FILM AS A TEACHING MEDIUM

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Introduction

In second language (L2) instruction there is a need for exposure to an abundance of contextualized authentic target language (TL) as spoken by many different people in many different situations. Furthermore, there is a need for teaching materials that are both vivid and relevant to the students.

Commercial feature-length film is one way of effectively satisfying these needs in L2 teaching. Through visual cues, film, compared to other instructional media, provides a more complete context for the language the learners hear, as well as supplying a greater diversity of linguistic and cultural input through the different film genres.[1] Although film is not authentic speech, the redundancy and speed of the speech in film closely replicate authentic speech. Possibly the most significant result of using film, a medium enjoyed by most students, is the enhancement of learner motivation. Although the use of film will be discussed here in the context of a university level ESL film course focusing on the integrated skills of listening and speaking, much of the discussion can also be applied to the use of film as only one component of a single skill ESL course (listening, speaking, reading, or writing), or for foreign language teaching in general.

Henry A. Garrity (1987) in his book, *Film in the French Classroom*, produced a credible model for using film as the instructional medium in teaching French. While Garrity offers a great deal of practical information on teaching French through film, he doesn't elaborate on what role images play in language comprehension, nor does he explain in much detail the specific criteria used in selecting films.

In this paper, there will be 1) a discussion of the relationship between images and language in film followed by 2) an enumeration and explanation of some criteria for selecting films. 3) *Broadcast News* is then used as a model, first to demonstrate the application of the criteria for selecting a film, and then to demonstrate the types of supplementary activities that can accompany a film and the principles that guide their development. To illustrate the points discussed, films used in an ESL Film Class[2] at the University of Minnesota, as well as several other films, serve as examples.

Background

The use of film in language teaching is not a new concept; documentaries have long been used to bring the L2 culture as well as the language to students. In addition, there are carefully scripted films using adapted speech produced to be used in conjunction with language textbooks (*Guten Tag, wie geht's*).

These types of materials have a valid place in language teaching, but they also have shortcomings. (1) In the case of documentaries, the speech is authentic (if the documentaries are produced for an audience which speaks the TL natively) and the content is often inherently interesting to L2

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learners. However, documentaries are limited in that they have a uniform speech style, generally didactic, with little or no conversation. The L2 learners don't encounter enough variety of input to adequately reflect the great variety of TL discourse styles. (2) In the case of the films prepared to go with textbooks, while they offer conversation, it is not authentic and often stilted and flat. In addition, the topics of these films often do little to excite students' interest, which can lead to waning motivation for learning the L2.

Commercial film has, in the past, been used much less often for ESL instruction.[3] Probably the greatest factors in the underuse of film are the lack of prepared teaching materials for them and the length (viewing time) of films. There are few published ESL materials for films and those that are published are often quite expensive. In addition, when confronted with a two to three hour film, instructors who would wish to create their own materials might easily be overwhelmed in trying to decide what to do with the film, what points to teach and how to do it. Printed film scripts are difficult to acquire, if not impossible for many films. Therefore, the instructor is required to spend a great deal of time viewing and re-viewing the film in order first to make decisions about what to teach and then to transcribe the language that's been targeted.

More recently though, there seems to be a blossoming interest in film as a pedagogical tool in ESL instruction. This is evidenced by the inclusion of sections on the use of film within ESL video texts (Geddes and Strudbridge 1982; Lonergan 1985).

Relationship of Visual Images to the Language in Film

The unique advantage of film is the visual images, which are an invaluable aid in language comprehension. What the students see may clarify and/or elaborate on the script, the language they hear. In fact,

students may be able to understand a good deal of the message from a given scene in a film without understanding all, or for that matter any, of the specific language. For this reason the action film *Witness* is a particularly good film; much of the dialogue is accompanied by explicit actions which help reveal the linguistic message to the students.[4] For L2 learners with inadequate aural comprehension, this visual understanding can enhance the L2 learners' confidence, and give them a basis for hypothesizing about the language, which will ultimately create comprehensible input for them.

Accompanying images can explicate the intent of speech even though individual lexical items may not be easily understood by students. For example, in a scene from *To Kill a Mockingbird* one of the characters, Bob Ewell, insults the main character, Atticus Finch, by calling him a "nigger-lover." If these words are presented alone out of context without any particular intonation, students can't usually interpret the words "nigger-lover" as an insult, nor can students really define their meaning. However, they have no difficulty understanding that when Ewell curls his lips into a grimace and growls "you nigger-lover" to Atticus Finch these words are intended as an insult.

Films are also effective in activating students prior knowledge of familiar situations, familiar in the context of their own culture and language, creating linguistic expectations of the film being viewed. These stereotypic situations framed in a scene of a film depict in the target culture and language: what the location looks like, the typical objects found there, the people involved, what they normally do in that situation, what clothes they wear, how they behave towards each other, the language suitable to the situation, and appropriate non-verbal communication of the speakers. All of this constitutes scripts or schemata (Schank and Abelson 1977) for students

which film serves to help establish in the TL.

Criteria for selecting a film

The first and most crucial step in the use of film in language teaching is choosing the appropriate film(s); and this decision must be guided by the students, their needs and interests. Garrity's model for a language class based on film made use of only one film for an entire semester. Although such a course may be feasible in some cases, there is the danger that such a course would be too slow paced for many students (especially at the college level). For this reason and others which will be discussed later, it may be advisable to consider making use of several (two to four) different films in an ESL film class. Indeed, the instructor's task of choosing a film is made simpler. Instead of searching for the single ideal film, several different good films can be used.

1. Student Appeal:

It will seldom be the case that a university class is homogenous; it's more likely that there will be a wide range of ages and educational levels,[5] not to mention a variety of cultures. The students are likely to have dissimilar tastes in regard to films, which highlights the necessity of using a variety of films in order to appeal to the different constituents of the class (at least some of the time).

Not only is it important to have a variety of films, but also to choose films from different genres. The films chosen for the University of Minnesota Film Class represent the following genres: action film (*Witness*), literary adaptation (*To Kill a Mockingbird*), historical film (*Amadeus*), contemporary profession (which isn't yet a clearly defined genre but is in the process of being defined by such films as *Broadcast News*, which was used in class, and *Wallstreet*, which wasn't used). In most cases a film will probably reflect a layering of two or three genres.[6] However, a diversity of genres offering a broad appeal to a heterogeneous group of students is what's most important.

In *The Video Connection* (1989), Rick Altman makes an assertion with which many language instructors might be persuaded to agree:

> One principle must be emphasized from the outset: if video is to be used in support of language or culture teaching, materials must be chosen not for their inherent artistic value but for their ability to fulfill a particular function in a particular course. ...its [artistic value] place should be appropriately subordinate. We are not choosing films for an Oscar...; we are selecting educational tools. (p. 25)

I would like to disagree with Altman's position. Students today are products of late 20th century society; and they are not only literate in regard to film, but also quite sophisticated. They have been viewing films — domestic and foreign[7] in theaters, on television, via the VCR — all their lives. A mediocre film selected primarily on the basis of its being a "good educational tool" won't be sufficient to engage these students' interest; they are not so easily impressed with moving images. If a film doesn't have an esthetic value which appeals to them, students won't become fully immersed in the viewing of the film, or worse, won't attend class regularly. All the linguistic input, stimulating cultural topics, and useful materials developed by the instructor will be of little use without the students' willing participation.

Moreover, there is an abundance of high quality films among which "good educational tools" can surely be found; and, when using a cultural medium such as film for teaching, the examples chosen should represent some of the finest American efforts in that medium. Finally, the creation of materials and activities is more enjoyable and easier when the film is also engaging for the instructor. Consequently, in the selection

process, the artistic merit of a film ought to be a coordinate, not subordinate, factor with the film's pedagogical merits.

2. Diversity of Linguistic and Cultural Input:

There are also important pedagogical reasons for using different genres of films. These films will reflect the diversity of the English language. In doing so, they will also demonstrate the different levels of formality, and how these levels are used between individuals or classes of people. In addition, within American English there is a wealth of dialects — Southern, urban black, and various East coast dialects, to mention a few. It seems worthwhile to introduce some of these dialects through film since they are vehicles of the diverse aspects of American culture, and a better understanding of the dialects and the culture they're associated with will enhance the students' acquisition of English. With a greater variety of films, it is also possible to capture a larger amount of situation-specific language (schemata) and a broader spectrum of vocabulary and idioms.

3. Linguistic Difficulty:

One of the most important considerations when selecting films is the linguistic difficulty of the film in relation to the proficiency level of the students. Films can be graded on their complexity of language. Some of the elements that increase the difficulty of understanding for students are: slang, dialect, topic-specific technical vocabulary, fast-paced conversation with sparse accompanying action.

To Kill a Mockingbird can be difficult for students because it contains both rural Southern dialect and children's speech (fast-paced slang); and in *Amadeus* there is an extraordinary amount of moderately technical musical terminology that can baffle students. Although a film might have one or more of these features that make comprehension difficult, it may still be viable for classroom use. When students are properly

prepared for the difficulties with pre- and post-viewing activities, such films can be made accessible to them. Both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Amadeus* were used successfully in the University of Minnesota Film class.

On the other hand, *My Dinner with André* (virtually one extended conversation) would never be considered because of its dense language based on abstract ideas without supporting visual cues. In contrast, *Witness* is fairly simple for most students to understand. It has fewer and shorter conversations than many other films, and vivid action that conveys a great deal of information.

In addition to pre- and post-viewing activities, segmentation is also useful in minimizing the difficulty of a film. In the University of Minnesota Film Class, the students first saw a 30-45 minute segment of film which gave them a broad context. However, for more difficult films or difficult parts of a film, smaller segments (as short as 2-3 minutes) were repeated afterwards to facilitate comprehension.

4. Culturally Loaded Films:

It is also necessary to consider whether a film is culturally loaded, meaning that there are many uniquely American cultural themes intertwined that are both difficult to extricate from each other and difficult to explain to foreign students, but are crucial to understanding the film. Comedies in particular often have this problem.[8] Films may be rejected on the the basis of being too culturally loaded.

John Fisk (1987) in *Television Culture* describes the interconnectedness of the themes of a film and society's cultural history with his *theory of intertextuality*: "The theory of intertextuality proposes that any one text is necessarily read [heard or seen] in relationship to others and that a range of textual knowledge is brought to bear upon it." Native speaker instructors have at their

disposal a whole range of texts[9] from their native culture based on what they've read, seen and experienced during their lives. However, non-native learners lack many of these texts, because they do not have as much experience with the target culture.

Therefore, it is useful when a film does contain several clear and important American themes. Native instructors can draw upon those "texts" which they have accumulated, and exploit the most appropriate themes as cultural teaching points. For example, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has several themes that can easily by separated out from each other and from the film: racism, the court system, and children's fantasy.

5. Offensive Material:

Another consideration in the selection of films is the presence of objectionable subject matter that might cause the students embarrassment or discomfort. Because the students come from diverse cultures, it's necessary to try to view the films from their perspective. Basic guidelines should exclude gratuitous violence, nudity, and obscene language. In addition, an instructor needs to carefully consider how to handle material which is culturally insensitive and insulting to any nationality. This is not to say that all the films must be scrupulously censored and rejected on these bases. For example, in *Witness* and *Broadcast News* there is some nudity. However, when it is tasteful and well integrated into the story-line, as with these two films, it is likely be inoffensive to most students.

6. The Instructor's needs:

A final consideration, of no small importance, is the appeal of the film to the instructor. Since the instructor must not only be able to tolerate repeated viewings of the film, necessary in creating the materials, but also view the film again with the class and generate enthusiasm for the activities before and after the film, whether the instructor finds the film truly enjoyable is a significant

criterion.

Broadcast News : A model

As one of the core films for the ESL Film class at the University of Minnesota, *Broadcast News* was used for all the ESL Film classes, Fall 89-Fall 90. It was viewed in three 40-45 minute sections over a two and a half week period. While viewing a section in the language laboratory with headphones, students made audio tapes of the sound track which they could use for doing homework, personal studying, and preparation for tests.

1. Application of criteria for selection:

Broadcast News is a good film, entertaining and appealing to a broad audience. The captivating story elicits unforced attention from students, drawing them along in their listening/viewing to find out "what happens next." It is also an accurate reflection of a certain aspect of American society, namely, middle-class professional working life.

The setting/general topic makes this film a particularly attractive choice; television news broadcasting is a topic most people (cross-culturally) find interesting, are somewhat familiar with, and would probably like to know more about. Moreover, *Broadcast News* is not culturally loaded. One of the main themes, which is fairly easy to grasp, is a love triangle. The other theme is one of ethics in broadcasting the news, whether the news should be treated as entertainment or only factually reported, which provides a real issue for the students to discuss/debate. From the instructor's perspective, the setting is unusually ripe with possibilities for developing materials and activities.

Broadcast News makes use of contemporary conversational English filled with the usual idiomatic speech spoken at a normal rate of speed, which is exactly the kind of speech that ESL students often find so elusive in comprehending. *Broadcast News* is a

good instructional tool, because the conversation is simulated authentic[10] and not authentic. The film is well scripted, clear and understandable to the listener, and does not have some of the facets found in authentic conversation that inhibit comprehension: there is little extraneous noise interference, interruptions and more than one person talking at a time are minimal, the speakers' lines follow the topic without wandering from the theme. In short, the life-like conversation of the film is, in reality, very controlled and an aid for comprehension by non-native listeners.

2. *Supplementary activities and the principles guiding their development:*

In creating supplementary activities to use with a film, there are some guiding principles to be considered:

1) Whenever possible, relate fundamental themes from films to their real-life counterparts in the target society. This provides L2 learners with a more complete cultural context, a model of authentic language, and in addition, schemata from the films are reinforced, broadened, and anchored in reality.

2) Give the students opportunities to practice production of the TL in a communicative manner, in addition to listening to the TL.

In preparation for viewing a film, students' existing schema (from their own country in their L1) for the general topic of that film must be activated, or if none exists, a schema must be developed. The schema provides the framework by which the L2 learners can organize all the information they receive from the film. The following activities were developed as pre- and post-viewing activities for *Broadcast News* in order to help develop/activate a schema about television news broadcasting for the students. The activities served to highlight vocabulary, speaking style and non-verbal communication, as well as the appearance of the people involved and the appearance of the location. The final videotaping of the student news broadcast gives the students the opportunity to apply the schema they have been acquiring by listening and watching to their own oral production.

• There was a field trip to WCCO television station in Minneapolis preceding the showing of the first segment of the film. This was helpful in initially introducing specialized vocabulary, both for television and the news, which would be heard in the film. The vocabulary was studied again as it came up in the film. Also during the trip, the students were able to see the people, their offices and equipment, who are participants in real news production. This helped to concretize the meaning of the different jobs (news producer, editor, reporter) of the characters in the film. In addition, the students could get a broader perspective of a television news studio (all the different rooms, their sizes, what it's like behind the cameras) than the film afforded, and they could make interesting comparisons between the studio in the film and a real one.

• During the two and a half weeks that the film was being shown, the students watched authentic news broadcasts: a) videotaped and then shown in class b) on their own at home. These broadcasts served as models for their own news broadcasts which would be videotaped at the end of the *Broadcast News* unit, and also gave more depth to their schemas. The students analyzed the format of the various broadcasts (*Nightline* vs. *MacNeil Lehrer NewsHour* vs. the local evening news), as well as, the types of news stories/reports (international news, human interest stories, sports, weather) found in the different programs. The students also analyzed the various broadcasters' use of specific language, gestures, and visual aids (maps, graphs, pictures, films).

• Near the end of the *Broadcast News* unit,

the class watched a videotape of a news broadcast produced by another ESL class and discussed what was good about it (made it interesting and understandable) and what wasn't good (made it boring and unclear).

• The students, in pairs or individually, prepared a five minute news piece or some other kind of report (sports, weather, culture) that would be videotaped later.[11] They were given time in class to choose a partner and to do some planning. However, most of the work for the videotaping was done outside of class. Since partners could not have the same native language, this greatly increased the students' use of English in the preparation stage. After the class news pieces had been videotaped, the instructor watched the tape and evaluated each student individually. On the last day of classes, these evaluations were given to the students to look at while they watched the videotape themselves as a whole class.

• In addition to the above activities, there were written exercises used throughout the showing of the film to clarify and practice vocabulary and idioms. These consisted of: paraphrasing brief quotes from speakers; answering comprehension questions about facts in the film; making inferences about the characters (why they did/said something).

Conclusion

In real world language, the listener most often sees the speaker and/or the context of the speech. In language classrooms where audiotapes and printed materials are mainly used, a great deal of information is missing that is normally conveyed through a native speaking partner and the surrounding environment. Therefore, the use of films provides the extralinguistic information which is an invaluable aid in comprehension.

Films also supply a contemporary, as well as contextualized, model of spoken English. Moreover, they are both relevant and intrinsically interesting to the students offering them a window on the American culture, thus stimulating responses in them which lead to a more natural desire to use spoken English.

NOTES

1. Genres in film are familiar standardized forms, such as westerns, detective stories, love stories, etc.

2. During each of the four quarters in the period from Fall 1989 to Fall 1990, ESL Film (ESL 0139), a new course, was offered at the University of Minnesota. *Witness, To Kill a Mockingbird,* and *Broadcast News* were the core films used for the course.

3. However, films seem to be more widely used in other foreign language teaching.

4. Student questionnaires confirmed that the supporting action in *Witness* was indeed an aid to comprehension; virtually all the students found this film to be the easiest to understand of all the films shown in class.

5. The ESL Film classes (Fall '89-Fall '90) had both undergraduate and graduate students ranging in age from 18 to the mid-30's.

6. For example, *Witness* is both an action film and a love story.

7. There were several students in each of the ESL Film classes who had already seen — in their own language — one, or even two, of the films that were scheduled to be shown in the Film class.

8. Most of the Woody Allen films are culturally loaded.

9. "Text" is used broadly here to include any discourse — written, filmed, or spoken.

10. Cf. Geddes and White 1978.

11. The students were given the videotaping assignment at the beginning of the

Broadcast News unit, which allowed them about three weeks to prepare their news pieces.

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