English Language Learning Program Newsletter

July/August 2025

Short Films for Learning English

Short films are a fun way for students to practice English, and they can lead to some great discussions. Their length – usually less than 15 minutes – means that they are brief enough to watch and discuss within one lesson (though you might want to have learners prepare by watching them in advance). Here are some recommendations for films for intermediate or advanced learners:

- In Yu Ming Is Ainm Dom, a man from China sets out to learn Irish, not realizing that it's not widely spoken in Ireland.
- Dotty is a moving film about an elderly woman trying to remember how to use her cell phone in order to contact her daughter.
- Two Strangers Who Meet Five Times is a memorable story about redemption and personal growth.
- We've All Been There shows that one good deed leads to another – or, to use an expression that might be new to learners, "what goes around comes around."

Here are a few films that are a little more challenging. All happen to relate to themes of Asian American identity.

- Neb is about a young man of Korean heritage who pretends to speak Korean in order to impress a date.
- In One Note, a high school student tries to meet her parents' expectations for success by getting into Harvard.
- Si is about a teenager who struggles to come to terms with being Asian in a predominantly white community (inspired by the director's experience growing up in Concord, Massachusetts).

What about films for beginners? These three are very short (under four minutes) and accessible, with minimal dialogue. Students can practice describing the plot and stating the message of each film in simple terms.

- The Notebook is about a young boy who helps his mother make time for him.
- In The Present, a boy with a disability learns to see life a little differently.
- I Forgot My Phone is about the perils of our smartphone-addicted culture.

Another idea for beginners is to use clips of the British sitcom *Mr. Bean* (not a short film, but easy to excerpt), which has very little dialogue. Here are scenes of Mr. Bean going shopping; you can find others on YouTube.

If you are interested in exploring other short films for English learners, check out this list. You can find many more films in a variety of genres at Short of the Week. Finally, a technology tip: If you are showing one of these films during an online meeting, remember to share your computer's sound so that your learner can hear it!

Upcoming Events for ELL Tutors

Eric Shuel, a popular presenter who has led some workshops for our tutors in recent years, is back! He will be presenting a workshop, "Successful Practice Activities for ELL Lessons," on Saturday, September 27, from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. at the library. Here is the description:

In this workshop, Eric Shuel – a longtime ELL teacher and teacher trainer – will present several tried-and-true, easy-to-plan activities that can be incorporated into almost any lesson, with learners ranging from beginner to advanced. The last 30 minutes will be a Q&A with Eric.

Registration is required, and space is limited. You can sign up for the event here.

I am also planning another workshop for tutors about U.S. citizenship, which will include discussion of recent changes announced by the administration. This event will be similar to the one in April, which was well-attended. Here is the description:

This is a workshop for ELL tutors about the citizenship test and the naturalization process. It will cover eligibility requirements; what's on the test; best practices and recommended resources to prepare applicants for the citizenship interview; and recent/potential changes to the application, interview, and test under the current administration.

This event will take place on Monday, September 29, from 10:00 to 11:30 a.m. on Zoom. You can sign up here.

Stay tuned for information about more guest speakers in the coming months. Also, consider signing up for one of our regular tutor roundtables, where tutors get together to share experiences and ideas with each other. The feedback about these has been very positive!

Theme-Based Stories

One of my favorite online resources for beginners, ESL Literacy Readers, recently went offline. Fortunately, I discovered a similar resource, Theme-Based Stories, which has stories from the old site, plus much more. The stories relate to common "life skills" themes, such as health, family, food, and shopping. As they are intended for beginners, they are written in the present tense and have lots of pictures, typically one per sentence. The stories are presented in slideshow format – ideal for online lessons or for tutors to show on a laptop or tablet during an in-person lesson; most also have printable versions and/or are available as narrated videos on YouTube. Here are a few examples:

- Jen Gets a Check-Up, about a young girl's trip to the pediatrician
- Tom's First Day, about a man starting a job at a factory
- Emma Makes Soup, about (you guessed it) a woman preparing soup

The stories are hosted on a site called Adult ELL Pathway to Literacy, which has other useful resources. In particular, I would recommend the Vocabulary Photo Banks, which are slideshows featuring pictures and vocabulary based on the same life skills topics as the stories. Here is an example about clothes and shopping.

Learner Profile

Latha is an English learner from India. She came to the United States two years ago because of her husband's job, and they live in Newton with their two children, who are 15 and 10. She recently got a job as a supermarket cashier; however, as a former ICU nurse, her long-term goal is to work as a nurse in the United States after she improves her English.

A friend recommended that she apply for a tutor from the ELL Program, and she was matched with Mary (also a former nurse), with whom she has been meeting since last August. "[The first time] I saw her, she asked me a lot of questions, but I didn't reply properly to her," Latha explains. However, now she can answer questions and express herself more easily. "I'm happy with that."

She thinks that the speaking practice she does with Mary is the most beneficial part of their lessons; she likes that Mary gives her topics to prepare to discuss in the following lesson. In addition, they have worked on grammar and vocabulary, including words related to nursing and working as a cashier, which have been helpful on the job. She does writing at home and brings it to lessons for Mary to correct, and they practice reading with short articles about holidays, such as Mother's Day and Juneteenth. To improve her listening skills, Mary recommended that she listen to NPR and the BBC. She didn't like doing this at first, but now she feels that her listening skills are better and it's easier for her to understand the news.

In addition to her lessons with Mary, Latha has been a dedicated and enthusiastic participant in the ELL Program's group classes, having attended more than 30 of them over the past two years. (Each class typically meets for 8-10 weeks.) "All ELL classes [have been] very helpful to me to improve my English skills," she says. "I got a new job here, so I am excited to do that work."

Program News

- As I mentioned in a recent email to volunteers, the ELL and Literacy collection at the library is in the process of moving – not very far, though! It is staying on the third floor, but closer to the atrium and the "rear arc," where many of our group classes take place. Please let me know if you have trouble finding something.

- Whiteboards and markers may be borrowed from the circulation desk or the second-floor reference desk. These can be used by tutors meeting in one of the second-floor study rooms or elsewhere in the library.

- Looking for new teaching ideas? Remember that past editions of this newsletter are available on the ELL page of the library website!

- Two upcoming concerts at the library will feature acclaimed musicians from South Korea, Greece, and India: a "four hands" piano concert on Sunday, September 7, and Leaves, Lyrics, and Emotions: Song Compositions of Tagore on Sunday, September 21 (both at 2:00).

Until next time,
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