

Teaching English as a Second Language via the American film Forest Gump

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Abstract. This study belongs to the line of research on the interface between ESP and Cinematography. In particular, it seeks to investigate the usefulness of using the film Forest Gump in English language teaching and learning. Stylistics is used because the present study studies language and style, which are rooted in figurative language via figures of speech. To this effect, this article applied a descriptive qualitative method. The data of the study were taken from the film Forest Gump. The forms of the data are the sentences uttered by the main character who is Forest Gump in the selected film, which is replete with figures of speech. For its theoretical framework, this paper relies on Perrine's theory. It focuses on five figures of speech, namely metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole and paradox. Each type of figure of speech has its specific function and meaning. In addition, the results of the pilot study were interpreted quantitatively to reveal the positive effect of the selected film upon participants' fluency. It has been found that students' fluency is improved by language input and figures of speech they are exposed to during the viewing process of the film.

Key words: *Forest Gump, English language teaching, learning, Perrine's theory, pilot study, figures of speech.*

1. Introduction

1.1 Films and language learning

It is believed that in an EFL/ESP context, films as means of communication do not only aim at entertaining and delivering information, but they also seek to teach the English language and improve viewers' listening, vocabulary, pronunciation and comprehension. In this light, two researchers investigate the use of the film in English language teaching. To explain, Bardovi-Harlig et al (1991, as cited in Henri, 2012) maintain that films provide "pragmatically appropriate language samples" in certain social contexts. In the same vein, Lowe (2007) argues, "film is an optimum source for learners to acquire useful vocabulary" (as cited in Henri, 2012). In this research, concern about films stems from the fact that little research has been conducted on the use of film in language teaching and learning.

1.2 Stylistics

The general framework applied to the analysis of the American film Forest Gump will be stylistics. The latter is concerned with the study of language in spoken or written form. In this context, Leech and Short (2007, as cited in Al-Qudsy, 2016, p.6) claim that "style is a way in which language is used. It refers to the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, and for a given purpose". Similarly, Verdonk (2002, as cited in Al Qudsy, 2016, p.7) argues that stylistics delves deeper into language and style. In other words, it is "a linguistic description on a language style study". Under stylistics, figures of speech are the stylistic devices used in figurative language. In this regard, Leech and Short (ibid) say, "figures of speech are the features which are foregrounded by virtue of departing in some way from general norms of communication by means of the language code".

This paper relies on Perrine's theory (1969) of figures of speech. In his book, *sound and sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, Perrine classifies twelve kinds of figures of speech (Perrine 1969, p.63) : metaphor, simile, personification, paradox, hyperbole, understatement, irony, oxymoron, allegory, allusion, symbol and personification. The present study focuses only on metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole and paradox. The reason behind the choice of these five figures of speech is their frequent occurrences in the movie under examination and their relevance

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to figurative language comprehension. As an explanation, metaphors, similes, and personification are valuable tools that help ESL students better understand the metaphorical nature of the English language. In addition to that, Understanding these rhetorical devices helps students become familiar with the idioms, clichés, and slang that native English speakers regularly employ. Students can learn more about the real-world language utilized by studying how it is employed in the movie. Also, students have the chance to familiarize themselves with a variety of stylistic tools and rhetorical writing standards through the study of figures of speech in *Forrest Gump*. Their general language and comprehension abilities can be improved by this exposure. Moreover, Throughout the selected film, the main character makes use of a variety of figures of speech in various situations. This wealth of examples enables a thorough examination and comprehension of the usage of these figures of speech.

According to Perrine (1969, p.65), metaphor is a comparison between two things without using “like” or “as”. Simile is a comparison of two things using “like” or “as”. Moreover, Kovecses (2010, as cited in Al Qudsy, 2016) states that, in personification, human-like characteristics are given to non-human objects. Added to that, Kennedy and Gioia (2007, *ibid*) say that hyperbole or overstatement is an exaggeration. Finally, paradox is a statement that contradicts itself, but it has a hidden meaning, which is covered beneath the surface of the language (*ibid*). In this study, the researcher will provide in – depth explanation of the five figures of speech used by the main character in the film *Forest Gump*.

1.3 Statement of the problem

The driving force of this research is to examine the hypothesis that *Forest Gump* significantly contributes to the teaching of English as a second language (ESL) to ESL students in a variety of ways. It particularly improves ESL students’ comprehension of figurative language, expands their vocabulary through its authentic context, and enhances their fluency and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC).

1.4 Research Questions

This study investigates the use of figures of speech in *Forest Gump* and their

role in improving participants’ vocabulary and fluency. Therefore, the research will attempt to answer the following questions:

- What are the types of figures of speech used in *Forest Gump*?
- How do they enhance participants’ fluency in the post-test?
- How does *Forest Gump* enhance participants’ Intercultural Communicative Competence?

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the usage of figures of speech in the movie *Forrest Gump* affects the vocabulary, fluency, and communicative competence of participants. To start with, this research will classify and break down the figures of speech that are used in the film under examination and explain their implied meanings to participants after watching the film. Added to that, the goal is to find out how participants’ utterances are affected by the use of figures of speech in the film. By giving them the means to communicate effectively and creatively, understanding and identifying figures of speech can improve their fluency and communicative competence.

1.5 Objectives of the study

In relation to the aforementioned problems, the present study seeks to:

- Investigate the role of the film in improving participants’ fluency.
- Explore the figures of speech and their underlying messages in the discussion session between the researcher and participants.
- Showcase the possibility of improving participants’ Intercultural Communicative Competence via *Forest Gump*.

The current study seeks to address the following goals. To start with, it reveals how figures of speech in *Forest Gump* expand participants’ English vocabulary. What is more, the purpose of this paper is to find out how the use of figures of speech affects viewers’ language proficiency and comprehension. Language fluency can be improved by comprehending and identifying figures of speech since they give learners the means to communicate effectively and creatively.

2. Methodology

This section provides a description of the methodology employed to analyze the data. It starts with a description of the corpus. In a subsequent step, this section deals with the rationale behind data selection. Finally, the qualitative, quantitative approaches and the

pilot study are explained.

2.1 Criteria for selection

Forest Gump is chosen as it is a popular film. To explain, is an American film released in 1994. It gained a high popularity and achieved a financial and huge box-office success. According to Lugie (2013), “Forest Gump is a miracle of 90’s American movie. It had made 300 million US dollars locally and 657 million US dollars globally, winning 6 major Oscar Award”. (para .1)

Forest Gump is selected due to its relationship with English language teaching. As an illustration, This Oscar-winning film provides the opportunity for students to learn English. According to Lowe (2007), “film is an optimum source for learners to acquire useful vocabulary” (as cited in Henri, 2012). In this manner, Tom Hanks, Robin Wright and Sally Field are good actors and teachers in this comic film as they help students improve their English vocabulary, listening, comprehension, pronunciation and speaking. Thus, viewers, watch, laugh and learn at the same time.

2.2 Qualitative Research paradigm

In this study, a descriptive qualitative approach was used, as it focuses on explaining the phenomenon of English language learning in the film. Furthermore, this study is qualitative since it provides a deep understanding of the use of figures of speech and their meanings in the film.

2.3 Stylistics: what for?

Stylistics enables the researcher to study the figures of speech, which are the stylistic devices, used in *Forest Gump*. This stylistic analysis investigates metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole and paradox, which enhance the learners’ vocabulary and fluency in English. That is why the study depends on Perrine’s theory (1969) which explores the different types of figures of speech. In addition, the analysis interprets their hidden meanings, which are covered beneath the surface of the language. After watching the film, a discussion session was opened between participants and the researcher about the explanations of the five figures of speech in the film. The reason behind this interaction is to explain the meanings of these rhetorical devices to participants and use them in their post-tests in order to assess their fluency in

comparison with the pre-test.

2.4 Pilot Study

2.4.1 Participants’ Selection:

The study involves a group of 30 baccalaureate students who studied at the college of Aboukacem Chebbi in Sfax. The participants are aged between 17 and 19. The reason behind selecting these participants stems from the fact that their proficiency levels enable them to express effectively their ideas in English. Added to that, participants are available and willing to take part in the pilot study, including attending the pre-test and post-test sessions and watching the film *Forrest Gump*.

2.4.2 Procedure

I received the participants’ consent, to ensure their voluntary participation in the study. Before watching the film, participants are individually assessed using a pre-test. Prior to the study, participants are directed to complete an online placement test consisting of multiple-choice questions. The test covers various aspects of English language skills, including grammar and vocabulary. Participants select the most appropriate answer for each question within 30 minutes. Based on their performance in the placement test, 16 students have pre-intermediate levels and 14 students have intermediate levels of English.

Then, participants did a pre-test. It consists of a speaking task where participants are asked to talk about a memorable personal experience that taught them an important life lesson. The topic is chosen as it is relevant to their lives. The purpose is to assess their fluency, coherence, vocabulary use, and ability to express ideas spontaneously. Errors, hesitations, and areas for improvement are noted.

In another session, students watched the film *Forest Gump*, and English subtitles are supplied to facilitate students’ understanding of the figures of speech uttered by Forrest. Participants were asked to pay attention to the figures of speech used by the main character, and take notes during the viewing process. After watching the film, there was a group discussion explaining the meanings of the figures of speech.

After the discussion session, participants underwent a post-test. The post-test topic is “Reflect on the life lessons portrayed in the film *Forrest Gump* and their

relevance to your own lives.” Participants are encouraged to use figures of speech they encountered in the film. The purpose is to assess their fluency, coherence, vocabulary use, and ability to use figures of speech in different contexts.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Data Analysis

After viewing the film, an engaging discussion was opened between the researcher and participants about the five types of figures of speech in the selected movie. The rhetorical devices are explained to the students. For example, Forest uses figures of speech when talking about destiny. For instance, the feather at the beginning of the film is a metaphor for the theme of the movie, which is fate. In this way, the protagonist conveys the idea that life is not planned but, on the contrary, it flows by chance. He says that: “I don’t know if we each have a destiny or if we’re all just floating around accidental-like on a breeze”. Similarly, Forest uses simile to speak about fate. His idea is conveyed in the following lines: “Mama always said life was like a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re gonna get”. Furthermore, the main character in the film resorts to the use of personification. He gives the bullet human-like characteristics when talking to a strange man on the bench. He says: “a bullet jumped up and bit you”. Moreover, Forest employs hyperbole to communicate the idea that he was a good player in his football team by claiming that he “had run for 3 years, 2 months, 14 days, and 16 hours”. Finally, when recalling his mother’s wisdom about dying and living, which are two contrasting ideas. Forest uses an oxymoron or paradox . He says: “Mama always said dying was a part of life”. These explanations of the five stylistic devices help participants to use these figures of speech in different contexts and know the figurative aspect of English language. Added to that, through these stylistic devices, participants manage to learn clichés and slangs that are used by native English speakers. By doing so, *Forest Gump* presents an authentic language input that “familiarizes students with stylistic devices and rhetorical writing conventions” (Jaashan, 2022, p. 425).

Table 1 highlights the improvement in scores for students in the post-test compared to the pre-test:

Table 1: Students’ fluency scores in the pre-test and post-test

Participants	Pre-test score	Post-test score
Ahmed	4	7
Firas	7	9
Mariem	8	9
Noha	7	8
Fedi	3	6
Ahlem	2	6
Ayman	4	7
Sawsan	7	8
Rania	6	9
Nawres	3	6
Taha	7	8
Khalil	8	9
Fatma	6	8
Ines	4	7
Rayen	7	8
Yousra	4	7
Amal	7	9
Chaima	6	8
Sameh	8	9
Hinda	6	8
Raouia	7	9
Ilyes	3	4
Ali	6	8
Amin	4	4
Sirine	7	8
Sabrina	4	4
Norhene	6	8
Amira	2	4
Sana	7	8
Rabeb	6	9

With reference to the scores in the pretest and post-test in the previous Table, there is a clear indication of improved fluency levels after watching the film *Forest Gump*. 19 individuals showed high fluency scores on the pre-test, while 11 students had low fluency. On the post-test, however, 26 other students received high fluency scores while only four students received low fluency scores. This obvious improvement in results implies that watching *Forest Gump* had a beneficial effect on the participants’ fluency skills. It explains how the movie gave them useful linguistic input, exposure to figures of speech, and chances to put what they had learned into practice in their speaking productions in the post-test. Thus, the film had a positive impact on participants’ fluency because the number of participants with high fluency scores increases in comparison with the pre-test results.

The results demonstrate quantitatively

the relationship between participants' fluency levels and their viewing of *Forest Gump*. It is clear that watching the movie and improving participants' fluency are related because more individuals received high fluency scores on the post-test.

Forest Gump seems to have a positive effect on the participants' performances. As an explanation, with reference to the students' scores in the pre-test and post-test, Table 2 reveals the number of students with low fluency and high fluency in the two tests.

	Low fluency	High fluency
Pre-test	11	19
Post-test	4	26

The difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of participants before and after watching the film is clearly manifested in the previous Table . The results can be translated into a graphical representation.

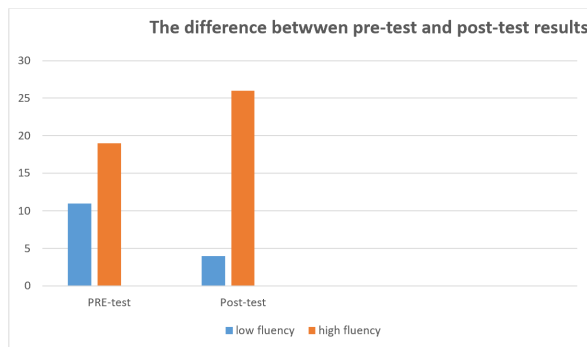


Fig.1 displays a remarkable shift in scores between the pre-test and post-test. In the pre-test, 11 participants had low fluency scores, while 19 participants had high fluency scores. In contrast to that, in the post-test, only 4 participants had low fluency scores, whereas 26 participants had high fluency scores. The visual representation of the scores fosters the idea that students' fluency is improved by language input and figures of speech that they are exposed to during the viewing process of the film. They managed to put what they had learned from the film and the discussion into practice .

3.2 Discussion

What merits attention during the pre-test, 11 students made interference errors and slips of the tongue while talking about their memorable personal experiences. For example, Yousra made interference errors as the structures and vocabulary of Vernacular Arabic language influence her communication. To explain, she unintentionally used Arabic

sentence structures and vocabulary while speaking in English. She said : «One time, I went to the souk and I buy many things. It was very crowded, and I got lost, but alhamdulillah, I found my way back home». In this case, she used «buy » instead of «bought ». In Tunisian Arabic, the past tense of the verb form doesn't require the auxiliary verb "did" or any conjugation changes. However, in English, the past tense requires the use of the auxiliary verb "did" for regular verbs, followed by the base form of the verb. So, 'buy » should be turned to bought when talking about a past memorable experience since it is an irregular verb. Moreover, the same participant used Arabic phrases in an English context. As a matter of fact, she utilized the word «souk» instead of «market» . Moreover, « Alhamdulillah" is an Arabic phrase meaning "praise be to God" or "thank God". While it is commonly used in Tunisian Arabic, it is not typically utilized in English conversations. The more appropriate English equivalent in this context is "fortunately." So, the correct sentence is "It was very crowded, and I got lost, but fortunately, I found my way back home ». Nawres , the other participant, unintentionally made an interference error from Arabic in her statement : "When I was child, I always play with my friends in the park ». She omitted the article «a» . To clarify, in Tunisian Arabic, the article "a" is often omitted when referring to oneself as a child or a specific category. However, in English, the article "a" is required before the singular countable noun "child." On top of all that, Ahlem », another participant, experienced slips of the tongue during her speech. She said : « I learned a very valuable [valuable] lesson from that experience. It made me realize [realize] the importance of family support." By saying that, she mispronounced "valuable" and "realize".

Moreover, pauses and hesitations are other types of speech errors that students made during the pre-test. For example, Amira , hesitated frequently while telling her experience. She paused several times, searching for the right words to convey her ideas. These moments of hesitation affected the overall flow and fluency of her speech, like « "Um, well, you know, uh, I had this, um, experience that, um, really taught me a lot." In contrast to that, after watching *Forrest Gump* and engaging in discussions about the film's five figures of speech and their hidden meanings, participants experienced a noticeable improvement in their fluency level and post-test scores as noted in Table 1 and

Figure 1.

By doing so, these participants were exposed to authentic language use and a variety of figures of speech while watching *Forest Gump*. They were given the opportunity to utilize these five stylistic devices in context, which helped students internalize and comprehend them. They understood these rhetorical devices and their implied meanings through discussions and explanations after viewing the film, which helped them speak fluently. As a result, these participants showed a decreased frequency of speech errors in the post-test. In point of fact, they were asked to give their opinions about the topic « “Reflect on the life lessons portrayed in the film *Forrest Gump* and their relevance to your own lives”. They were asked to use the figures of speech they observed in the film. During the post-test, they had the ability to use these stylistic devices in their utterances. As an illustration, Yosra opened her speech by stating that “Life is indeed like a box of chocolates, as *Forrest* claims. I have discovered, like the protagonist, that accepting risk and taking chances can result in unexpected pleasure in life ». Similarly, Mariem, an eloquent participant, compared her life to *Forrest’s* by drawing comparisons between them. She said, “I learned on my journey that life gives numerous flavors and options, much like a box of chocolates. It’s up to us to appreciate every moment, including the sad and happy ones, and to revel in the unexpected ». What is more, Sameh, another active participant, uses the metaphor of the “feather” at the beginning of the film to convey the idea of fate in her following utterance: “Just as the feather drifts through the wind, we too navigate through the waves of chance and destiny ». Finally, it can be said that these figures of speech enhance participants’ communicative competence. Indeed, by incorporating these linguistic tools into their speeches, participants created more engaging and creative utterances than in the pre-test.

The selected movie reveals different language variations, namely Southern accents and African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). By listening to characters’ speech patterns, participants gain knowledge about linguistic diversities, and thus they become open to different ways of communication. In other words, their ‘knowledge’ and positive ‘attitude’ towards other language variations can build effective intercultural communication. In this light, Byram (1997) proposed a model of Intercultural Communicative Competence

(ICC). It is composed of ‘knowledge’, ‘attitude’, ‘skills’ and ‘critical cultural awareness’ (as cited in Yue, 2019, p.199). In this way, there is a relationship between the film under examination and the various components of the ICC model. As an illustration, learners can be influenced by *Forrest’s* positive attitude towards different cultures. For instance, one can notice *Forrest’s* respect for *Bubba’s* racial difference by the way he interacts with his African-American companion. In this manner, students can follow *Forrest’s* footsteps by accepting diversity without bias or preconceptions, which fosters the idea of cultural awareness. In addition to that, another way of improving students’ intercultural communication skills is knowing the non-verbal cues of people from different cultures because they are other forms of social interactions. For example, when he travels to Vietnam, *Forrest* notices and abides by the Vietnamese bow which is a traditional greeting gesture. As a result, *Forest Gump* encourages cultural differences and intercultural communication skills.

Teaching ESL through *Forest Gump* challenges the traditional view of teaching English in an academic classroom setting. This new way of learning English can be an innovative method of teaching ESL. As an explanation, as opposed to solely relying on textbooks and grammatical exercises, adopting *Forest Gump* as a teaching resource allows pupils to experience actual language use in context. In the film, metaphors and similes are frequently used as figures of speech. What is more, students can hear native English speakers talking in a variety of accents and dialects in the selected film. This makes using movies in ESL instruction a more engaging way to learn the language and its distinctive varieties of pronunciation and informality. Indeed, *Forest Gump* gives students the chance to become familiar with vernacular English in addition to figures of speech. For example, *Forrest* uses slang phrases like “run like the wind” and “drunk as a skunk” that present opportunities for pupils to comprehend and use them in context in their conversations with native speakers.

4. Conclusion

On the whole, the results of the pre-test and post-test lead to the conclusion that *Forest Gump* can be an inventive way of teaching English. Thus, teaching ESL and cinematography become intimately connected.

In other words, movies, including Forest Gump, can provide students with an immersive language experience, enrich their vocabulary and improve their pronunciation. For instance, the selected film offers students an opportunity to hear and observe native speakers practicing English in real-life contexts. This allows them to correct their speech errors, know the pronunciation of words, the stress and rhythm, and imitate characters' gestures and accents when interacting with each other. Moreover, the movie under examination offers a rich source of figures of speech used in natural and authentic contexts. Participants got high fluency scores in the post-test after watching the film thanks to their exposure to these stylistic devices, which enable them to enhance their language skills and become more fluent in English. In this manner, learning ESL may turn into acquisition as students do not rely on formal instructions, explicit rules and conscious efforts in their learning process. The film provides them with a motivating way of teaching English in an implicit way. That is why, Krashen (1982) says that "adults can 'acquire', which is the way children 'get their first language, subconsciously, through informal, implicit learning" (p.17).

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