

FILMS, SLIDES OR TAPES GERMAN INSTRUCTION BY FILMS

by Harry A. Walbruck

I. *The Role of Films in FL Teaching*

Teaching films are just one of the many media presently employed in modern instruction. The whole field of AV (audio-visual) education has catapulted to such tremendous proportions in recent years that a cool reappraisal of its effectiveness seems very much justified, indeed badly needed.

One expert in the field put it this way: "We have inherited a revolution in educational needs and expectations . . . The curriculum has exploded . . . one reason for growth is the inability of our institutions of higher learning generally, and our teacher training institutions in particular, to adjust rapidly to these new conditions."¹

Many producers of AV materials now provide greatly improved customer service in this field. At the same time educators have acquired much more experience in the use of such teachers' aids. With more and more curriculum changes in the making, this trend is bound to continue.

According to a report from the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (USOE), experiments have been made both with film-based courses originally produced as films and with courses produced as television programs; the latter were later made available for classroom use in the form of kinescope recordings.² For instance, a biology study group using films was compared with two other groups not using these films, and it was found that it took the film group about 20 per cent less time to complete the identical course.

Similar findings are contained in the USOE report comparing filmed courses with direct instruction in college-level psychology and communication skills, high school chemistry, physics, history, industrial arts, etc. The potential usefulness of such film series therefore seems to be well established.

Focusing on the teaching of foreign languages (FL), it must be kept in mind that experimentation with films has been undertaken in this country only to a limited extent. With the arrival of better

¹Maurice Mitchell, Chancellor of the University of Denver, Colorado, *Let's Take a Look*, *Film News*, No. 4 (1967), 7-8.

²Leslie P. Greenhill, "Review of Trends in Research on Instructional Television and Film", *Research in Instructional Television and Films*, U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare 1967, 1.

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equipment and the prevalence of greater technical know-how in many of our institutions of higher learning, wider use of FL films can hopefully be expected.

Many pros and cons will always be raised, of course, about the actual usefulness of such films. Comparing them with language tapes, for instance, it seems obvious that tapes alone will never do the job of duplicating a complete language experience, for they can only help in listening and speaking practice. Use of language films, on the other hand, is the closest thing to a normal language experience, part of which is also seeing and reacting to another speaker.

In a comprehensive study on current trends in research on Instructional Television and Film, it was pointed out that the period from 1945 to 1965 represented two decades of intensive research on the development and use of films and television as instructional media. This research was stimulated largely by a predicted and actual shortage of competent teachers and by the need to educate a rapidly growing population. The film medium was brought out quite clearly as as having a stimulating effect on learning. The underlying reason seems to be that "this generation is image-oriented, and has grown up with ads, posters, TV and film screens; it responds to films more than it does to books, at a certain level, at least. Even a mediocre film stimulates far more analysis and talk than a mediocre short story."⁴

How then do FL films as a teaching tool compare with some of the other established media such as filmstrips and slides? There certainly is a place for still pictures in beginner courses where intensive observation is helpful in associating objects with words. Films, on the other hand, seem to produce stronger effects at the intermediate level where fluency and flexibility of expression are stressed to a greater extent.

Supposing that FL teaching by films on the intermediate level will be more and more accepted, one has to reappraise the specific goals set for programs in which each language films are used. There must first be a clear answer to the basic question, "What is 'language'?" Language has been defined as a structural set of verbal and nonverbal behavior patterns within a particular cultural context, exclusively acquired through communication experiences with other human beings by the application of an apparently innate language

³E. Jahiel, University of Illinois, in a paper read at the MLA Seminar, New York, December 27, 1968, "The Use of Commercial Motion Pictures in Teaching Programs".

⁴Jahiel.

processing ability.⁵ Therefore, language is a composite of many things: not only of words, but of gestures, actions, emotions and situations. Of course, linguists will never completely agree on such definitions either, but it is one that makes sense to this writer.

How can this total involvement called language be taught? At least a partial answer is by films, which never will, of course, be equivalent to, or replace, a live teacher. Stronger implementation of AV methods in FL teaching does not diminish but apparently increases the teacher's role. Without his active participation, all teaching aids are just gadgets. The teacher is the key to their effective use which has to culminate in a follow-through procedure that only he can determine.

Instructional films will always supplement the teacher's own presentations. They will furnish the FL student with deeper "insights into foreign civilization, history, sociology and into the filmic culture of another land. The film can be the starting point — often the finishing point, too — of discussions, compositions, or a take off point for related subjects."⁶ Indeed, films will quite often serve to expand the mind of the student in many directions, which can be considered a valuable fringe benefit.

The above opinions are the result of experiments and can be substantiated. Questions arising from these points of view might be: In what respect do FL films actually do more for the student than other AV media? To start with, do they offer a wider basis for language learning? Do they also have greater appeal to the student and thereby provide him with stronger motivation and inducement to learn a foreign language as a whole? Will they add more to his accuracy, fluency, and flexibility in speaking, and even, in writing this language? These questions can only be answered by further intensive studies.

II. *FL Films on Different Levels*

Among the new FL teaching media applied in the Soviet Union, films are the most popular with the teachers.⁸ One of the positive results from its use as a teaching aid, they claim, is excitement. Excitement, in their opinion, is conducive to better concentration, and

⁵*Methods Service Materials, 1969/70*, from the Center for Curriculum Development in Audio-Visual Language Teaching (1969), 16.

⁶Jahiel.

⁷Greenhill, 5.

⁸Anthony M. Mlikotin, "Soviet Methods of Teaching Foreign Languages", *The Modern Language Journal* (October 1967), 341-342.

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this in turn is said to lead to better memorization. Other special advantages of FL film teaching, according to the Soviet experts, are these: in one single stroke, a film covers more material than the text; films carry the meaning of a word better than the verbal translation; they are particularly useful in learning the vocabulary.

As for procedure, the Russian teachers insist that no film be shown before the students have first mastered the film material at home; that is, until the students have read the story told by the film and become acquainted with its vocabulary. In the films, question and answer patterns are applied and later the student is asked to retell the film story.

In comparison to the Russians, to judge from various opinions expressed in conversations, our FL teachers seem to be highly doubtful about film-based methods and the goals to be achieved thereby. A better clarification of teaching goals must be the first logical step in planning any FL instruction at our schools, it seems. Assuming that on the beginner level, other teaching media, such as tapes, slides, and filmstrips will usually be more effective than films, let us attempt to scrutinize the intermediate level a little more closely, using some German language films as examples.

At the intermediate level of all foreign languages the usual learning objectives are many-fold. To use a recognized guideline, the minimal course content in German III (third year of high school or third-semester college German) should meet several demands in phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary as well as culture.⁹ These are all increased at Level IV which could be considered as the higher intermediate level. However, the exact teaching goals for both of these levels, which for practical purposes will be called the intermediate level as a whole, cannot be defined in a precise way, because different school curricula on a nation-wide scale leave much room for changes and special emphases.

Usually, students on the intermediate level are supposed to acquire, or improve, the following skills: to speak in the language, using the fundamental vocabulary of 900 to 1500 words; to write short compositions; to read edited, contemporary material, to begin the transfer from concrete to abstract language.¹⁰

Many methods in film-based instruction can be applied to achieve these goals. One proven pattern is the following: A scene is presented in both picture and sound; next, the main speaker in the film

⁹Frank M. Grittner, *Teaching Foreign Languages* (New York, 1969), 101-106.

¹⁰*Methods Service Materials*, 17.

asks questions about the scene which are to be answered by the student, upon which the speaker gives the correct answer; the speaker then asks the question again, whereupon the student repeats the correct answer. (This pattern is similar to the four-phase exercise commonly applied in language lab courses.)

Another no less effective approach is the one in which a dialogue is first presented by two speakers on the screen, then broken into parts by the same speakers, and repeated several times. Other patterns tried in FL films have applied the technique of showing a pictorial sequence with narration first, then presenting the translation in writing, repeating the scene in narration, then finally breaking it down into parts.

There are, of course, many more possibilities, including the repetition of spoken sentences, while the text simultaneously appears in print on the screen. The speaker on the screen can also take turns with the students in asking and answering questions. Which of these methods is the best will always depend on the specific objectives of the course in which these films are used.

III. *Films Used in Teaching German*

In order to determine what can be done to improve film instruction in German, let us first consider which films have been available thus far. A distinction must be made between regular films in the native language and FL teaching films. The Russians refer to the former as "artistic" and to the latter as "grammatical" movies.¹¹

The consensus with respect to the first group, also often referred to as "entertainment films" seems to be that their value as a tool for instruction is not as great as those designed specifically for this purpose. It can be said in favor of the first group that films serve at least the purpose of offering more advanced vocabulary and cultural enrichment to the student.

The major goals of FL teaching, however, can better be attained in using films of the second group since only these types of films are based on the systematic development of the various skills.

The availability of German teaching films is still rather limited in the United States. Some of the films of this group tested by myself in recent years are the following: *Allerlei aus Deutschland*; *Die Tiere in der Stadt*; *Unsere Strasse*; *Die bezaubernde Schweiz*.¹² These films live up to their promise to supply the student with functional vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, thereby contributing to the improvement of conversational skills.

¹¹Mlikotin, 342.

¹²Films available through International Film Bureau, Inc., Chicago, Illinois.

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Early Films

Of a different nature is a film series in German originally produced for television on the main campus of the University of Wisconsin.¹³ Although it was made as far back as 1951, it must still be considered a good example, for it uses a variety of teaching techniques. Called *German Language Films No. 1, 2, 3, 4*, the stated content of this series was: "German language—study and teaching: basic grammatical and conversational construction of German."

According to the summary of this film series, the technique of hearing and seeing words pronounced by native informants was applied in these films in accordance with accepted teaching methods. Each of the four films consisted of a short sketch, in which two native speakers acted out an everyday situation using conversational idioms. After each sketch was concluded, the speakers broke it down into its component phrases and sentences. These were illustrated by close-ups of the speakers as they pronounced the phrases, and by the phrases themselves which appeared in print on the screen. Each sentence or phrase was repeated a total of four times. This device gave the viewer an opportunity to repeat the words along with the native speaker. In doing so, he became better acquainted with inflection, voice modulation, and pronunciation.

After several years of using these films, I found them attractive and profitable for my students, although the subject matter would appear somewhat dated now.

Current Films

Of all German teaching films currently available, the most substantial one seems to be a series developed by the Goethe Institute in Munich, Western Germany.¹⁴ Under the title *Guten Tag-lernen Sie Deutsch* it consists of 26 short films for use in its 21 Branch Institutes in the Federal Republic of Germany and in 115 other Goethe Institutes throughout the world. The series has been proven effective in teaching German to foreigners: where 70% of the students took part in the film classes regularly, 65% did so with measurable success and 20% with even outstanding success. *Guten Tag* is now available in the United States, too.¹⁵

¹³BAVI (Bureau of Audio-Visual Instruction), Madison Campus, The University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin. This film series is not available anymore.

¹⁴Hans-Otto Broecker and Henner Oepfert. "Bericht über den Einsatz des Sprachfilmkurses 'Guten Tag' an der Unterrichtsstätte Arolsen", special reprint from *Deutschunterricht für Ausländer*, Heft 13-14, 16. Jahrgang (Goethe Institut, München), 99.

¹⁵International Film Bureau, Inc., Chicago, Illinois.

The author of a further study of the results of this experiment claims that such films immediately catch the interest of the viewer since he feels himself not as a partner in conversation, but as a "secret onlooker and accessory." To this fascination, other elements of interest are added. Where else in a classroom situation, he asks, can genuine dialogue be presented? Where else (but on the screen) can corresponding situations be made alive? Through the medium of film, the student is able to participate in the every day life of the country whose language he is learning.

In addition to such linguistic experiences, the student gains "understanding by experiences made visible: gestures in connection with language, information on social attitudes; not talks about language are presented to him, but the complete spoken language itself."¹⁶

IV. Test Results and Conclusions

During the first semester of the last school year, I gave some comparative tests to two small groups of my own German students at the third semester level. Both groups, called A and B, used identical text and tape materials. The A group, however, also used films of the same subject matter, whereas the B group did not see the films but used the same amount of time for additional tape work in the language lab.

The film series in this experiment was produced by me and consisted of six short 8 mm sound films with German narration and exercises, combined under the title *Living German* — parts I to VI. Both handbooks and tapes contained the same texts as the films, made for exclusive use at the University of Wisconsin—Parkside.

The comparative tests given to the A and B groups were carried out after the first six weeks of the course. At that time it was possible to split the course into two sections of comparable grade averages, based on the students' six-weeks grades.

Preceding the tests, the teaching procedure in both groups was the same up to the point when the A and B groups were separated either for film viewing or for additional tape drills. By that time, both groups had studied the texts in the handbooks and familiarized themselves with its vocabulary. The A group using the films was advised to proceed from there in the following fashion:

- a.) WATCH THE FILM. With the sound turned on, follow the scenes and listen to the narration at the same time;
- b.) LISTEN TO THE TAPE. Answer the questions which you can simultaneously read in the Exercise section of this handbook, then listen to the correct answers and repeat them;

¹⁶Rudolf Schneider, "Guten Tag! Ein deutscher Sprachfilm für Ausländer", special reprint from *Kulturarbeit*, Heft 12 (1966), 1-3.

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- c.) WATCH THE FILM. This time with the sound track off, replace the film's narration by your own;
- d.) WATCH THE FILM. As under a.) listen to the film's narration, comparing it mentally with your own;
- e.) WATCH THE FILM. As under c.) give your narration.

The results of comparative tests, given immediately afterwards to both groups, can be summarized as follows:

In overall percentage points, based on answers to content questions, the A group proved to be superior to the B group. The written tests, of course, reflected only on retention of subject matter and correct spelling. Additional oral tests in which pronunciation and fluency were evaluated led to the conclusion that such oral skills could not be noticeably improved by film study, but just as well be furthered by tape work in the language lab.

The argument could be raised here that any results drawn from such limited tests are not conclusive enough for general findings. This may be true since a greater number of such studies conducted through longer periods of time is bound to make any such findings more comprehensive. Nevertheless, the test results described above in connection with some additional observations made through several years of teaching German with and without films lead me to conclude that:

- a.) FL films are best suited to create an atmosphere of linguistic authenticity and "now" quality which cannot be surpassed by any other teaching aid in as far as they also offer a special *inducement to learning*. While not each of the phases of progress can be tested on the spot, their total audio-visual impact will be more effective than the impact of other audio or visual media used separately;
- b.) FL films will be useful in gaining *cultural information* from topics dealing with geography, history, art, literature, and other related subjects;
- c.) Using FL films will be of value in *saving time* because observing language contents through film will enable the student to absorb language more rapidly. When the same amount of time is given to study by film as to study by more conventional methods, the quality of language retention on the part of the student is a higher one.
- d.) Other tangible results from using FL films will be the building of a new vocabulary, even though this is not a major function of FL films, as well as the stimulating effect in activities requiring use of the language such as speaking or writing, goals that are often quoted as among the most desirable in language learning.¹⁷

¹⁷Frank Grittner, "Motion Pictures for Use in the German Class", *VOICE of the Wisconsin Foreign Language Teacher*, German Section, VIII (Winter 1968), 2.

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A final word seems to be in order regarding "independent study". The films used in my experiment were also utilized in this type of study activity which makes it possible, especially for the student of foreign languages, to proceed at his own speed, a feature more and more emphasized at many institutions of higher learning. There is, of course, much room left for further study in this area.

It can be safely stated, however, that already now, at the beginning of a new age of electronic and relate teaching methods, many inspired and forward-looking FL teachers can improve the quality of their instruction with modern teaching aids such as films.

The ways and means to teach are many; the greater their variety the greater will be their effectiveness. This holds true especially for FL instruction by films.

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