may find the travel or the timing difficult. Likewise, participation in webcasts is easy, but it is harder to create the community of learning found in the short courses where members share expertise, ask questions, and learn from one another.

To learn more, readers can visit the CARMA website (http://carma.wayne.edu), which clearly outlines the resources discussed in this review. The homepage features a CARMA 2013-2014 program overview provided in a short video. In addition, several videos can be found on the site, so visitors can see and hear how short courses, live webcasts, and the video library actually work. Course descriptions, instructor listings, and membership information can also be found for those interested in learning more.

References


---

**English Vinglish**


**Reviewed by:** Jon Billsberry, Deakin University, Australia

DOI: 10.1177/1052562913509224

“I don’t need love. What I really need is some respect!” So says Shashi Godbole, a traditionally demure Indian housewife, who desperately wants to learn English and thereby put an end to the mocking of her husband and daughter. And with these words, Shashi also summarizes the message of this cinematic tale of cultural interaction and learning. This is a film about the alienation of the stranger in a strange land, a celebration of marriage and family, and a person’s need for respect and acceptance.
The story focuses on Shashi, played by the great Bollywood star, Sridevi, who was making a comeback after a 15-year hiatus. She is mother and wife in a well-to-do Indian family. Her daughter goes to an aspirational school where much of the instruction is in English. Shashi’s faltering English embarrasses her teenage daughter, who tries to prevent her from coming to a parents’ day. Her embarrassment leads to belittling and mocking behavior at home, something Shashi’s husband does little to quell. This is an uncomfortable environment that Shashi smiles through with forbearance and forgiveness. The audience is encouraged to hope she receives salvation.

As luck would have it, the family receives news that Shashi’s sister’s daughter is getting married. She lives in suburban New York and wants Shashi to come out a month before the ceremony to help with arrangements, which she reluctantly agrees to do. Once there, she sees an advertisement on the side of a bus for an intensive course, “Learn to speak in English in 4 weeks.” She decides to enroll and to keep it a secret from her family. In the language class, Shashi encounters and makes friends with other outcasts and misfits who are also struggling to gain acceptance in the United States because of their faltering English. The film ends with Shashi making an emotionally powerful speech in English at the wedding.

*English Vinglish* is an accessible modern Bollywood film that is part romance, part comedy of manners, part melodrama, and part feel-good drama. As in many Bollywood films, there are a few musical interludes, but in this film these appear as short, modern musical videos in the narrative that summarize and emphasize plot points and do not get in the way of the storytelling. The opening is set in India, but the main body of the film takes place in New York. Throughout the film, Hindi and English mingle, as they do in everyday speech in modern, middle-class Indian families. The subtitles are clear and concise, helped by the elementary language spoken in much of the film, and I quickly found myself unaware that I was reading them. The film is approximately 2 hours, 15 minutes long and rattles along at a pleasing pace.

This film is directly relevant to the teaching of cross-cultural interactions and adaptation, communication and miscommunication, intercultural sensitivity, and cultural values. Such is its richness that it might be used in a number of ways. The first approach is to screen the whole film as an enriched case study. I could do this during weeklong residential sessions, but instructors may be uneasy devoting so much class time to viewing the film. Instead, the film might be set as an assignment with students asked to analyze the particular area of interest. The film works well in this context because the lead character, Shashi, is so well drawn. The audience is quickly and effectively drawn into her world, and she is depicted as a very resilient character who shrugs off
adversity. We see events through her eyes and feel her embarrassment and the pain of the mocking and belittling. When the whole film is examined, students might be asked to identify and explain the ways in which Shashi experiences the new culture, the key events shaping her understanding of it, and the factors shaping her adaptation. Alternatively, students might be asked to compare and contrast the two cultures that are seen through the eyes of upwardly mobile middle-class families. Another approach, a demanding one that will reward stronger students, is to examine the role of language in cultural adaptation. Students might be asked to explore how language competence shapes understanding, alienation, and distance.

Several scenes in the film lend themselves for use as illustration in didactic environments. In an extraordinarily powerful scene 40 minutes into the film (40.35-43.31), Shashi attempts to buy lunch in the hustle and bustle of a New York sandwich shop. Her poor spoken English brings misunderstanding, confusion, and delay, and the shop assistant’s response is impatience and rudeness. The embarrassment is palpable; it is one of the moments where you want the ground to open up and swallow you. This is one of the main strengths of the film from a teaching perspective. By making you form such a strong attachment with the lead character, you can empathize with the excruciating discomfiture and frustration that outsiders feel.

Another scene (24.13-24.39) that might be variously interpreted to illustrate abuse of power, a disrespectful attitude toward those who are different, or the powerlessness of the outsider, is a short episode when Shashi requests her visa. She encounters an American border guard who is polite and measured, but clearly he is thinking about prohibiting Shashi from travelling to the United States because of her poor English. Fortunately, an Indian border guard is also present and he pulls up the American: American border guard to Shashi: “Ma’am, how will you manage in our country if you don’t know English?” Indian border guard to American colleague: “Like you’re managing in our country without knowing Hindi?”

In addition, those instructors wanting to focus on other cross-cultural issues such as misunderstanding, prejudice, misfit, alienation, loneliness, and socialization will find examples in this film to illustrate their teaching.

Cross-cultural interaction is a topic that lends itself to cinematic treatment with, traditionally, the “traveler” exposing one of two things. Either they highlight differences between cultures, for example, Crocodile Dundee (Cornell & Faiman, 1986), East is East (Udwin & O’Donnell, 1999), Gung Ho (Blum, Ganz, & Howard, 1986), Mr. Baseball (Claybourne & Schepisi, 1992), or the traveler’s presence in a “strange land” helps them understand themselves better, for example, Babel (Golin, Kilik, & Iñárritu, 2006), Dances with Wolves (Wilson & Costner, 1990), Local Hero (Puttnam &
Forsyth, 1983), and Lost in Translation (Katz & Coppola, 2003). English Vinglish does both of these things well (i.e., comparing two affluent subcultures in India and the United States, and Shashi learns that despite her frustrations her family means more to her than anything else), but it is perhaps more interesting in the way it exposes the culture of the “strange land,” the United States. For American students, this film may make for uncomfortable, but informative, viewing by the way that it holds a mirror up to this culture and exposes how some non-Americans experience America and Americans. As such, the film would work well in cultural sensitivity training in addition to cross-cultural management teaching. Other films that explore similar themes are El Norte (Black, Navarro, Thomas, & Nava, 1983), Gran Torino (Gerber, Lorenz, & Eastwood, 2008), The Namesake (Pilcher & Nair, 2006), and The Visitor (London, Skalski, Woldenberg, & McCarthy, 2007).

On a completely different tack, the film might also be used to explore the role of women in modern families, especially Indian ones. Shashi is portrayed as a “traditional” Indian housewife from “the country” who is exposed to an urban, modern, and fairly wealthy lifestyle. There are tensions in her Indian home that are amplified by the international comparison and exposure to similarly wealthy families in the United States. This is a modern take on a major theme in Indian movie history. Acknowledged greats of Indian cinema like Mother India (Khan, 1957) and the Apu trilogy (Ray, 1955, 1956, 1959) have focused on the role of mothers in poor rural families. In many ways, English Vinglish is an updating of this theme reflecting societal change in India.

One final thought occurred to me when I was studying this movie. This movie paints a very rich picture of the cultures in which it is set and the problems adjusting to these places. It highlights how important language is when trying to adjust to, understand, and thrive abroad. And the camera takes us inside the lives of the main characters and exposes their innermost concerns. I was struck by the comparison to overseas study tours, especially those that go to countries where a different language is spoken. Although students may be situated in another country, their experiences are often “managed” in terms of who they meet and they are often unable to converse with people. Therefore, they will often only engage with people on a superficial level. Rather mischievously, I found myself wondering if the use of films such as English Vinglish would offer deeper, richer, and more nuanced insights into a culture. It would certainly be cheaper, quicker, and more convenient.

English Vinglish has had a global release. It is now available online and on DVD and Blu-ray.
References


