

The Didactic Potentials of Films and Contemporary Media in the EFL Classes

Veneranda HAJRULLA

University "Ismail Qemali" of Vlora, Albania

Department of Foreign Languages

venerandahajrulla@yahoo.com

Marsela HARIZAJ

University "Ismail Qemali" of Vlora, Albania

Department of Foreign Languages

marselaharizaj@yahoo.com

Abstract

It is important for teachers who work with children and teenagers to be aware of the role of media and popular culture in young people's lives. It is a challenge to have an open and flexible approach to film, TV and other media products. Students' real experiences have to be considered as equal in importance to the experiences and ideas of the teacher. The teacher has to help students to place their experiences in a larger perspective.

In this study, the didactic potentials and the use of film and media are studied in relation to the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language. Our personal experience shows that film is sometimes regarded as valuable teaching material and at other times only used for amusement or as a time-filler. The starting point for this study was, therefore, the curiosity to find out if our personal view is correct. The main questions at issue for this study are:

What didactic potentials are there of film and media in English teaching? How do teachers use film and contemporary media in the classroom? How do teachers regard film and media as teaching resources?

The possibilities of using media in teaching are great. It is, for example, possible to watch a movie with subtitles in English or find an interesting video-clip within seconds. However, there is no guarantee that contemporary media is being used to its fullest potential.

Keywords: *films, contemporary media, valuable teaching material, teaching resources, educational development.*

Introduction

Today, film and media are part of student's lives; the majority of them are frequent media consumers. They spend on average about six to seven hours each day using the Internet, watching TV, watching films, reading newspapers and listening to the radio. Thus it is important to analyze and see the language that students encounter outside of school *as an asset for language teaching*.

A "film experience" is regarded as an important tool for starting a discussion or introducing a theme. Teachers say that film offers authentic target language input. It is also likely that students' positive perception of film in teaching has effects on language learning since motivation and attitudes, affect language acquisition. Teachers generally are positive to the use of film in education and believe that students can learn many things from audio-visual media. But is it always the case? What does the reality of our school contexts show? The role of the teacher in using films and contemporary media in the classroom is very important. But teachers predominantly use *text-* and *work-books*. Experience shows that film is sometimes regarded as valuable teaching material and at other times only used for *amusement or as a time-filler*.

Films in the teaching context

In the Albanian National Curriculum of Foreign Languages, (*Kurrikula Kombëtare e Gjuhëve Moderne për Arsimin Publik Parauniversitar*) we find no suggested decisions on how to use films, or what kind of films to use. It is up to the teacher or the group of teachers to work out how it is possible to reach different goals by using different teaching methods and material, where film can be included. It is important to include media and popular culture in teaching. In this context, the concepts of *high culture* and *popular culture* are important to consider since teachers' perceptions of these concepts can influence how they regard film in general and film as teaching material. There is no cultural theory that can provide a specific definition of what culture is. Films, books and theatre that are appreciated by a large number of people are often regarded as popular culture. However, it can sometimes be difficult to know where the limit is.¹ Rönnberg² discusses the conflict between *traditional culture and popular culture* and points out that adults often regard commercial visual media, such as film, TV

¹ J. Storey, *Cultural theory and popular culture: a reader* (3rd ed. London: Prentice Hall, 2006).

² M. Rönnberg, "*Nya medier*" — *men samma gamla barnkultur? Om det Tredje könets lek, lärande och motstånd via TV, video och datorspel* (Filmförlaget, Uppsala, 2006), <http://www.hig.se/download/18.2ca6b1a4132473568408000582/1353630731492/Nya+medier.pdf>.

and media as low culture and regard books and written texts as high culture. According to Rönnerberg, it is more important to think about the thoughts that arise when children and adults, for example, watch a film, than defining the product as “high culture” or “low culture”.

In Albania, there is a nine-year compulsory school for children aged 6-15 free of charge. The curriculum in use is the Curriculum for the compulsory school system. There is also a specific syllabus for each subject. After the compulsory primary and secondary school it is possible to continue to upper secondary school.

In the current curricula, one of the goals to aim at is that students should be able to develop their ability to *critically examine facts and relationships*. In the syllabuses for different subjects, it is also possible to see that film has become more important. *Literature, films and the theatre open new worlds and communicate experiences of excitement, humor, tragedy and joy and contribute to the development of an identity*.

It is, furthermore, stated in the syllabus for English that it is important to link the teaching of English to the informal ways students get in contact with English outside school, through film, TV, Internet, music and computer games. It is emphasized that the subject of English should provide a “background” as well as a “bridge perspective” on the students’ experience. Pupils encounter today many variants of English outside school. The subject of English provides both a background to and a wider bridge perspective on the cultural and social expressions surrounding pupils in today’s international society.

Specific features of films

There are some specific features of film that make it a very powerful tool in teaching. Film theorist Kraucher³ stated, for example, that there are some aspects of reality that only the cinema is privileged to communicate. Watching a movie together can provide an excellent starting-point for conversation and reflection about important issues in life. It is often easy to see and understand human behavior and dilemmas in the fiction film format. Documentary film can put people, places and events in new perspectives. Films can bring the past to life, mirror the present-day and help us to identify with people in different countries, with different cultural backgrounds and living under different conditions. *Experiencing a movie together provides a way to spark pupil curiosity and inspire continued knowledge seeking*.

³ S. Kraucher, *Theory of film: the redemption of physical reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Furthermore, Lundahl⁴ discusses the use of media in English teaching. According to him, it is obvious that the teacher has to use all the possibilities that are offered by different media. He mentions how easy it is to find information on the Internet that can be used as a base for a discussion. He also mentions the possibilities of using e-mail and chat to communicate with native speakers of English or students in other European countries. He furthermore emphasizes the *possibilities of using news, documentaries, film and music in the classroom*.

But generally teachers' main focus is on *written texts* and that film sometimes is used as a *supplement*. If a filmed version of a book is used as teaching material, it is always the book regarded as the “*right*” version. Films are most often used as a *time-filler or for entertainment*.

Negative effects of film and television

There are many advantages for the use of film in teaching, but film and TV-watching are sometimes regarded as something negative. TV watching has both positive and negative effects.⁵ So the question raised is whether it is necessary to encourage the “passive and destructive” behavior of TV – or film watching in school since it already occupies so much of young people's lives.

Media, always reports about the negative effects of TV-watching. As researchers point out, there are negative as well as positive effects of film and TV-watching. If film is to be used in education, it is necessary to remember the negative effects and consider how they can be avoided.

The teacher has to be aware of what feelings a film can provoke and also consider the “laziness” that is connected with film watching. *Film can be good or bad, it depends on what the teacher makes out of it*. Teachers state that they use films in their teaching to some extent. They generally think that it is good to use film in teaching as long as it is done in a professional way and with a well defined goal. The more experienced teachers generally have more well thought-out ideas about film in teaching.

In this context, the students of the Department of Foreign Languages, at the University of Vlora, under our supervision, had the possibility to interview some *experienced* English teachers during their practicum. These students complete their final graduation this year, and will become English teachers. These “*future*”

⁴ B. Lundahl, “The effectiveness and applicability of motivational interviewing: a practice-friendly review of four meta-analyses,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 65(11) (2009): 1232-45. doi: 10.1002/jclp.20638.

⁵ B. Gunter and J. McAleer, *Children and television*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1997).

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teachers also tried to bring films and contemporary media in their presentations. We would like to cite some of their comments, regarding the opinions of *experienced teachers*:

“Film can be good or bad, it depends on what the teacher makes out of it.” (Teacher A)

“I think film in teaching is really great. I usually choose a film that is not only something to watch, but a film that has something more to it.” (Teacher B)

“Film can be good but also difficult to use. I teach many students who are very shy or not so motivated, so it is difficult to get them to participate in a film discussion.” (Teacher C)

“Now I use video-clips from Youtube and the BBC or shorter films or documentaries. We look at scenes or episodes which can be discussed from different perspectives.” (Teacher D)

The main part of the answers gives the idea that film is rather well regarded and used in a good way. Nevertheless, some answers reveal that the general view of film in teaching is not always positive.

Some of my colleagues might say “But are you watching a film?” as if it is a bad thing to do. Actually the students improve their receptive skills by listening and reading and also their communicative skills since they have to discuss their experiences and impressions of something they have seen. (Teacher A)

Reasons for using media and films in teaching

When teachers were asked why they use film and media in their teaching, the responses were rather different. Some teachers pointed at the importance of listening to the target language while others found the audio-visual media as a good complement to written texts. Another motivation for the use of film was to find a link between school and the life of the students out of school. Motivation is a factor that affects language learning.⁶

The teachers' answers in regard to employing contemporary media in their classes were rather different, also. Some teachers use web media frequently while other teachers rarely or never use contemporary media. Teachers are not quite sure about what the regulations are. Some of them believed that it is good to use and show contemporary media, since it is available on the Internet. They use the *new technology and Youtube* but they wouldn't be honest if they told you that it always turns out well. Here are some of their comments:⁷

⁶ G. Chambers, *Motivating language learners* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 1999).

⁷ They are the same teachers being interviewed (as in the previous section) by the students of our Department.

*“Sometimes I use media in my teaching, as for example video-clips from YouTube”
(Teacher A)*

*“We also listen to music especially in relation to poetry. Song texts are rather poetic.”
(Teacher B)*

I haven't used contemporary media but I agree that it would be really good to look at the latest news on the BBC or CNN, for example. But it takes time for teachers to learn how to use the new technology. (Teacher C)

“It is important to connect what we do in school with the students' activities out of school. It is necessary to look at what they do out of school to find ways to reach out to them but also to enable them to look at these media, with curious eyes. (Teacher A)

As seen from these *experienced teachers'* point of view, the use of media seems to be linked to *personal competence* and *interests* rather than to *age* or *working experience*. Where as our “*future teachers*” think that younger teachers might use contemporary media more but they *lack organization and time management*.

What students learn from watching films

All the teachers believed that students can learn very much from looking at films. According to the teachers, students can improve their receptive skills by listening and by reading English subtitles. According to Gardner⁸ teaching methods have to be adapted to suit different intelligences. In such a context, watching films may be interesting for all types of learners. If there is a discussion after the film, they also improve their communicative skills as they talk about a common experience with their classmates. Students also learn about cultural differences and get different perspectives of their experiences. It's a really listening comprehension exercise, but they can also look at the body-language to try to understand what the characters are saying. Students try to negotiate the meaning of the new words. Negotiation of meaning is very important. According to Wegner⁹ whether we are talking, acting, thinking, solving problems, or daydreaming we are concerned with meanings.

STUDENT RECEPTION

Teachers generally thought that students appreciate watching films since it is something they are used to doing. Some of the teachers said that the students enjoy watching film, but that they are not always happy to get assignments of questions that are linked to the viewing of the film.

⁸ H. Gardner, *Intelligence reframed: multiple intelligences for the 21st century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

⁹ E. Wegner, *Communities of practice, learning, meaning, and identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Students enjoy watching film and it is an enjoyable way to learn since they do not think about the fact that they are learning. According to Weis & Belton¹⁰ Sound has unique potential for increasing the artistic effects of film and increasing a film's effects on a viewer. While watching students are focused on everything.

Most students watch film in their spare time, so it is something that they are already familiar with. It is not so popular among the students to give them assignments to do while they watch the film or after the film since many students regard the viewing of a film as some kind of reward. Students often demand to choose the film they want to watch, and they highlight the effectiveness of several *didactic potentials* of film in English teaching:

- a starting point for a discussion.
 - it can also trigger reflective thinking.
 - film is also a good tool for students who have different learning styles.
 - the image and sound offer something different than a written text,
 - the availability of target language input is important and film can be part of this language input.
- students enjoy watching film and that it is easy to get a good relationship with the students by using films, even if the students sometimes are reluctant to do some of the assignments.
- positive student response to film is regarded as enjoyable and is likely to benefit language learning

Conclusion

To conclude, it is possible to say that there are several didactic potentials of films and media in English teaching and that it is up to the teacher to make something more out of the material that is available. Film and contemporary media can be complements and alternatives to written texts in the teaching of English since it is important to emphasize variation in teaching, whatever the subject might be.

The results suggest that teachers generally regard film as more valuable and important than expected. There are several ways of working with film and many teachers give the impression that they really have made an attempt to use film and media in their teaching in a good and thought-out manner. Even if the use of film as a “time-filler” or as a “reward” is rather uncommon, it is necessary to point out that these occasions harm the reputation of film as teaching material and send out

¹⁰ E. Weis and J. Belton, eds., *Film sound: theory and practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

the wrong signals to students. *If film is to be regarded as valuable in teaching, it has to be used in a professional and well structured manner.*

It is interesting and important to follow the developments of technology and teaching and look at how different approaches can be used to encourage and stimulate language acquisition. Further research is necessary to obtain a more in-depth picture of how media, Internet and popular culture can be used in foreign language learning and teaching. It would also be interesting to study foreign language learning in relation *to interactive media.*

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