A Guide for using The Terminal as an ELL Teacher Training Tool

The opening scene of The Terminal, a romantic comedy starring Tom Hanks as Viktor Navorski, takes place in the international arrivals section of the JFK Airport in NYC, where Navorski, upon arrival, is denied entry into the U.S. His fictional country, Krakozhia, has undergone a military coup while he was in the air, and he is informed by airport customs officials that he now is a “citizen of nowhere” and therefore is not permitted to enter the U.S.; however, U.S. Customs does not have the authority to detain him, either, so he is told to “wait” at the airport until the matter is resolved.

Complicating matters—and of particular interest to me as a linguist—Navorski only has the command of about five words in English: “please,” “okay,” “yes,” “yes,” and “yes”—which he uses to respond to all questions posed to him during his initial entry and interview, leading officials to mistakenly believe he can understand what is being said. He is given food vouchers (which he loses right away while attempting to help a girl with her luggage), a phone card, and a pager, and is escorted to the international lounge of the airport. He is shown the “door to American soil,” but is told he must not leave until given permission.

Trapped in the airport, with no means of income and growing hungry (a metaphor for the U.S. immigrant experience?) he cleverly discovers a way to earn money for food by returning abandoned luggage carts to their kiosks and redeeming quarters. Soon, we begin to see Navorski using basic English conversational phrases such as “keep the change,” “excuse me,” and “allow me.” In short time, airport staff—many of them also non-native English speakers—begin to sympathize with Navorski’s plight and befriend him. They interact with him, helping him with his pronunciation, and his functional English improves.
We see Navorski using a variety of methods to decode the English language during his airport immersion experience. In his attempts to obtain the proper visa to enter the U.S., he learns by trial and error which forms to use: “no, the light green form—this one,” for example, as said by the customs agent while holding up the correct form. Television plays an important part in his English language acquisition, too, as he first relies on images shown on airport lounge tv’s, then gradually learns to read the closed-caption text of news updates scrolling across the bottom of the screen. Relying on the visual and textual cues of ads and signs allows him to build his vocabulary with words and phrases such as “wet floor,” “gates,” and “shoes, 2nd floor—sensible heals.” He makes use of the airport bookstore, where he compares the parallel texts of English and Bulgarian NYC tour books. Lastly, his proficiency continues to increase in his daily conversations with airport staff and personnel.

When considering how movies support language learning and teaching, it is widely accepted that language learners can benefit from watching movies in the target language. The multi-modal input of images and sounds can be an effective means of providing context for spoken dialogue. Closed-captioning, too, can be used as an aid—either by providing a translation of the spoken target dialogue (English subtitles for the native-English speaker while watching a Spanish-language film, for example) OR to provide written reinforcement of the spoken dialogue (i.e. Spanish closed-captioning of a Spanish-language film).

The Terminal could certainly be of interest to non-English speakers and therefore could be viewed as a means to improve one’s English-language skills; however, I believe this movie would be particularly useful as a means of demonstrating English-language acquisition skills to those who are teaching and/or working with English-language learners (ELL). Watching Viktor
Navorski develop his own language skills—along with the concurrent development of the social skills he gains as he learns to navigate his environment—gives the ELL teacher insight into some of the challenges encountered by students working to acquire a new language.

Of course, effective language learning cannot take place in isolation, but rather, requires community. Films can provide us, the viewing audience, an opportunity to see and to experience peoples and communities different from our own and The Terminal is no exception. The centralized plot of this movie takes place entirely in one airline terminal, but even within this limited confine is found a cohesive community of workers and airport personnel, not a few of whom are immigrants to the United States and non-native English speakers. Viewing the interactions of these community members, we catch glimpses of their immigrant experiences: the Indian janitor who fled his country after assaulting a corrupt, bribe-seeking policeman, for example; or the food service worker who, when excited, slips into his native Spanish and needs to be reminded that he cannot be understood. Seeing these glimpses allows us to see these characters—and ultimately all peoples surrounding us—in a new light.

Viktor Navorski himself eloquently demonstrates his capacity for compassion—combined with a demonstration of linguistic agility—in one of the better-known scenes of this movie: the “Goat” scene. In this scene, a Russian-speaking passenger is detained for trying to export medicines from Canada into the United States and the man becomes distraught. Navorski is hastily summoned to “translate,” Navorski speaking to the man in Bulgarian and the man responding in Russian. When Navorski turns and explains (in English) to the customs officials that the man is taking the medicine to his father, the officers instantly seize the man and begin to drag him away. Navorski, alarmed by their response, quickly intervenes, claiming
he “mis-translated”—that the medicine was for the man’s goat, NOT his father, as had been mistakenly reported. Wordlessly conveying with his eyes the importance of this linguistic switch-up to the Russian passenger, Viktor repeats the words “goat, his goat” and waits. When the passenger returns the look and whispers “goat;” then again, louder, “goat!” Viktor’s “victory” over the English language is absolute. There are no restrictions against bringing in medications for animals, which Viktor has learned from studying the customs forms; the medication is returned to the Russian passenger and he released, free to go.

For teachers of ELLs, Navorski’s linguistic victory is perhaps The Terminal’s biggest “take-away.” Apart from this “feel good” moment, though, this movie has other redeeming qualities, capable of both informing and inspiring the ELL teacher. While it may not be the best use of classroom time to show the movie in its entirely, clips from the movie could be shown and used as a point of departure for discussions about specific features of language learning. Students could also be asked to watch the movie as an at-home assignment and tasked with analyzing Navorski’s language learning process, the experience of the airport community members, or even U.S. custom practices. As for me, watching the movie for educational purposes was very satisfying. Now, though, I’m ready to watch it again—this time, just for fun.