express interest in literature, which was once the core of most language programs. However, many students still follow foreign films, tv shows and music.

Indeed, now that access to it to music is almost unlimited and often free, international music has retained or possibly increased in popularity. Music can indeed motivate students to read and thereby improve their English. Fans of Taylor Swift or the Beatles may do their best to understand song lyrics; or, may struggle with information available only in English to better understand these artists’ songs and lives. However, as proven by Bach, John Coltrane and others, music can be enjoyed without understanding its lyrics. Knowledge of an artist’s or song’s background may deepen our understanding of a composition but is not essential to understanding that composition. In any case, most pop songs are under 5 minutes long and usual involve the repetition of a chorus or a few key sentences. Movies can better motivate students to improve their foreign language skills. The right movie can provide context for the spoken language, an ongoing story that tempts students to spend more time and thought on that movie; and, in some cases, gives students new insights into different cultures or eras. This paper illustrates the use of movies in language classroom; specifically, movies by one of America's most acclaimed directors, Robert Zemeckis. Through descriptions of several approaches to using his movies in language education, the author hopes other teachers can find new ways to use movies to integratively motivate their own students.

Following this introduction, this paper consists of three parts. First, reasons why films were chosen to be used in lectures on American culture will be given. The second and largest part of this paper will include several “case studies” on how and why various Zemeckis films were used in class. The final part of the paper contains a brief explanation of the American dream and its role in the life and movies of Robert Zemeckis. At this point, an explanation must be given for relating a few first person accounts of classroom experiences in this paper. This is not intended to mean that

these personal experiences will be true for everyone but to indicate that the choice of a movie for classroom use must depend on a teacher's own interests and those of her / his students. Teaching based on a movie or movies goes far beyond simply having students watch all or part of a movie. It requires teachers to learn about and be prepared to tell about the movie, director and any historical information relevant to films chosen for class. If possible, these explanations should include a cross cultural element that will help students better understand the target language / culture. It is hoped that the "case studies" in this paper show how by explaining the background and meaning of a movie teachers can add to a student's enjoyment of that movie, help students understand the time or culture described in the movie and increase students' motivation to learn more.

Why movies?

Movie making is based on three skill sets: business, art and technology. Some critics of American studios feel the business aspect of movie making is given too much importance in the United States. American studios often revise films based on the analysis of audiences in advance showings. Some critics say American movies are products, not works of art. If American movies are products, they are in deed designed for and market to international audiences. Once a studio has finished a major production, the studio markets its film enthusiastically. As much as US\$200 million may be spent on advertising the release of a major movie. (McClintock) The film's stars and director are sent on public appearance media blitzes to promote it. Some critics condemn American movie making as uncreative, a factory system and so on. However; it is an extremely successful system. The Motion Picture Association reported that America's movie industry directly or indirectly employed 2,500,00 people in 2018. (MPA) David Robb published an article with a rather lengthy title, "U.S. Film Industry Topped \$43 Billion In Revenue Last Year, Study Finds, But It's Not All Good News", in Deadline, a Hollywood online news source. The good news referred to in this title was that the revenue at American studios had continued 5 years of growth to top \$43 billion in 1917. The bad news was that domestic box office sales in the United States and Canada, were down by 2%, also continuing a 5 year trend. (Robb) Robb cited the following breakdown of studio revenue:

...films shown at the domestic box office now make up less than a quarter of all the revenue they generate, with foreign distribution accounting for 36.1%. The largest source of revenue (39.1%) came from ancillary forms of domestic distribution including the sale of Blu-rays and DVDs, direct-to-consumer film rentals through video-on-demand services, and licensing fees from television broadcasters and streaming services." (ibid.)

As this industry publication shows, American studio executives are aware of the growing importance of the foreign market to Hollywood. The USD 15.5 billion earned from foreign distribution of American films (36.1% of USD 43 billion) shows that American movies are extremely popular abroad. However, even this huge sum of money may lead readers to underestimated the popularity of American movies overseas. It does not account for the large number of illegal downloads and copies of American movies found in some countries. It is also misleading in respect to theatre box office. Tickets for a first run American movie might cost two dollars in a legitimate theatre in Malaysia or Thailand. A million dollars in revenue from Malaysia represents many more tickets sold than would be indicated by the same amount of revenue from the USA.

Market research is extremely important in Hollywood. Current research clearly indicates that the foreign market is growing in importance. Another question addressed by market research is the age of ticket and video buyers. This is addressed in the chairman's letter of another industry publication, the Motion Picture Association of America Theatrical Market Statistics of 2016,

In 2016, more young people and diverse populations went to the movies. Audiences between the ages of 18 and 24 attended an average of 6.5 movies over the course of the year — more than any other age group. Per capita attendance also increased among African American and Asian/Other audiences. (MPA)

Although movies are made to appeal to people in various age groups, the importance of

college and immediate post college years to American movie makers and marketers is clear. Consequently, American studios are “aiming” many of their movies at audiences between 18 and 24 years of age, with special attention to African American and Asian audiences — an age group includes almost all Japanese college students. That American studios carefully analyze movie goers and tailor movies to specific groups can be clearly seen in various industry publications. That the industry considers people in college or a few years older to be its most important market is also clear. That the American movie industry is trying to appeal to an increasingly international audience is yet another fact clearly stated in industry publications. American studios are sparing no effort to produce high interest material that appeals to students of college age.

Why Zemeckis movies ?

To teachers who have decided to use (American) movies to motivate students, the question arises why limit yourself to movies by one director or actor instead of picking from the hundreds of movies available. It is indeed possible to create interesting theme based movie courses, such as Asian Women in American Film or Minority Experiences in America. However, by examining several different movies by one prolific director, students are encouraged to consider a broader range of topics. Zemeckis films are well suited as educational and motivational material for several reasons. First, they show an awareness of history, especially pop history and the development of post WWII youth culture. Second, they are both fast paced and funny. Humor based on English puns and cultural trivia abound in his movies. Third, by choosing movies by one director the teacher is able to introduce information about that director's background. This enables interested viewers to develop a better understanding of a country, in this case America, in the late 20th century. Fourth, Zemeckis movies are entertaining to casual viewers but have depth that is not easily recognized by all viewers. His movies, especially *Forrest Gump*, contain many facts and scenes, which can be explained either in writing or lectures. Added information deepens the students' enjoyment and understanding. Fifth, Zemeckis has played an important role in the development of special effects. His movies can be used as the framework of a course in cinema studies. Finally, Zemeckis' life represents an example of the American dream, the power to shape one's own future through hard work, a just society and belief in oneself.

Case Studies: Sample Teaching Approaches to Zemeckis and his Work as American Studies

Back to the Future: Youth Culture

For college students, probably the easiest understood and most enjoyable lectures in a course on Zemeckis film are those related to *Back to the Future* (1985). By filming the same town in two different decades, 1955 and 1985, Zemeckis shows how American society changed over this important 30-year span. The development of shopping malls has led to downtown decay even in small towns such as the one shown in this film. At first glance the changes are bad. The beautiful town square has been replaced by a parking lot. The 1955 first run cinema has been replaced by a seedy adult theater. On the other hand, there has been laudable social change as well. In 1955, an Afro-American boy sweeping a local diner declares that he will be mayor when he grows up. His boss disdainfully says that there will be never be a colored mayor. In 1985, the boy is mayor running for his third term. Several other scenes show the rapid development of consumer technology. In written comments on this film, several students said they were astonished by a scene in which an average family (in 1955) got its first television set. The idea of a family not having a television set or computer is stranger to them than the idea of a family having a flying car.

One change of great interest to college students is the emerging youth culture, a separate identity between childhood and adulthood, in society. (Advameg) In a recent article in the Washington post, James Marriott wrote that. In the rich, postwar, baby boom years of the late 50s and 1960s, a separate culture for you young people, called “the youth culture”, developed in both the UK and USA. Before this development, teenagers were more or less considered to be small adults. (Marriott) They listened to the same music, watched the same shows and read the same books and magazines their parents did. It was not until the relatively large numbers of births after World War II and the booming post war economy gave teens the numbers and wealth needed to bring about

youth culture. Fashion, music, TV shows and even cars were designed to appeal to young adult market. The older generation had more money. but they also paid mortgages, car payments and school fees. Then, as today, many young adults spent much of their income on fun; dates, music, travel and movies. The focus of mass marketers in America, and many other countries, changed from middle aged adults to young adults. Zemeckis illustrates this change several times the movie; but, nowhere is it clearer than at the Enchantment Under the Sea Dance, a high school prom. At one point, the 1955 lead guitarist has injured his hand. Marty, the boy from 1985, takes the stage. He starts off with “Johnny B. Goode” by Chuck Berry, a guitarist some critics consider the “father” of rock and roll music. The previously staid high schoolers start dancing with wild abandon. They were ready for the change that was about to sweep over society.

In his recent book, *The Decadent Society*, New York Times columnist Ross Douthat used the movie *Back to the Future* to explain the magnitude of the change in youth culture in the period between 1955 and 1985. The list of items that changed in this period includes almost everything; fashion, music, sexual mores, conversation topics, use of free time, etc. (Douthat) *Back to the Future* presents these changes in a humorous manor. Fashion for example, when Marty from 1985 walked into his hometown in 1955, he was asked why he was wearing a life preserver, a down vest. Technology, Marty decided not to explain to his uncle, a young boy at the time, what a television rerun was. Still later, as Marty prepared to go back to 1985, he demanded to change clothes. “You think I am going back in that, that zoot suit,” he complained. (Zemeckis Gale)

Zemeckis and Gale’s decision to compare 1985 and 1955 shows either incredible insight or incredible luck. In a widely syndicated review of Douthat’s book, “Why We May Be Stuck in a Time Loop Reliving the 60s and 70s”, James Marriot asked the question, “Would people in 1980s be shocked by the appearance of a time traveller from the 2020s?” He then suggests that the only surprises would be that shoulder pads had disappeared from women’s clothing; and, even more amazingly, that everyone had an iPhone. Mariott maintains that the youth culture established in the years skipped over by Marty McFly still exists today. Douthat contends that this 30-year period, 1955 to 1985, was the last great creative burst of western culture. He holds that this period’s real and fictitious characters will be the benchmarks of modern pop-culture for some time to come. Among the accomplishments of this period we can find: the Beatles, the Marvel Universe, Bob Dylan and the first films of Robert Zemeckis. Teenage movie-goers in 1985 were surprised by how much young people’s lives had changed over the preceding 30 years. Marriott states that today’s teenagers would be surprised by how little has changed in the last 35 years. (Marriott)

Thanks to this great change in society, for Americans in their 50s and 60s, *Back to the Future* is filled with inside jokes. For example, when the time traveler, a boy named Marty from 1985, first walks in to a diner in 1955, he quite naturally orders something to drink. He wants a low calorie drink; so he asks for a Pepsi Free, a sugar-free drink marketed by Pepsi in the 80s. The diner’s owner replies, “If you want a Pepsi, pal, you’re gonna have to pay for it.” Then Marty asks for a Tab, another sugar free drink once marketed by Coca-Cola. In 50s slang, tab meant a bill for something you’ve ordered. The owner replies, “I can’t give you a tab unless you order something.” Finally, in desperation, Marty says, “OK, just give me something with no sugar”. The exasperated clerk pours Marty a cup of black coffee. Zemeckis included another “boomer inside joke” in the school dance mentioned above. After Marty starts to play “Johnny B. Goode”, the injured guitarist calls his cousin in St. Louis. He explains that he's discovered the new type of music that his cousin, also a guitarist, has been looking for. When his cousin doesn't recognize his voice, the injured man says, “Chuck, it's me, your cousin Marvin, Marvin Berry.” (Zemeckis, Gale) Explaining these and other lines from *Back to the Future* to today's college students is time well spent. Such explanations not only increase student enjoyment of *Back to the Future*; but, also, both shows students the value of thinking more deeply about a movie can be interesting and amusing and help them to better understand American society.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit: Los Angeles, Film Noir and History

In 1988, Zemeckis directed live actors in a film that “co-starred” a number of cartoon characters; Betty Boop, Mickey Mouse, Dumbo, Donald Duck and dozens more. The plot of this film

is that the title character, a cartoon rabbit named Roger, is accused of killing the owner of a toy company, who has been “playing patty cake” with the rabbit’s cartoon wife. A down and out private eye, Eddie Valiant takes on the case and eventually discovers that the real killer is another cartoon character masquerading as a human judge and politician. The judge’s ultimate goal is to buy up and dismantle LA’s public transportation system in order to force its citizens to use the highway system being built by his company. Anyone following this synopsis of the plot so far is probably not asking him or herself what this movie can teach viewers about history. The answer to this un-asked question is, “Quite a bit.” As will be explained below, this movie is based on actual events in the history of Southern California.

In addition to information on the history of American public transportation in the early 20th century, this movie conveys a myriad of scenes from the history of American movie industry. First, it is clearly a parody of a type of movie unknown to younger audiences, the film noir. Popular in the 1940s and 50s, film noir protagonists are bitter, cynical heroes, or occasionally anti-heroes, who have usually been disappointed in both life and love. The most common protagonist is a slightly over the hill male detective, such as Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade; or, a disappointed, cynical man, like Rick the American in *Casablanca*. Some critics feel that *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* is most closely related to yet another homage to film noir, Polanski’s *Chinatown*. A critic for New York Magazine wrote, “Indeed, the script for Roger was actually inspired by *Chinatown* in its attempts to warp and bend actual history to fit the framework of a blockbuster.” (Van Der Werff) Roger Rabbit can introduce film noir to today’s students, giving them insight into American culture of the 40s and 50s.

However, true films in this rather bitter genre would probably not appeal to modern viewers. Thankfully, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* is a parody of film noir; not a true film noir. It is filled with puns, insider jokes from the movie industry and little peeks into movie making of the past. Teachers can explain these jokes and anachronisms in ways that increase students’ enjoyment of the movie, their ability in English and knowledge of American cultural and cinematic history. One example related to language learning concerns the idiom “to work for peanuts.” Dumbo, a Disney cartoon elephant, appears in this movie. The studio’s owner throws a handful of peanuts into the air that the pachyderm sucks up like a vacuum cleaner. The businessman then gloats that the elephant and other cartoon characters, “work for peanuts.” When first watching the film, students had absolutely no reaction reaction to this line. However, after learning that the phrase “works for peanuts” means to work for a very cheap salary and is similar to “daikonyakusha” (an actor who eats radishes) in Japanese the students had a good chuckle. Almost a year later when asked what the phrase “works for peanuts” means, three former members of class all smiled in recognition. One gave a perfect definition in English. A second student added, “Like Dumbo.” Zemeckis’s little joke had cemented the meaning of this idiom into their memories.

As mentioned above, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* is set in a film version of Hollywood. It is filled with allusions and examples of business methods and technical developments in movie history. The studio at which much of the action of this film takes place is modeled on American studios at the height of their power in the 30s and 40s. One prop shown in this story is a moviola, the film editing machine on which all most all movies of the 30s to 50s were made. A simple explanation of this machine can teach students a lot about movie making and movie history.

Discussions of the actual making of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* can teach students about the business side of American studios. This is a Disney movie and naturally contains Disney cartoon characters. However, Warner Brothers Studios took the unprecedented step of allowing its cartoon characters also to appear. Warner granted Disney the rights to use its characters because of the popularity of the movie’s director, Zemeckis, and its producer, Steven Spielberg. Warner Brothers did not want to miss the chance to have their characters appear in a major movie featuring 40s cartoon characters filmed by a top flight director and producer, even if it was a Disney movie. (Rodriquez)

Who Framed Roger Rabbit is itself an important milestone in movie technology. In this film Zemeckis pushed the boundaries of filmmaking without computer graphics as far as they would

go. Today's teenagers have seen that that anything is possible through computer graphics. However, after watching the excellent *Making of Roger Rabbit* included in the special edition of the Roger Rabbit DVD, they realize the boundaries of special effects without CGI and the effort needed to reach these boundaries. The 20 minute "Making of" documentary shows how hand puppets, costumed characters, robots, live actors and cartoon animation were used to create the movie. Zemeckis has consistently led the way in pioneering special effects over the last 30 years. The *Making of Roger Rabbit* shows the state of the art in movie special effects as of 1988. (Mayfield, 1988)

Roger Rabbit's lessons in history are not just limited to the history of cinema or pop culture. Students who have watched *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* are amazed to learn that the movie plot is related to the transportation chaos and air pollution found in some American cities today. The plot of the story holds that an evil mastermind wishes to replace the (Pacific Electric) streetcars of Los Angeles with a network of freeways. This is in order to force residents to commute by car. Eddie, the movie's downtrodden hero, comments, "Only a toon (cartoon character) would be loony enough to come up with that plan." In fact, like many other American cities of that time, LA once had a highly efficient and popular public transportation system, popularly known as the Red Car. This profitable concern was bought out by a group mainly financed by America's major oil companies. Once they had purchased the system, they closed it and sold off the property on which its tracks had been laid to hundreds of different landowners. This, of course, made it impossible to rebuild the system. Sadly, Eddie was wrong to say that only a toon could think of such a loony idea. (Price) Poorer neighborhoods, often Mexican or African American, were demolished or divided to make way for L.A.'s freeways. At least one movie critic and cinema historian feels that Toontown, the area inhabited by cartoon characters which was to be razed, is actually a stand-in for these communities. (Van Der Werff)

Forrest Gump: Brushing Shoulders with History

In 2004, Japanese American writer Cynthia Kadohata's publisher reported to her that her first novel, *The Floating World*, had been well received in the young adult (YA) market. Therefore, she decided to write a book specifically for that market. Eventually, she went on to write 6 very successful YA novels. In a 2006 speech to educators held at the Japanese museum in San Francisco, Kadohata recounted the following antidote. Before starting her first book specifically for the YA market, she asked a more experienced writer in the field what young adults considered a historical novel. The answer was, "Anything before the 1980s." (Kadohata 2006) Time marches on. Most of the senior teaching staff in colleges today clearly realize that much of what they have experienced is the mysterious past to the average 18 to 21 year old. If we update what Kadohata was told in 2004 to today, for today's youth anything before 1996 is history. Teaching about *Forrest Gump* to college age students is teaching history.

For lecturers on film, the movie *Forrest Gump* is like a box of chocolates. It is what you make of it. A lecturer can approach this movie from various angles. The film can be used in relation to problems as diverse as American involvement in foreign wars, segregation, women's rights, drug addiction, racial prejudice, the meaning of love, fate vs free will, bullying at school, the aids epidemic, prejudice against handicapped people and so on. Sadly, all of the problems seen in this movie are still meaningful to young people today. How previous generations have dealt with or ignored these problems is also still relevant.

Two historically oriented lectures on *Gump*, one on pop songs featured in the movie and another on the famous characters met by Forrest, have been particularly well received by students. The lecture on pop songs requires some text analysis and fairly long descriptions of the social background behind each song. This approach, which lends itself well to teaching vocabulary and recent American history, is better suited for more advanced or highly motivated students. Alan Silvesteri, who was in charge of the music for this and most of Zemeckis's other films, did an excellent job of capturing the ever-changing spirit of the 60s, 70s and 80s. For example, "California Dreaming", by The Mamas and The Papas, epitomizes the "summer of love" in San Francisco. "Fortunate Son", by Creedence Clearwater Revival, captures working class anger against American

power elites; more specifically, against the unfair way America drafted young men into its military at this time, which allowed wealthy or well connected families to keep their sons out of the war.

The second lecture, which involves explaining the historical figures Forrest met, is probably the easiest way to use this film to teach American culture/history. Students caught up in the movie's narrative are eager to learn the roles these characters played in both the movie and in American history. To anyone old enough, American enough, or interested in America enough, each of the famous characters Forrest meets is a chapter in history. The following timeline shows the historical characters who "make cameo appearances" in *Forrest Gump*. In my most recent "pre-test / post-test" experiment with college students, except for John Lennon and Elvis Presley, students knew nothing but the name of these characters.

Encounters with *Forrest Gump*:

1956 Jan	Elvis Presley, popular musician
1962 Oct	Bear Bryant, Alabama football coach
1963 July	George Wallace, conservative segregationist governor of Alabama
1963 Nov	President John F. Kennedy, presenting Forrest with a football award
1968 July	Abby Hoffman at an anti war protest
July	President Lyndon B. Johnson, presenting Forrest with a medal of honor
1971	Dick Cavett, a TV talk show host
	John Lennon, another guest on Dick Cavet's show
1972 June	President Richard Nixon, ping pong diplomacy in China

Topics that can be addressed by discussing these famous Americans range from 1950s popular music to the Watergate affair and the fall of Richard Nixon. Along the way, *Forrest's* story touches on sports in the south, segregation, violence against American politicians, a foreign war, the opening of China and the Beatles.

As interesting as these historical figures are, the movie's main characters are Forrest, Jenny and Lieutenant Dan. They have a habit of walking through history at just the right, or wrong, time. Explaining the events in the main characters' lives is another way to open the box of chocolates (lectures) we can label "*Forrest Gump*." Truly successful lectures on these topics can accomplish more than just teach a bit about history. They might lead to increased critical thinking and the thrill of understanding a topic more deeply in some students. With the aid of good explanations, the innovative and fascinating way in which Zemeckis tells these stories can give students of English the motivational boost needed to become independent language learners.

Zemeckis: An American Dream

After presenting a few "case studies" of Zemeckis movies, such as those just described, it is easy to segue into a discussion of Zemeckis and the American dream. In 1931, James Truslow Adams, a leading American historian and writer, defined the American dream as follows, "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement regardless of social class or circumstances of birth." (Adams) The fulfillment of the American dream is the basis of many America's best novels and movies. The director's life story can also be described as one person's fulfillment of the American dream.

Zemeckis was born in 1952 in Chicago. His mother, an Italian American, and his father, a Lithuanian-American, were working class. Although his parents tried to discourage him, Zemeckis developed an intense interest in making short films while in high school. This led to film studies in a nearby university and part time jobs at local TV stations cutting film to make commercials and news. He attempted to transfer to the school of his dreams, the University of Southern California's film school. USC rejected his application at first because of low grades. However, in a phone call his enthusiasm for filmmaking, ideas on film and belief in his own abilities persuaded a film school administrator to give him a chance. He did very well at USC. A short film, which he wrote and directed, *A Field of Honor*, won a prestigious student award, the equivalent of an Academy Award

for students. This short film impressed a slightly older, more established USC graduate, the director Steven Spielberg, who used his influence to arrange for Universal Studios to hire both Robert Zemeckis and another USC student, Zemeckis's friend and writing partner, Bob Gale.

In 1978, at age 26, Zemeckis directed his first movie, *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*. The movie is about three high school girls who wanted to meet their idols, the Beatles, who were in New York for an appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show. Zemeckis had studied the art and technology of film making at USC but he was about to learn a harsh lesson about the business side of film making. His first movie flopped because of its title filmgoers had expected to see a movie about the Beatles. (Emery) Instead, they saw three teenage girls chasing shadows, cardboard cut outs and moving cars. The following year, another movie based on a screenplay written by Zemeckis and Gale, also flopped, even though it had been directed by Spielberg himself. In 1980, Zemeckis directed his second movie, *Used Cars*. Critics liked this movie but Universal Studios had already given up on Zemeckis and didn't spend much to advertise it. This movie was his third box office failure. With this strike, Zemeckis was no longer a movie maker. He was relegated to producing and directing horror shows for the TV series *Tales from the Crypt*. (Emery)

1984 was a very good year for Robert Zemeckis. Even though he had been associated with three box office flops, he was selected by one of Hollywood's most popular leading men, Michael Douglas, to direct him in the movie *Romancing the Stone*. Douglas had been impressed with *Used Cars* and its director. He stood by Zemeckis even when the studio tried to change directors midway through filming. (Rodriegez) Douglas's faith in the young director was well rewarded. *Romancing the Stone* became the number one box office success of 1984. Suddenly, the three-time loser Zemeckis, who said he had been avoided by studio executives like the plague, became a "hot property". (ibid.)

After the success of *Romancing the Stone*, studio executives suddenly remembered a script about time travel that Zemeckis and partner, Bob Gale had written several years earlier. Zemeckis and Gale had offered the script to all seven of Hollywood's major studios. Each of these studios had rejected it. After *Romancing the Stone*, all seven of these studios made bids for this script. (ibid.) The writers gave this script to Universal Studios. This movie, *Back to the Future*, became the number one box office success of 1985 and one of the most successful American movies of all times. With the help of Steven Spielberg and Michael Douglas, Zemeckis had overcome opposition by his family, his university and the Hollywood establishment to become one of America's most sought after directors.

Zemeckis's career embodies the American dream; a strong, talented person with a vision who could find fame and success. Success through hard work and belief in yourself can be seen in several of Zemeckis's movies. The leading man in *Romancing the Stone* is a poor young man trying to catch enough exotic birds in Columbia to fulfill his dream of buying an ocean going yacht. He obtained both the yacht and love. Marty's dream in *Back to the Future* was to play guitar at his high school dance. He did it but in a way he had not expected! Zemeckis continues to film the realization of dreams in his later movies; such as the boy hero in *Polar Express* who needed to find his lost ticket. He found it and when he did he saw that printed on it was the word "believe". Zemeckis wanted to become a director. To do so he had to fight his working class background, university administrators who rejected him for his low grades and the hierarchy of Hollywood studios who had written him off as a failure. Zemeckis is living the American dream.

Conclusion

Reviews of Zemeckis as a director repeatedly refer to him as one of America's best storytellers. (Emery) He has an interest in pop history and a knack for interestingly presenting historical details and time specific references in his movies. This paper examines a few of the many possible approaches to using his films to teach students about 20th century America. It also gives examples of information that can given students as handouts, lectures or discussions. Although a knowledgeable teacher can greatly contribute to students learning experience, it is no shame to admit that a major Hollywood studio, after spending millions of dollars on market research and

revising films scripts and movies, often packages information in a more interesting form than could easily be created by the average teacher. However, the same “average teacher’s” role in explaining this movie enables him to piggyback on the interest popular movies can generate.

It is hoped that a course such as the one described in this paper, based on movies and additional spoken, written or videoed information provided by teachers, will benefit students in several ways. First, it can increase student interest, leading to increased “guided” study time, time needed to understand films and other teacher provided materials. Second, such a course should encourage students to think more deeply, to look behind the surface meanings of what they see, not just on the screen but also in life. Learning to see past the obvious is an important part of maturation. Third, along with improving students command of English, it is hoped that the movies and teacher input suggested in this paper can help students better understand the culture of at least one English-speaking country, the United States. Finally, since the amount of time allotted to English in most programs is usually insufficient for students to actually master the language, it is hoped that students will become “fans”, independent learners who further explore topics or films on their own. Motivating and teaching students can be often difficult. However, it is a task in which Marty McFly, Roger Rabbit, Forrest Gump and Robert Zemeckis can help.

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