

"Being There" by Jerzy Kosinski as a Resource for Teaching Language and Culture

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Abstract

The article discusses the possibilities films present for the EFL teacher and, in particular, shows a few examples of utilizing the film "Being There", by Jerzy Kosinski, for culture study and language practice with advanced level students.

Film is already a well recognized language teaching facility due to its power to provide various stimuli, which are not attainable by using other teaching aids. I would like to explore "Being There", by Jerzy Kosinski, in the perspective of teaching English as a foreign language. It has become common methodological knowledge that language is the means with which individuals think and therefore it conditions cultural thought, perception and worldview. Language as a part of cultural reality has been emphasized by Kramersch stating that it is "a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language; they view their language as a symbol of their social identity" (Kramersch, 1998:3).

In "Being There" this peculiarity of language use shows in the dialogues Chance Gardener has, first with a gang of boys in the backyard, and later during the dinner in Ben Rand's mansion. The first one goes as follows:

Oh shit, who sent you here, boy? That chicken shit asshole Rafail sent you, boy? You tell that asshole if he's got to tell something to me to get his asshole here soon. Get that, boy?

The other one sounds gorgeous:

- Is there anyone we could notify for you?
- No, the old man died.
- I do hope your injury won't prevent you from attending to business, Mr Gardener?
- My house was shut down and closed by the attorneys.
- If things go like this they'll legislate the medical profession right out of existence.
- That's exactly what I mean. The businessman today is at the mercy of kid lawyers. It's a damn shame!

This approach to the social function of language opens the possibility for the EFL teacher to look at the speech of different language users in view of their social backgrounds, which can give the students a better understanding of language appropriateness.

Another rich resource of the film is the exploration of its language resources where vocabulary, grammar and phonetics are equally important. As an extension, we can practice speaking and writing skills, perhaps most successfully in an interpretation of the situational English phrases, formulaic expressions, improvisation on a given scene or theme, etc.

In using a film for teaching advanced learners it is essential to present its history. This film (1979) has great significance in Kosinski's career, since compared to the book (1970) its three thematic shifts

"reveal Kosinski's evolving attitude toward American culture and visual media: racial tensions receive more attention than Cold War politics; a minor character, Benjamin Rand, gains importance as a symbol of American capitalism; and the revised ending implies that the Fool may actually be a saint." (Lazar, 2004: 99).

Undoubtedly, there are more thematic lines in the film, which can be formulated as subjects for discussion, mainly:

- a person with no past – an advantage in achieving social success;
- an innocent man versus the media ;
- a nation of “videots” (a term used by Kosinski in 1993)
- a person limited by one’s own garden;
- people hearing what they want to hear;
- society vetted by secret services;
- naivety of serious and respectable people;
- the role of chance and circumstances;
- pure heart and pleasing appearance can be misleading;
- television controlling the nation’s mind;
- human conduct depends on human contact;
- sexual identity and behaviours;
- interference of business and politics;
- life and death; etc.

These subjects can be set up as individual tasks for students at the pre-watching stage so that while watching they are filtering the information and collecting the evidence for post-watching discussion or writing. Of particular interest here can be the list of quotes by Ben Rand:

- "I have no use for those on welfare, no patience whatsoever, but if I am to be honest with myself, I must admit that they have no use for me either."
- "I do not regret having political differences with men that I respect. I do regret however, that our philosophies kept us apart."
- "I could never conceive why I could never convince my kitchen staff that I looked forward to a good bowl of chili now and then."
- "I have heard the word "sir," more often than I have heard the word "friend," but I suppose there are other rewards for wealth."
- "I have met with kings; during these conferences I have suppressed bizarre thoughts. Could I beat him in a foot race? Could I throw a ball farther than he?"
- "No matter what our facades, we are all children."
- "To raise your rifle is to lower your sights."
- "No matter what you are told there is no such thing as an even trade."
- "I was born into a position of extreme wealth, but I have spent many sleepless nights thinking about extreme poverty."
- "I have lived a lot, trembled a lot, was surrounded by little men who forgot that we entered naked and exit naked and that no accountant can audit life in our favor."
- "When I was a boy, I was told that the Lord fashioned us from His own image, that's when I decided to manufacture mirrors."
- "Security. Tranquility. A Well Deserved Rest. All the aims I have pursued will soon be realized."

or by Louise, the African-American maid:

"It's for sure a white man's world in America. I raised that boy since he was the size of a 'pissant' and I'll tell you he never learned to read nor write. No sir. Has no brains at all. Stuffed with rice pudding between the ears. Short-changed by the Lord and dumb as a jackass. Yes sir, all you got to be is white in America to get whatever you want."

Situational English is another strong point in applying film to teaching purposes. The visualized language produced by actors adds the paralinguistic components helping to understand the communicative goals. Below is a list of situations from the film in which the characters use peculiar language which can trigger student interpretation of the situations, or work in another direction – the teacher reminds students of the situation and the student reproduces the language.

1. *Cold as a fish.* Louise, the servant lady, to announce that the Old Man was dead.
2. *You are to find your servant lady.* Louise when leaving the house.
3. *The law firm handling estate.* Thomas Franklin, the lawyer, introducing himself.
4. *Are you related to the deceased?* Thomas trying to establish Chance's kinship.
5. *These clothes come back into style.* Ms Haze, the lawyer, looking at Chance's wardrobe.
6. *I have no claim.* Chance replying to the lawyer's question concerning the estate.
7. *No legal right to reside.* The lawyer informing Chance he could no longer live in the house.
8. *Yes, Sir, I'll report it.* The policemen guarding the White House about Chance's remark concerning the tree.
9. *My leg is very sore.* Chance after he got trapped between the cars.
10. *Everybody seems to make such a to-do out of simple little accident.* Eve Rand appreciating Chance's calm behaviour after the accident.
11. *I've never been in one of these before.* Chance about the elevator.
12. *I'd like to ask you something straight out.* The doctor about Chance's eventual claim against the Rands.
13. *Mr. Gardener is a very reasonable man.* Eve characterizing Chance's behaviour after the accident.
14. *He is different, intense.* Eve's impression about Chance.
15. *A businessman is at the mercy of kid lawyers.* Ben Rand about indecent lawyers.
16. *Reluctant to speak, yeah?* Ben when Chance did not know what to reply to his business proposition.
17. *You've lifted Ben's spirit to such an extent.* Eve commenting on Ben's good mood after speaking to Chance.
18. *Show the President into the library.* Ben giving orders on meeting the President.
19. *Your visit is to raise my spirit.* Ben appreciating the President's visit.
20. *In the garden growth has its seasons.* Chance talking to the President.
21. *You are the right man to take charge of the institution.* Ben appreciating Chance's popularity.
22. *You like to play games with words.* Ben about Chance's enigmatic way of expressing his thoughts.
23. *... make a decision on the spur of the moment.* Ben to Chance discussing his project.
24. *I don't want to rush you into your decision.* Ben to Chance discussing his project
25. *I must excuse myself.* Ben leaving the room.
26. *The President was very taken with you this morning.* Eve to Chance after his meeting the president.
27. *We appreciate the time when trees are bare as well as when we pick the fruit.* The President in his speech creating a metaphor *economy is a garden* after his talk to Chance.
28. *I'm taking the liberty of asking you.* The chief editor on the phone to Chance.
29. *He plays his cards close to the chest.* The chief editor to his colleagues about Chance.
30. *It's the white men's world in America.* Louise about Chance's career.
31. *He was the size of a pissant.* Louise remembering Chance in his childhood.
32. *He's stuffed with rice pudding between the ears.* Louise about Chance's stupidity.
33. *... if you would attend in my place and escort Eve.* Ben asking Chance to go to the reception with Eve.
34. *You have the gift to be natural.* Ben characterizing Chance.
35. *What was in his sleeve?* The chief editor to his colleagues.

36. *No more shots*. Ben to the nurses.
37. *Watch over her*. Ben asking Chance to take care of Eve.
38. *He's gone*. The doctor stating Ben's death.
39. *Our philosophies kept us apart*. The President about differences in world views.
40. *Life is a state of mind*. The President in his speech at Ben's funeral.

It is worth discussing with advanced students the metaphoric shifts made in the film, namely, *economy is a garden, simplicity is a virtue, politics is a TV show, garden is a microworld, life is a state of mind, etc.* Here they all get a strongly expressed humorous colouring in the source or target domain.

Considering the grammar of the film, an interesting observation can be made on the usage of the Simple and Continuous forms. The mood of the film is rather slow-paced, balanced, calm and very factual, which is supported by the domination of the Present Simple tense. As an example of the misunderstanding concerning the verification of the fact of Chance's living in the house, the following dialogue between him and the lawyers can be used:

Ms Haze. And you really are a gardener?

Chance. My roses.

Thomas. We will need some proof of your having resided here.

Chance. You have me.

Thomas. Could you show us something with your address?

Ms Haze. And what about your medical record? Could you give us the name of your doctor?

Chance. I have no doctor.

This example illustrates the difference in categorization of reality between the gardener and the lawyer, resulting in different conceptions of "live" due to different life experiences.

As mentioned above, the general mood of the film lacks dynamic situations, and the language contributes to this effect by only three instances of the Continuous tenses: *Chauncey, what are you doing here? I'm taking the liberty of asking you. The President is arriving.*

Finally, no matter which way the list of possible applications of the film for teaching purposes is extended, by his novel about the fool who in the reality of "videots" is taken for a wise man, Kosinski supplies a variety of opportunities for a creative teacher to make an EFL lesson rich in both culture-related discussion and language practice of excellent quality.

References:

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Being There. 1979. Directed by Hal Ashby. 130min. Lorimar Film. Videocassette.

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