
Review

A Convenient Classroom Package for an Inconvenient Truth

Keith Ford

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*When the coast of California
Sinks into the ocean
And the ice poles are water
And England's green and pleasant land
Is all desert sand
No one will answer you when you call*

.....
*Make me a drink Caroline
Tall and icy*

(From "California," lyrics by Richard Butler)

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There is something about a song—a musical mood, a telling lyric—that can carry a message in a succinct and effective way when perhaps an hour's worth of dry rhetoric and proselytizing remains unconvincing. But come on, the coast of California sinking into the ocean, and England all desert sand? Isn't this taking global warming too far? Well, yes, perhaps, but to a certain extent, isn't selling the man-made global warming argument partly about playing on emotions and relying on sentiment, fear and exaggeration? And using a popular medium like music or film is undoubtedly one way to get across such a serious message to a mass market. Indeed, one could say that this is how Al Gore goes about trying to put across his message in the film documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, that through increased emissions of carbon dioxide we—as opposed to a natural process of climate

change—are directly responsible for global warming and for all its dreadful and seemingly apocalyptic consequences.

In having to deal with such a responsibility and potentially disastrous reality, just like the character in the song above it is easy to reach for a drink in despair (“Tall and icy”—bitter glacial irony there perhaps?) rather than face up to the horrendous future that may await the planet for our children and future generations. But then hopefully, *if* we accept that we are the cause, we *can* actually do something about it, and without attempting to excuse my own shameful inactivity or alcohol consumption in response to any apparent crisis, perhaps something I can do is encourage the next generation to really pick up the thematic oar when I belong to a generation that may well have missed the boat: for as ELT agents we are undoubtedly in a privileged position to do this, but hopefully without coming across to our students as being too prescriptive. Using *An Inconvenient Truth* as classroom content is, I suggest, one interesting and very visual way of doing this, while at the same time keeping in mind the need to question some of the arguments and evidence that it presents.

With a twice-weekly, first-year, high intermediate-level four skills English class I used *A Young Person's Guide* version of the *An Inconvenient Truth* book in conjunction with the DVD of Al Gore's presentation and documentary, as well as providing my own vocabulary lists and notes for helping students' understanding of context and cultural references. *A Young Person's Guide* follows the documentary film almost exactly in terms of both content and language. Also, it works as a relatively high-level graded reader in that it is a simplified version of the original accompanying book. The readings are shorter and more concise while keeping the main ideas from the documentary presentation and the keywords and concepts relating to geography, climate, and other issues related to global warming. Also in the book can be found most of the excellent visual images that Gore uses as the basis for his speech.

Initially I used a PAL version of the DVD from the UK, which unfortunately involved carting to class extra equipment, but the Japanese version of the DVD came out in Japan on 6th July 2007. It has clear, accurate English captions and has many chapter divisions - 32 in all - with most chapters only a few minutes long and therefore making it convenient when locating a particular section or using the chapter menu display. The timings and chapter references mentioned below are from this Japanese version.

I used the DVD and some of the short readings from the book as something of an experiment to challenge my class with an input-oriented project (reading, vocabulary preparation and video/listening) after having already done projects/presentations on global issues and developing countries that involved plenty of speaking opportunities. We began the whole process with a short pair discussion/brainstorm on causes, effects and solutions of global warming and to what extent we are responsible.

I divided the DVD into four parts of about 20 minutes each, using it over four class periods. Conveniently, each part seemed to have a clear focus: what global warming is and how it is caused (00.36 seconds to 24.40), general effects of global warming (28.06 to 39.24 and 41.46 to 51.25), effects with a specific focus on Antarctica and Greenland (54.13 to 1.09.29), and misconceptions and solutions (1.09.29 to 1.29.30).

Each viewing was preceded by vocabulary preparation and a few short readings from the book (done for homework) highlighting some of the main issues covered in each section of the documentary. I divided each of the 20-minute parts again into two sections (of approximately 10 minutes each) and after viewing each of these sections students answered some review questions. We then watched the whole 20-minute section again and later checked answers. Finally, in the last 15 minutes of each class students wrote a 100-word summary of the 20-minute section using the vocabulary sheets I had provided to help them recall some of the main ideas and concepts and to recycle topic-

related vocabulary. Given more time, as opposed to just four classes at the end of the semester, the whole theme could well have been extended into a mini research project as students might investigate how an area and/or people of the world have been badly affected by ice melting or rising sea levels, such as the Inuit in Alaska, or the inhabitants of the Pacific islands of Kiribati.

In addition to presenting the key points about global warming (e. g., process, causes, effects), supported by charts, computer graphics and cartoon images, Gore makes good use of a few literary references and quotations to support his argument. To demonstrate denial? Mark Twain: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble, it's what you know for sure that just ain't so" (07.48). In cataloguing the misdeeds of a White House official in editing unfavorable research findings? Upton Sinclair: "It's difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on him not understanding it" (1.16.48). These quotes could well be used as freeze-frames in class with further explanation from the instructor, discussion or multiple choice questions about what point made in the documentary they were used to exemplify.

As well as adding variety to his presentation style through anecdotes, exceptional visuals and such quotation touches, there is a good deal of wit in dealing with this most serious of issues. There are also some appropriate digs at a couple of former Republican presidents demonstrating their contempt for the whole debate: Ronald Reagan (50.24) dismissing air pollution by making a trite comparison with the Big Smokey haze in The Rockies as being the result of nitrogen oxides from decaying vegetation; Bush the elder in vitriolic mood and defending business at all cost, damning Gore as "This guy is so far off in the environmental extreme we'll be up to our neck in owls and out of work for every American" (50. 40).

There are, however, a few points on which Al Gore's approach in this documentary might come under particular scrutiny. One is the

rather self-laudatory nature of Gore's catwalk scenes as he arrives for giving what he calls his "slideshow" at various locations around the world and the scenes showing him being photographed and received by an adoring audience. This is something we could have done without, just in case we are tempted to question Mr. Gore's motives as an ex-politician for going so public and up front on this issue.

Another critical note is that there are undoubtedly some rather personalized sections of the documentary (not least, reference to his son's accident and long-term hospitalization, and to his sister's premature death from lung cancer) as it weaves together the actual presentation and Al Gore's personal experiences that led him to first understanding carbon dioxide measurements and then making a growing commitment to exposing carbon dioxide as the chief cause of global warming. He does, however, in referring to his sister's death, draw a good parallel: how the cigarette companies dismissed research in the 1950s showing the damaging effects of smoking and how many of us only tend to react to a social problem or world crisis when things start to touch us personally. And while there is no question that Al Gore tries to play on emotions in getting his message across, it may well be an effective way of getting people to consider the global warming issue when otherwise they may not have even entertained the idea.

I would at this point like to add something of a balanced view of this issue. In a recent BBC radio program *The Moral Maze* the question was raised as to whether the acceptance of human causes of global warming has reached such a state of orthodoxy that morally it is beyond debate. However, a strength of any democratic society that values the freedom of speech is that even such an overwhelmingly popular view can be criticized. Following the initial release of *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006, and its public recognition at the Cannes Film Festival, Martin Durkin wrote and directed *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, which is billed as "The definitive answer to Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*." It presents strong evidence and compelling arguments from respected

scientists and meteorologists to show that man-made global warming is a falsehood, and that the phenomenon is actually due to changes in the sun's radiation. In fact, it turns the Gore argument on its head, pointing out that higher temperatures lead to more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere rather than the other way round. It also points out that the climate science agenda for supporting the carbon dioxide view was originally politically motivated back in the Thatcher years in Britain to promote nuclear power plants as a solution to energy dependency and potential crisis.

These contradictory views, both apparently supported by scientific research, can make for something of a dilemma. Whose scientific truths do we believe, convenient or otherwise? Anyway, having viewed the Durkin documentary, I feel it is only fair to offer students a balanced view of this issue, and so for a follow-up to classes on *An Inconvenient Truth* I am planning to do a few classes using selected scenes from *The Great Global Warming Swindle*. However, as the documentary is apparently only available in the UK at present in a PAL version, I'm afraid I will be going back to carting that extra equipment to the classroom. Furthermore, somewhat inconveniently, it does not have English captions, so it will involve a good deal of transcription if it is going to be accessible for the students.

Finally, I'd like to conclude this brief review with a final comment on Al Gore's take on global warming. Even if the Gore camp have got it wrong, and global warming is an inevitable consequence of natural climate change, surely encouraging people to reduce carbon emissions in the developed world can be no bad thing. Al Gore's documentary, after highlighting various solutions and ways that we can all contribute to reducing carbon emissions, ends with a pertinent, though perhaps rather sentimental comment that the planet we live on "Is our only home." This leads into the song "I Have Got to Wake Up" while various recommendations for action for making a difference are shown on screen, and indeed, using the song in class and looking

at the lyrics can be an appropriate way to finish the last class on this topic. Among its lyrics are the following lingering questions that we might ask ourselves:

*Have I been sleeping?
I've been so still
Afraid of crumbling
Have I been careless?
Dismissing all the distant rumblings
(From "I Have Got to Wake Up")*

I just wonder how easy it will be for me to find such an emotive song to support the viewing of *The Great Global Warming Swindle*?

Note

If you wish to have a Word document of the vocabulary lists and context notes, please send me an email and I would be happy to send them to you: fordkeith@hotmail.com

References

- "An Inconvenient Truth." (2007). Paramount Pictures. Dir: Davis Guggenheim.
- "California." Recorded by Richard Butler. From the album "Richard Butler" (2006). Lyrics available at www.lyricsdir.com/richard-butler-california-lyrics.html
- Gore, A. (2006). *An Inconvenient Truth: The Crisis of Global Warming. A Young Person's Guide*. Bloomsbury: London.
- "I Have Got to Wake Up." Recorded by Melissa Etheridge. From the album "Greatest Hits: The Road Less Traveled" (2005). Lyrics available at www.digitaldreamdoor.com/pages/lyrics2/ineedwakeup.html
- "The Great Global Warming Swindle" (2007). Channel Four. Dir: Martin Durkin.