REEL JUSTICE AND LEGAL ENGLISH TEACHING

Nicoleta Aurelia MARCU[1]

Abstract

Legal English (LE) teaching and popular culture seem so distant from each other that one could not fancy the LE instructor actually resorting to the latter in finding trustworthy resources for teaching legal terminology. However, the proximity of these two areas is demonstrated by the increasing use of movies or courtroom shows in teaching about law and legal matters. Even though these movies favor the dramatic effect at the expense of the accuracy of legal information, given their popularity among students, they can be used as inspiring resources in teaching legal terminology and they can develop law students' professional communication competences.

Key words: Legal English, movies, popular culture, teaching, communication skills

Legal English has evolved as a distinctive branch of ESP and the need of specialists that must be efficient not only on the national level but also the international one is increasing. In his endeavor to teach this specialized terminology, the Legal English teacher can find support and resources in the specialized textbooks (which include extended terminology but not enough materials for developing communication skills) and also in a field that, even though is not ranked as being academic, offers inspiring resources for enhancing students' professional communication skills. This is the popular culture of the legal genre promoted in movies or courtroom shows.

Popular culture is one of the biggest exports of the USA and its representation of American law has a great impact on foreign cultures and their legal systems. This implies that "those influences are fruitful areas of study and teaching for courses in law and popular culture should be included in course materials and books" (Papy, p.143).

Why popular culture? Why should we care for entertainment media whose evident purpose is to promote mass consumption? We consume it, guiltily enjoy it but we as well forget quite a lot of it. Then why should we consider it as an inspiring source for teaching specialized vocabulary? One reason is that this popular culture is like a mirror of the society. Leaving aside the required dramatic effects that this industry relies on, popular culture media often provides "clues about public attitudes and beliefs. Looked at in this way we can learn a lot about what the public thinks about lawyers and justice. If for instance most current films and television shows depict lawyers as unethical and greedy scoundrels, those representations reflect the stereotypes people carry around with them" (Asimov, p.4). In *Law and Order* tenacious prosecutors convict the guilty. "Judge Judy" denounces irresponsible creeps to the enjoyment of the audience. These are media responses to the social trends and people have always enjoyed watching what validates their preferences and preconceptions. Apart from taking the pulse of the society, popular culture, by means of media, also instructs the public. The same is valid for law-related

[1] Assistant Prof., PhD., „Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu Mureș

BDD-A28205 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:49:36 UTC)

movies, which can be used by the Legal English (LE) teacher in developing students' language skills, especially the professional communication competences.

As pointed at the beginning of this paper, the available textbooks on Legal English do not provide enough materials for developing students listening and speaking skills. A solution to this, one that is actually much favored by the students is the use of law-related movies. Here the role of the LE instructor is essential as he has to guide the students not only in the linguistic material acquisition but also in making the transfer from what is called "cultivation effect" to "viewer response." These represent two theories on how audience reacts to the information provided by media.

The "cultivation theory" states that "people's opinions are influenced by long-repeated, consistent themes in fictitious pop culture"(Asimov, p.XXI). This means that the students only watch the respective movies, absorb information but are not critical to it (Dabrowski, p.139). On the other hand, the "viewer response" or "reception theory" claims that pop culture "is subject to interpretation and consumers construct their own personal interpretations-make their own meanings-from the materials in a film or a TV show" (Asimov, p.XXII).Being active and not passive consumers of pop culture, students develop not only their professional communication skills, but also their cross-cultural knowledge and their critical thinking. The students can examine the depiction of law, lawyers and justice in movies and, on the basis of their legal knowledge, can determine how accurately the legal systems and the lawyers are presented in these movies. They can even identify the movies' influence on public perceptions and expectations regarding the law and the search for truth and justice in the society.

Establishing the differences between real and reel justice could be one way of placing students on the side of the "viewer response" theory. One can easily guess that the dramatic effect has the upper hand when it comes to movies or courtroom shows. Thus we can see the prevalence of violent crimes involving bodily harm offences whose occurrence is not so high in real life, while, for instance traffic offences (so frequent in reality) are seldom shown in movies. Despite this predominant entertaining character of movies or courtroom shows, their use in classroom is invaluable because they provide authentic materials for teaching specialized terminology to foreigners studying English. CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) underlines the need of authentic materials in teaching English as they actively engage and motivate learners more than the non-authentic materials. Moreover they expose the students to the authentic culture of the target language, thus enabling them to develop their cross-cultural communication skills. Therefore, students learn not only terminology but also cultural facts and the contextualization of the specialized vocabulary helps them better understand the legal concepts and facilitates their correct use in other law-related contexts, situations.

Using videos in foreign language classes is not something new and it proves to be among the most popular resources for learning a foreign language, especially these days with the increasing availability of media resources on the Internet. Jeremy Harmer (p.282) mentions several advantages of using video in class, among which, seeing language-in-use,

BDD-A28205 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:49:36 UTC)

cross-cultural awareness and motivation (students enjoy completing interesting tasks such as watching a video). One very important aspect is underlined by Larry Lynch who states that videos "can provide invaluable insight into current events and cultural aspects of English –speaking countries for language teachers and learners in other parts of the world…Course books…cannot hold up to their level of cultural knowledge and impact."

As regards the incorporation of movies into a lesson, there are several techniques as suggested by Jane Sherman (pp.18-20): illustrated talk (the teacher presents the movie by showing students short episodes, but stops at the climax. Students then have to watch the entire movie at home and have to prepare a report for the next class); salami tactics (a movie is divided into several parts and is incorporated in the lesson that follows the standard structure for using videos in the classroom with pre-watching, watching and post-watching exercises); finally we have the independent film study, which involves students working in teams or individually on a film study project. The common goal of these techniques is to engage the students in the learning process, to steer their curiosity about the topic of the movie and, finally, to efficiently use the video materials. The teacher can also resort to certain viewing techniques as suggested by Harmer and Sherman, such as: fast forward, freeze-frame, silent viewing or partial viewing. Following these techniques and being exposed to different communication situations and areas of law, the students can develop their specialized vocabulary and acquire the proper legal jargon for further use in other law-related communication situations. Legal English (LE) textbooks include various exercises for listening and speaking but they cannot cover the diversity of speech patterns that law-related movies offer. Thus, watching movies in a guided manner can benefit the LE class a lot. The greatest advantage is that students really love watching movies so the learning process is half-way completed. The role of the LE instructor is to properly guide the learners and select adequate materials considering factors such as language accuracy and articulation, terminology frequency, topics covered and their relevance to different areas of law. The LE teacher can provide students with lists of movies that can be covered both in the classroom and/or as independent film study. On the Internet one can easily access lists of movies grouped, for instance, according to their relevance to certain law subjects such as civil procedure/trial advocacy (A Civil Action, The Rainmaker, The Trial, The Verdict), contract law (The Paper Chase), corporate law (Other People's Money, The Network), criminal law (The Accused, Anatomy of a Murder, And Justice for All, The Client, Primal Fear, To Kill A Mockingbird, etc.), defamation law (Denial, Absence of Malice), environmental law (Erin Brockovich), family law (I am Sam, Custody, Kramer vs. Kramer), human rights (12 Years a Slave, Anita, Disclosure, Freedom Riders), intellectual property (Counterfeit Culture, Flash of Genius, The Social Network), judges (The Judge) juries (12 Angry Men, Jury Duty, The Juror, Runaway Jury), practice of law (Devil's Advocate, The Firm, Legally Blonde, Michael Clayton, The Paper Chase, Philadelphia). This list is just a selection of law-related movies and it is far from being an exhaustive one, thus suggesting the popularity of the legal genre among the students.

BDD-A28205 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:49:36 UTC)

The LE teacher can use this popularity to his advantage and can guide students in the transfer from passive recipients of this form of popular culture into active users who construct their personal interpretation of the movies they watch. Therefore 'reel' justice, although not always matching the 'real' one, could become a very efficient tool both in language and critical thinking training and finally, it can equip students with the necessary professional skills.

Bibliography:

Asimov, Michael, *Lawyers in Your Living Room! Law on Television*, American Bar Association, Chicago, 2009

Dabrowski, Andrzej, "When law goes pop- teaching Legal English through TV courtroom shows", The Central European Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, Applied Linguistics, Issue 3, 2010

Harmer, Jeremy, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, 4th ed., Harlow, Uk, Pearson Longman, 2007

Lynch, Larry, *Throw Away the Course Book and Adapt Authentic Materials*, retrieved March 1st, 2018, http://www.eslbase.com/teaching/adapt-authentic-materials

Papy, Donald, "Law and Popular Culture: A Course Book by Michael Asimov and Shannon Mader", Book Review, Journal of the Oxford Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, Issue 2, Oxford, 2017

Sherman, Jane, *Using Authentic Video in the Language Classroom*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003

BDD-A28205 © 2018 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:49:36 UTC)