

# Activities for the ESL Classroom Incorporating Reality-based TV

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This paper lists several ideas about using 'The Amazing Race' as a teaching aide in an ESL classroom. The activities utilize authentic English and emphasize the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, group decision making, and reasoning.

The following activities incorporate the use of a reality-based TV show called 'The Amazing Race' into an ESL class. This is a weekly American television show, but is broadcast in many countries via cable. It features 12 teams who race around the world. The activities presented here can be used to teach a variety of English language skills including speaking and listening, reading and writing, as well as group decision making, cultural understanding and reasoning.

## Reasons for Using Reality TV in the ESL Classroom

### 1. **The introduction of authentic language into the classroom.**

Too often listening exercises found in textbooks are vastly different from anything that is heard outside of the classroom. Language is scripted and acted out, spoken clearly and steadily, and always uses proper grammar. While there is obviously a place for this in an ESL classroom, there is also a place for authentic, unscripted English, language that is spontaneous and full of incomplete sentence structures, cut-offs, mumbling, utterances and idioms.

### 2. **Students enjoy the classes.**

They get involved with the teams, pick their favorites, cheer when they do well and groan when they do poorly. They are excited by the show and the classes.

### 3. **The shows occur weekly.**

You can establish a routine of watching the program with your class, adapting the programs to cover the area that you are studying. You can use as many or as few of the episodes as you and the class decide. Although the activities are divided up here, you may want to use a combination of them during one day if the class time is long enough.

### 4. **Each show takes place in a different location.**

This opens up the opportunity for cultural discussion, classes on different countries and if you are lucky enough to have students from the area, it gives them the opportunity to talk about their home to the other students.

I originally designed these activities for an intermediate General English class in Sydney. The class was composed of students from mixed nationalities including China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Japan, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. We watched the program for three weeks until it was preempted by the World Cup for three weeks. The classes were quite successful and enjoyable and we probably would have kept on watching, but the semester was coming to an end. Since that class, I have used a modified form of the same lesson in two courses. One was a media analysis course, also with a class of mixed nationalities and the other was a high school preparation class composed entirely of Chinese students between the ages of 17 and 19. For this last class, I used the program as a means of exploring group dynamics and working together.

## Preparation Time

- For each episode you will need at least one hour to record the show and take notes. Depending on the activity, you will need 45 minutes to an hour for creating materials.

## Supplies needed

- Television, VCR, worksheets, white board or OHP, and a computer with the Internet to gather information about the teams and the shows

## Class time needed

- 1.5 - 2 hours

## Opening Procedures

- Before doing anything, you need to introduce the program's concept. The show sends eleven pairs of contestants on a global race. The two-person teams must face various challenges and perform certain duties around the world. Each week, the slowest participants are eliminated from the competition until just one team remains. This team receives a prize of one million US dollars. You could choose to introduce this information verbally or you might give the students the information from one of the many web sites devoted to the show. One of these can be found at <http://www.sirlinksalot.net/amazingrace.html>. The students should be aware of the ways in which challenges are presented. These include roadblocks, fast forwards and detours.
- Brainstorm with the students about the problems people encounter when traveling. Share one or two anecdotes about your own travel experiences and then ask for some more from the students. Make a list of these on one side of the board. They will probably come up with communication difficulties, strange food, getting sick, running out of money, etc. Ask them to identify what travelers might do when encountering these situations. Elicit the students opinions about why people like to travel when there are so many problems.

## Activities

### Activity 1

In this activity, students will be predicting the outcome of the race by reading a biography and interview of the participants. It is a communicative activity that emphasizes working with a group to reach a consensus, reading and summarizing information and predicting outcomes based on reasoning. In groups of three or four, students will summarize the given information about the team, categorizing what they feel are their strengths and weaknesses. The bios and interviews can be found at [http://www.cbs.com/primetime/amazing\\_race/](http://www.cbs.com/primetime/amazing_race/). Each team should predict who will win and lose this leg of the race and be able to explain why they reached that decision. Each of the groups will present their predictions to the class discussing their reasons for their choices. They should support their choices with information from the texts provided. After watching the first and second segments of the program, give students an opportunity to change their predictions based on what they have seen so far. At the conclusion of the race, ask students to come up with suggestions that might have helped their chosen teams to do better.

### Activity 2

This is a listening activity focusing on phrases, idioms and sayings common in everyday speech. Students will match team members with the things that they say. Give students a worksheet with the pictures of the teams on one side and quotes from the teams on the opposite side of the paper. Students can draw a line matching the phrase with the team. Before watching the show, go over what each of the phrases mean and how they might be used. Have students try to come up with situations in which they might use the phrases. I used this activity alongside other activities every time I used the program. In every instance, the students did quite well on this exercise.

### Activity 3

In this activity, the students design their own course for the teammates. It gives them an opportunity to share something about their country with the rest of the class and emphasizes writing and presentation skills. Students work with others from their country (if possible) and decide on three tasks that the participants must do in their country. They should employ the use of a route marker (detour or roadblock), choose a pit stop, and decide how much money the teammates can spend. After the groups have finished they should explain their leg of the trip to the rest of the class. This presentation may include the potential difficulties that the contestants will encounter as well as some of the interesting things that they will be able to see. Either you or one of the students, should plot the coordinates on a map. You might consider (I wish I had) sending the information the show producers. This might motivate the students to really think about what they are doing.

## Activity 4

This is a two part activity with the goal of students writing a recount of one leg of the race. Sometime after watching the show, have students engage in a running dictation. Using a recount of the show sliced into pieces, the students will dictate to another student. After finishing with the dictation, the students should number the actions from one to six. Have students write their own recount after watching the next show.

## Activity 5

This activity gives students the opportunity to explore one aspect of computer literacy, as well as giving them the opportunity to communicate with an international audience. If you have one to one Internet access, go to one of the numerous bulletin boards devoted to the program. TV Clubhouse or to one of the fan club pages (there are plenty). If you don't have access, you can print it out for the class. Have students respond to one of the topics that are being talked about. Be careful using bulletin boards as occasionally there is language that may not be appropriate for the classroom.

## Other Ideas

This is only a partial list as the programs are adaptable to a number of different learning concepts. Some of the other areas that might be considered include grammar points such as a lesson on superlatives, asking for directions, inappropriate/appropriate behavior of guests in foreign countries and for higher level classes a debate on how real are reality TV shows.

## References

- <http://www.sirlinksalot.net/amazingrace.html>
- [http://www.cbs.com/primetime/amazing\\_race/](http://www.cbs.com/primetime/amazing_race/)

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<http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Davis-RealityTV.html>