



Watch, Listen, Learn: Exploring English Learning Through “Dead Poets Society” Movies

Faturahman¹, Abdah²

Corresponding E-Mail: abdah@unismuhpalu.ac.id

English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education,
Universitas Muhammadiyah Palu.

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Abstract

This study explored how English learning and pedagogical practices were represented in Dead Poets Society, focusing on the film’s multimodal combination of dialogue, visual scenes, classroom activities, and teacher-student interaction. A qualitative design was employed using qualitative content analysis and multimodal interpretation. Selected scenes were identified, coded, categorized, and interpreted in relation to student-centered learning, literature-based language learning, critical thinking, learner autonomy, and teacher-student relationships. The findings showed that the film represented English learning as more than linguistic knowledge, involving interpretation, personal expression, critical reflection, and learner agency. The analysis also revealed tensions between progressive and traditional educational models. The study concludes that Dead Poets Society can serve as a valuable multimodal resource for English Language Teaching and teacher education. However, its use requires structured learning activities, teacher guidance, and critical discussion to connect cinematic representations with contemporary pedagogical practices and meaningful classroom learning experiences in diverse educational contexts today.

Keywords: *critical thinking, error analysis, higher education, interdisciplinary teaching materials*

Introduction

English has become a significant language for international communication, higher education, science, technology, business, and professional interaction. Consequently, English language education increasingly requires learners to develop not only grammatical knowledge but also communicative competence, critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and the ability to use language

appropriately in different contexts. Contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT) therefore needs learning resources that provide learners with meaningful exposure to language while simultaneously encouraging active participation and reflection.

One important challenge in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts is the limited exposure learners receive to naturally occurring English outside the classroom. Conventional classroom materials often provide controlled linguistic input that is useful for developing foundational knowledge, but learners may have fewer opportunities to observe how English is used through authentic interaction, emotion, gesture, social relationships, and cultural contexts. Audiovisual materials can help address this limitation by presenting language within meaningful communicative situations.

Films are particularly valuable because they combine several modes of communication. Spoken language is presented together with images, facial expressions, gestures, sound, setting, and social interaction. Such multimodal input can help learners construct meaning from linguistic and non-linguistic information simultaneously. A recent systematic review of empirical research on English movies in language classrooms concluded that films can support communicative competence and expose learners to both formal and vernacular forms of English.

From an ELT perspective, films can therefore serve multiple functions. They may be used to develop listening comprehension, vocabulary, pronunciation, speaking, intercultural competence, pragmatic awareness, and critical thinking. They can also provide contextualized examples of how language functions in particular social situations. However, the educational value of film does not depend simply on showing a film to students. Its effectiveness depends on how the material is selected, contextualized, and incorporated into pedagogical activities.

Film can also function as a representation of educational practices. Through teachers, students, classroom interaction, institutional rules, and educational conflicts, films portray particular assumptions about what teaching and learning should be. For this reason, educational films can become objects of pedagogical reflection, particularly in teacher education.

One particularly significant example is *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir and released in 1989. The film is set at Welton Academy, an elite and highly traditional preparatory school. The arrival of John Keating, an English teacher with unconventional teaching practices, creates a contrast between traditional teacher-centered education and a more student-centered approach emphasizing individual expression, literary interpretation, creativity, and independent thinking. Keating's classroom practices are particularly relevant to English language education because literature constitutes a major component of his teaching. Rather than treating poetry as a collection of texts that students simply have to memorize or analyze according to predetermined interpretations, he encourages students to question established interpretations and construct their own meanings.

This representation corresponds to constructivist perspectives in which learners are viewed as active participants in the construction of knowledge rather than passive recipients of information. It is also consistent with student-centered approaches that emphasize learner participation, interaction, personal meaning-making, and reflective learning.

The film can further be interpreted through the concept of learner autonomy. Autonomous language learners are expected to assume increasing responsibility for decisions concerning their learning, including goals, strategies, resources, and evaluation. The encouragement of individual voice and independent interpretation in Keating's classroom provides an interesting representation of this principle.

At the same time, *Dead Poets Society* can be interpreted through critical pedagogy. The film portrays a conflict between institutional authority and an educational philosophy that encourages students to question established assumptions. Recent scholarship comparing *Dead Poets Society* with *Mona Lisa Smile*, for example, argues that the film represents a movement away from rigid educational structures toward independent thinking and alternative ways of interpreting knowledge.

Previous research has already examined *Dead Poets Society* from several perspectives. Yulianingsih, Syafrianto, and Wulandari identified a range of teaching techniques represented in the film, including authentic materials, reading aloud, question-and-answer activities, positive suggestion, peer correction, graphic organizers, paragraph writing, role play, and creative adaptation. Other research has examined Keating's teaching style and identified personalized and interactional dimensions in his classroom practice.

Research has also examined the film as a resource for teacher education. Tan and Koh demonstrated how *Dead Poets Society* could be used with preservice teachers and school leaders to stimulate reflection on the surface, deep, and implicit structures of educational practice. Their findings emphasized the development of critical and context-sensitive judgments about teaching and school leadership.

Despite these studies, an important research gap remains. Much of the existing literature has concentrated on teaching techniques, educational values, teacher roles, or general pedagogical characteristics. Relatively less attention has been given to *Dead Poets Society* as a multimodal representation of English language learning, particularly the intersection of literary learning, learner autonomy, critical thinking, student-centered pedagogy, and teacher-student interaction.

The present study addresses this gap by treating the film not merely as a story about an inspirational teacher but as a multimodal pedagogical text that can be examined from the perspective of English Language Teaching.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore how English learning is represented in *Dead Poets Society* and to examine the pedagogical implications of this representation for ELT and English teacher education.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How is English learning represented in *Dead Poets Society*?
2. What pedagogical practices and values are represented through John Keating's English teaching?
3. How do the represented practices relate to student-centered learning, learner autonomy, critical thinking, and literature-based language learning?
4. What implications can *Dead Poets Society* provide for contemporary English Language Teaching?

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using qualitative content analysis and multimodal analysis. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret meanings represented through dialogue, classroom practices, character behavior, visual scenes, and interactions rather than to measure learning outcomes statistically. The film is treated as a multimodal pedagogical text.

Data Source

The primary data source is Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society* (1989). The data consist of selected scenes, dialogues, classroom activities, teacher-student interactions, literary-learning practices, and visual representations directly related to English teaching and learning. The selection of scenes is based on their relevance to the research questions.

Data Collection

Data were collected through repeated viewing of the film. The procedure involved:

Watching the film in its entirety, identifying scenes related to English teaching and learning, transcribing relevant dialogue, recording relevant teacher and student actions, identifying visual and contextual features, coding the data; and organizing the data into thematic categories.

A data-recording matrix was developed as follows:

No.	Scene	Dialogue/Action	Pedagogical Category	Interpretation
1.	English classroom	Teacher encourages alternative interpretation	Student-centered learning	Students construct meaning.
2.	Poetry lesson	Students interpret literary texts	Literature-based learning	Literature becomes a

				communicative resource.
3.	Classroom interaction	Students express personal opinions	Critical thinking	Students develop independent perspectives
4.	Group activity	Students interact with peers	Collaborative learning	Learning occurs through interaction.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through five stages.

Stage 1: Familiarization

The researchers watched the film repeatedly to become familiar with its narrative, educational setting, characters, and pedagogical conflicts.

Stage 2: Initial Coding

Relevant scenes and dialogues were coded according to their pedagogical characteristics.

The initial codes included:

- SCL-Student-Centered Learning
- LL-Literature Learning
- CT-Critical Thinking
- LA-Learner Autonomy
- TSR-Teacher-Student Relationship
- CP-Critical Pedagogy

Stage 3: Categorization

Related codes were grouped into broader themes.

Stage 4: Interpretation

The themes were interpreted in relation to theories of language learning, student-centered pedagogy, learner autonomy, literature-based language teaching, and critical pedagogy.

Stage 5: Thematic Synthesis

The final themes were compared with previous research to identify similarities, differences, and potential contributions.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis identified five interconnected themes:

Student-centered learning, literature as a medium for English learning, critical thinking. Learner autonomy and Teacher-student relationships.

These themes demonstrate that English learning in Dead Poets Society is represented as a process extending beyond linguistic knowledge toward personal interpretation, intellectual development, and learner agency.

Student-Centered English Learning

The strongest pedagogical contrast in the film is between teacher-centered and student-centered instruction. Welton Academy represents a highly structured educational environment characterized by discipline, institutional authority, and conformity. Keating's classroom introduces an alternative approach in which students are encouraged to participate actively.

Instead of simply transmitting predetermined interpretations of poetry, Keating encourages students to question assumptions and develop their own responses. This representation is consistent with constructivist learning theory, which views knowledge as something learners actively construct through experience and interaction. For English language education, this has important implications. Language learning should not be reduced to memorizing vocabulary, grammar rules, or literary definitions. Students should also have opportunities to interpret, discuss, negotiate meaning, and express personal responses. The film therefore provides a useful representation of the movement from knowledge transmission to knowledge construction.

Literature as a Medium for English Learning

Literature occupies a central position in Keating's classroom. Rather than presenting poetry as an abstract academic object, Keating uses literary texts to stimulate discussion about life, identity, emotion, and personal experience.

This approach has significant implications for English language learning.

Literature can support:

- Vocabulary development
- Reading comprehension
- Speaking practice
- Writing
- Interpretation
- Cultural awareness
- Critical thinking; and Personal expression.

The representation in the film suggests that literary texts can function as spaces for communication rather than merely objects of formal analysis. This is particularly relevant to English Education Programs in higher education, where students need to develop both linguistic and analytical competence.

Developing Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is another dominant theme. Keating repeatedly challenges students to reconsider assumptions and examine ideas from alternative perspectives.

The pedagogical significance of this approach lies in the fact that students are not simply asked to understand what a poem says but to consider how and why it can be interpreted differently.

This principle can be transferred to contemporary ELT through activities such as:

- Open-ended questions
- Literary discussion
- Debate
- Problem-based tasks
- Reflective writing
- Comparative interpretation; and evidence-based argumentation.

The film therefore demonstrates that English classrooms can become spaces for intellectual development rather than simply language practice.

However, critical thinking should not be interpreted as rejecting authority automatically. Critical thinking requires evidence, reasoning, evaluation, and reflection.

This distinction is important because films often simplify educational conflicts for dramatic purposes.

Learner Autonomy and Student Voice

The film strongly emphasizes individual voice. Keating encourages students to develop their own perspectives rather than simply reproduce institutional expectations. This representation corresponds with the concept of learner autonomy, particularly the idea that learners should gradually assume responsibility for their learning.

In ELT, learner autonomy can be encouraged through:

- Independent reading
- Self-selected learning topics
- Reflective journals
- Project-based learning
- Self-assessment learning portfolios; and independent use of digital resources.

Nevertheless, the film also highlights a potential problem: autonomy without adequate guidance can become difficult to manage.

Effective autonomy requires teachers to establish learning objectives, provide scaffolding, monitor progress, and offer constructive feedback.

Therefore, the pedagogical lesson from the film should not be interpreted as “students should be completely free.” Instead, it suggests that students need meaningful opportunities to exercise agency within an appropriately structured learning environment.

Teacher-Student Relationships

The relationship between Keating and his students is central to the film's pedagogical message.

Keating attempts to understand his students as individuals rather than treating them simply as members of a class. His teaching style creates opportunities for students to communicate and participate.

Previous research has similarly identified facilitator, personal-model, and

delegator roles in the representation of Keating as an English teacher.

A positive teacher-student relationship can contribute to students' willingness to participate, particularly in language learning where students may experience anxiety when speaking or expressing ideas in a foreign language.

From an ELT perspective, teachers need to create classroom environments where mistakes are treated as part of learning rather than as reasons for embarrassment. Thus, the film reinforces the importance of the teacher's interpersonal role in addition to instructional competence.

The Tension between Traditional and Progressive Pedagogy

One of the most significant aspects of *Dead Poets Society* is its representation of the conflict between traditional and progressive education. Traditional pedagogy in the film is associated with:

- Discipline
- Authority
- Conformity
- Institutional control
- Academic achievement and obedience.

Keating's pedagogy is associated with:

- Creativity
- Individual expression
- Critical thinking
- Learner participation
- Autonomy and personal meaning-making.

The film clearly favors the latter orientation. However, an academic analysis should avoid accepting this binary without qualification.

Traditional education is not necessarily ineffective, and progressive education is not automatically effective. Language learning requires both structure and freedom. Students need clear objectives, explicit instruction, feedback, and assessment, but they also need opportunities for exploration, interaction, creativity, and reflection. Consequently, the most useful pedagogical lesson from the film may be the importance of balance and contextual responsiveness.

Discussion: Beyond the "Inspirational Teacher" Narrative

A common interpretation of *Dead Poets Society* is that it is primarily a story about an inspirational teacher. Although this interpretation is understandable, it is insufficient from an academic perspective.

Previous research has already demonstrated that the film contains multiple teaching techniques and educational values. Another research has emphasized Keating's role as facilitator, personal model, and delegator. Research using the film in teacher education has further shown that it can stimulate reflective and context-sensitive thinking about educational practice.

The present analysis extends these perspectives by positioning the film as a multimodal representation of English learning.

The significance of the film lies not simply in the fact that Keating is unconventional. Rather, the film raises broader questions:

- What does it mean to learn English?
- What role should literature play in language education?
- How much freedom should students have?
- How should teachers balance authority and autonomy?
- Can language learning contribute to critical thinking?
- How can classroom interaction develop learner identity?

These questions make *Dead Poets Society* potentially valuable for English teacher education.

Pedagogical Implications for English Language Teaching

The findings have several implications for ELT.

1. Film as Listening Input

Selected scenes can be used to expose students to natural spoken English, including pronunciation, stress, intonation, vocabulary, and discourse patterns.

2. Film as a Speaking Stimulus

Students can discuss characters, conflicts, educational issues, and personal interpretations.

3. Film as Literary Learning

The poems referenced in the film can become starting points for reading, interpretation, and creative writing.

4. Film as Critical Thinking Material

Students can critically evaluate Keating's teaching methods and compare them with their own educational experiences.

5. Film as Teacher Education Material

For preservice English teachers, the film can be used to analyze:

- Teaching styles
- Classroom management
- Teacher identity
- Teacher-student relationships
- Learner autonomy
- Professional ethics and educational leadership.

The use of films for preservice teacher education has already been supported by research showing that film-based reflection can encourage educators to examine educational practices critically and contextually.

Conclusion

This study has explored *Dead Poets Society* as a multimodal representation of English learning and teaching. The analysis demonstrates that the film presents English education as a process that extends beyond the acquisition of linguistic knowledge. Through literature, classroom interaction, critical questioning, and student participation, English learning is represented as a means of developing interpretation, individual expression, critical thinking, and learner agency.

Five major themes emerged from the analysis: student-centered learning, literature-based learning, critical thinking, learner autonomy, and teacher-student relationships.

The film demonstrates the pedagogical potential of literature as a stimulus for language development and personal reflection. It also illustrates how classroom interaction can provide opportunities for students to develop their own voices and perspectives.

At the same time, the film should not be interpreted as a complete or universally applicable model of effective teaching. Its dramatic representation simplifies some of the complexities of classroom practice and institutional constraints. The contrast between traditional and progressive education should therefore be examined critically rather than accepted as a simple opposition.

For English Language Teaching, *Dead Poets Society* can function as a valuable multimodal resource when integrated with carefully designed activities. It can support listening, speaking, reading, literary interpretation, critical thinking, and teacher reflection.

Future research should compare *Dead Poets Society* with other educational films to investigate similarities and differences in representations of English teachers and learners. Researchers could also conduct classroom-based empirical studies to determine whether using selected scenes from the film actually improves students' listening comprehension, speaking ability, critical thinking, or learner autonomy.

Further research could additionally investigate students' responses to the film using mixed-methods designs, combining qualitative reflection with quantitative measures of language-learning outcomes. Such research would complement film analysis by providing empirical evidence regarding the pedagogical effectiveness of audiovisual materials in English language education.

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