

ESL students who are pursuing a degree in higher education may not find this dictionary the most useful or effective because it focuses more on cultural issues and pragmatic aspects of the language and less on higher level vocabulary for academic purposes or for a particular field of study. But for beginning- and intermediate-level ESL/EFL learners and instructors, I heartily recommend the *Cambridge Dictionary of American English* even though its homonymic headwords may confuse some users at first. Each component of this dictionary was carefully selected and developed by specialists to illustrate English language use in the US in both written and spoken form. The *Cambridge Dictionary of American English* serves as a quick reference to English grammar, writing conventions, American culture, and word meaning. This dictionary is an ESL student's secret weapon, an extremely useful resource for ESL and EFL students and instructors alike.

#### REFERENCE

*Webster's II new riverside dictionary*. (1984). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

## Seeing the Big Picture: Exploring American Cultures on Film

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*Seeing the Big Picture: Exploring American Cultures on Film*. Ellen Summerfield and Sandra Lee. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press. Pp. 222. 2001. \$27.95. ISBN 1-877864-84-6

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If "a picture is worth a thousand words," then film should be able to inspire many thoughtful ideas and ongoing discussions that lead to meaningful activities, papers, and projects in the classroom. Ellen Summerfield and Sandra Lee have used film in their classes at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon, to motivate students and teach them about American culture. They share the product of their work in *Seeing the Big Picture: Exploring American Cultures on Film*. Summerfield and Lee have done an outstanding job of researching and creating materials that effectively introduce students to the history of American cultures, that engage students in the practice of thinking critically about the content of film, and that skillfully help students develop useful concepts for understanding other cultures.

*Seeing the Big Picture* is organized around eight feature films that provide insights into mainstream American culture as well as the cultures of Native Americans, African Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Mexican Americans, gays, and the deaf. Before viewing each film, students participate in previewing activities that involve freewriting and discussion. The book supplies historical background and some geographical context. The historical background is detailed and insightful; this is one of the noteworthy strengths of this book.

Several follow-up activities help students think beyond the basic plot after viewing each film. One of these activities, "Spotlight on Culture and Communication," highlights a cultural concept in each film. For example, after viewing the movie *Children of a Lesser God*, students are asked to find a clip from the film portraying ethnocentrism and to prepare a presentation explaining how pertinent cultural concepts and filmmaking techniques apply to their selected clip. This is an interesting and challenging exercise. However, most English as a Second Language (ESL) students would require an extended discussion of the concept and examples, and an opportunity to practice in class before they could successfully complete the activity on their own. Within the "Spotlight on Culture and Communication," a limited number of cultural concepts are introduced: nonverbal communication, values, empathy, internalized oppression, assimilation of immigrants, cultural borders and conflicts, "coming out of the closet," and ethnocentrism. Other concepts that are also useful for understanding

cultures—such as communication styles—might have to be provided in supplemental materials.

Readings also constitute a follow-up activity in each chapter. The readings are insightful and thus help the students better understand the movies from the perspective of the people that they are studying. For example, in the chapter on Native Americans, Summerfield and Lee have included four critiques of the movie *Dances with Wolves*. These four reviews allow the students to see that the mainstream press has praised this movie for its portrayal of Native Americans. In contrast, the Native American critic Shoots the Ghost, an Oglala Lakota, suggests that the movie is historically inaccurate and points out that the hero of the movie is once again a white man (p. 32).

Finally, each chapter concludes with abundant ideas for activities, papers, and projects. For a language teacher, the variety of options makes it possible to find a project idea that can be adapted to accomplish a particular language learning goal.

Summerfield and Lee suggest that *Seeing the Big Picture* is appropriate for introductory college classes and advanced ESL classes (TOEFL 500 and above). The book is probably best suited for content classes, yet could be used in advanced speaking/listening classes if accompanied by supplementary material that focuses on specific language skills. For instance, an ESL teacher could provide useful phrases for leading a discussion, model their use, and then have the students take turns being leaders during one of the many discussion activities presented in the book. It would be natural to talk about the features and structure of successful oral presentations and have the students practice these skills when presenting a project. Moreover, historical background information provided in *Seeing the Big Picture* could easily be adapted to practice note-taking by simply presenting this information in the form of a short lecture. The material is challenging yet accessible for advanced ESL students. An ESL class would be able to thoroughly cover only a few chapters during a term, especially if the students come from cultures where critical thinking is not stressed in the educational system. However, students would face genuine academic challenges with the benefit of having motivating material for listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities.

For ESL teachers who enjoy delving into film, who want to explore American cultures in some depth with their students, and who are willing to provide additional materials focused on specific language skills, I would strongly recommend *Seeing the Big Picture: Exploring American Cultures on Film*. The materials are interesting and extensive, and they can be easily supplemented to adapt to the specific needs of students as well as to the requisites of various curriculums.

## INFORMATION FOR CONTRIBUTORS

### Editorial Policy

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