

# ESL/EFL Listening Comprehension Lesson for the Movie *Super Size Me*

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## Introduction

Watching a film in class is always enjoyable for students, and using films from the English speaking world in English lessons is easy in terms of choice. It is more difficult, however, to fit such a long activity into the syllabus, especially since most films are longer than an individual English lesson. Often the teacher is required to cut a film into sections and only use certain parts in the classroom.

An English-language film, even if only a few scenes are used, provides students with natural and authentic English. In my experience, and in the view of most students, this makes exercises around such material worthwhile and meaningful. Films or scenes in English are a source of activities such as vocabulary-building tasks, classroom discussion, writing, and listening comprehension.

To do all this in one or two lessons I chose Morgan Spurlock's 2004 documentary *Super Size Me*. The film is about the eating habits of Americans and helps thematise stereotypes about America, discussing food, eating habits and a healthy life style in general.

The length of the documentary did not allow for dealing with the entire film, so I opted for two portions.

- The first five minutes (immediately preceding the opening credits), which are a sort of fact file about eating habits of many Americans.
- The fifty-first to fifty-seventh minutes (the section dedicated to state schools and the food offered to American high school students).

Though the examples in the film may seem extreme to students, the topic is directly applicable to high school students around the globe (if the questions in Tasks 2 and 4 are adjusted accordingly, and the relevant country substituted for "Slovenia"). The topic also offers material for comparing and discussing how, or whether, their school takes care of the students' meals.

Leading up to the lesson in which the documentary film was shown, several lessons were dedicated to this topic, so the students would be equipped with the necessary vocabulary.

Since in the video the words are supported by visual image, the students had to do two things at the same time. First they had to focus on the words missing in the gapped text, then they had to apply the knowledge from the documentary in order to answer questions and participate in the class discussion. The first part was not difficult for them, as the words missing in the gaps were known to them and it was easy to hear them despite the narrator's quick speech. This offered an impulse that led naturally to classroom discussion.

## Topic: Talking About Food

**Level:** Intermediate

**Number of Lessons:** One or two.

Before watching the first part the teacher only tells the students that the documentary is about eating habits in the USA. The title of the documentary is introduced after the first five minutes of watching and it is then that the title and its relevance are discussed.

## Listening and Discussion Activities

1) The teacher introduces the students with Task 1. They should be given a few seconds to read through the instructions and the task. Then the teacher shows the first five minutes of the documentary.

### Task 1

Read the text and fill in the gaps.

1. America is the \_\_\_\_\_ nation in the world.
2. More than \_\_\_\_\_ % of adults in the US are obese.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ is the fattest state in the US.
4. The two main causes for deaths in America are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
5. McDonald's is spread over the world and feeds more than \_\_\_\_\_ million people worldwide a day.
6. McDonald's accounts for \_\_\_\_\_ % of the fast food market in the US.
7. In the US you can find McDonald's everywhere: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.

Key: 1) fattest, 2) 60, 3) Mississippi, 4) smoking, obesity, 5) 46, 6) 43, 7) Walmart outlets, airport, hospitals.

Students report their answers, the teacher writes on the board words that might present difficulties for the students. While the students report, the answers can be commented on.

2) Students are introduced to Task 2 and they form groups of four.

### Task 2

In groups discuss the following questions. Support your opinion and make notes.

1. Are Slovenians heavier than they used to be? Why or why not?
2. What influence does McDonald's have in Slovenia? Is it very popular? Does it influence our diet?
3. In America some people are suing fast food restaurants. Where does personal responsibility start and corporate responsibility stop?
4. The title of the film is *Super Size Me*. What does it refer to?
5. What will the specific topic of the film be?

After a short while, when the teacher notices that the groups are done with their work, the students report and a lively discussion will likely evolve.

3) The teacher introduces the students with Task 3. They should be given a brief amount of time to read through the instructions and the task. Then the teacher shows the second section of the documentary (minutes 51 to 57).

### Task 3

Answer the questions. Use short answers only.

#### State School

1. What do American students eat in school?

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2. Which food company caters most schools and prisons in the USA?

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3. How is food prepared in schools?

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4. Why don't they prepare meals from scratch in schools?

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5. How many meals a month are actually cooked at the school mentioned?

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**Key:** 1) cookies, fries, ketchup 2) Sodexo, 3) it is reheated, 4) it is inconvenient, 5) 6 out of 36.

### **School for Students with Truancy and Behavioural Problems**

6. Who cooks for the school?

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7. What is important for the company that cooks in this school when they prepare meals?

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8. What did the school get rid of?

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9. Why doesn't every school provide their students with food like this school does?

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**Key:** 6) Natural Ovens, 7) fresh preparation, not chemically processed food, 8) candy machines, soda machines, 9) the junk food companies do not want to be kicked out of the school system.

Students report, the teacher writes on the board words that might present difficulties to the students.

4) Students are introduced to task 4 they work in groups of four as before.

### **Task 4**

In groups discuss the following questions. Support your opinion and make notes.

1. Discuss your eating habits.
  - o How many times a day do you eat?
  - o When do you eat?
  - o What do you eat?
  - o Who prepares your meals?
2. In your opinion, what is a healthy way of eating ? (consider the type of food, frequency of eating, time of eating, variety of food, etc.)
3. Are the eating habits of Slovenians changing? In what way?
4. Is fast food going to influence our eating habits the same way as it has many Americans?

Students report after discussing the questions in groups.

## **Post-listening Activities**

At home students write responses to the following:

- How is the issue of providing food for high school students taken care of in your country?
- In the next lesson, the students freely report on what they have written.

# Conclusion

Watching *Super Size Me* proved to be interesting, engaging and motivating. Not only were the students forced to use words that they learned about cooking and food prior to watching the documentary, they were also forced to think about their own eating habits and life styles. Most importantly, for these intermediate students the exercises provided them with confidence as they discussed a current and crucial topic based on an authentic source. In other words, they could see that they are in a position to confront real, rather than “classroom,” English.

# Reference

- *Super Size Me*. Dir. Morgan Spurlock. 2004. DVD. Cinemania Group, 2006.

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The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. XV, No. 3, March 2009

<http://iteslj.org/>

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<http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Blake-SuperSize.html>