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Fiction Movie in ESP: Rhetorical Analyses of Thank you for Smoking

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This paper provides a strong foundation for justifying the use of fiction movies as an educational tool in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The presenter shares her personal experience and demonstrates how a thoughtfully selected fiction movie, suitable for the age and social and professional maturity of the students, inspires and motivates them for further exploration of profession-related concepts. The talk is based on the project carried out at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-U).

Jason Reitman's "Thank you for Smoking" is a political satire that looks at the hypocrisy of both corporate and political spin. The movie tells the story of Nick Naylor a chief spokesman and lobbyist of Big Tobacco. His job is to appear on talk shows, go into schools, and lobby anywhere else for Big Tobacco. He claims that smoking is not unhealthy and goes as far as to say that cigarettes may be the cure to Parkinson's disease. Naylor loves his job and is great at what he does. He could sell anything to anyone. His success is based on his good knowledge of Rhetoric.

The project was carried out with Law and Public administration students as the themes of lobbyism, rhetoric and public speaking are essential for them. The movie sparked off considerable debate and encouraged the students to go beyond the content of the movie and delve deeply into those professional issues.

Rhetoric is an art of discourse, an art of using language as a means to persuade. Persuasion, according to Aristotle, is brought about through three persuasive appeals logos, pathos and ethos, that work together toward persuasive ends. Logos is the appeal to reason and is most commonly associated with argument. It refers to the orderly presentation of claims, reasons, and evidence, as well as counter claims, reasons, and evidence. Argument would obviously suffer without adequate attention to logos, though argument need not be equated exclusively with logos. Pathos is the appeal to emotion. The term is used to refer to the emotions and values of the audience and the efforts of a rhetor to evoke those emotions and acknowledge those values. Ethos is the persuasive appeal. It is used to describe a person's character and credibility, fundamental to the art and science of persuasive argument.

The movie "Thank You for Smoking" shows many fine examples of logos, pathos and ethos. By proficiently combining the appeals the main character shows how it is possible to convert people to a certain way of thinking by words alone.

Today's society is full of professional persuaders-people whose job consists in making an argument that sways the general public in a certain direction. In a persuasive argument, it is not always being right that wins. Often, the mere illusion of being right wins an argument.

Examples of logical arguments are abundant in everyday life. Any political campaign must be filled with logical arguments in order to win the trust of voters. In any court room situation, a lawyer must be able to present a sound logical argument to win his case. Without sound reasoning an argument will fail.

Fallacy is another notion essential for rhetoric. A fallacy is an erroneous argument dependent upon an unsound or illogical contention. The movie “Thank you for Smoking” abounds with fallacies. The paper provides numerous examples of fallacies - Red Herring, Ad Hominem, Faulty Analogy, Faulty Comparison, Slippery Slope and others - used by Nick Naylor while speaking and spinning arguments.

It is a strong sense of rhetoric that makes Nick Naylor a successful persuasive lobbyist and speaker. Naylor’s argument throughout the movie is full of rhetorical technique and logical fallacies. Logos, pathos and ethos skillfully combined with kairos, meaning the right time, allows him to argue a controversial topic such as smoking. Naylor makes good use of ethos and kairos and wins the audience when stressing his responsibility of parenting his young son as his son is part of the audience. It is beneficial for Naylor to have his son in the audience.

The movie pokes fun at Tobacco industry and touches upon some other aspects of Modern society. The spin coming out of Nick Naylor’s mouth is ridiculous but when the students were encouraged to turn to the mass media they were able to collect samples of fallacies in the speeches of contemporary lobbyist, politicians and speakers of any kind representing different countries and strata.

On the whole the project carried out at MGIMO University proves that fiction movies can be framed for ESP curriculum. They both make the teaching/learning process entertaining and enhance professional language skills.

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