Foreign Films In The Classroom: Gateway To Language And Culture

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of culture has become gradually more significant for all teachers involved in language education; it has been referred as the “hidden curriculum” of foreign language teaching. Because of limited time available in the classroom and curriculum constraints, the inclusion of cultural lessons often comes second to the teaching of the language at all levels of education. This paper will discuss the inclusion of foreign films to develop culture-based contexts for language in the classroom. While the description of the course focuses on Italian-language students who have achieved intermediate-mid or intermediate-high oral proficiency, according to the ACTFL oral proficiency guidelines, the article describes how the principles illustrated can be adapted for use with other languages and at other levels of instruction.

Keywords: Italian films, culture, language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

The use of video, film, and television has been the subject of several studies in foreign language acquisition. Danahy (1985) and Donchin (1985), for example, focused on the use of videos on the novice and intermediate levels of instruction; Edasawa, et al. (1990), Garza (1991), Secules et al. (1992) and Terrell (1993) concentrated their studies on video and film as comprehensible input (according to Krashen’s theory) for developing students’ listening comprehension at various level of instruction; Allar (1985) and Rueberg (1990) focused on the use of video and film in the advanced level conversation class; and Rifkin (2000) addressed the use of video in the proficiency-oriented advanced conversation class. Proficiency in a language, however, has never be acquired without a thorough grounding in the culture that speaks it, and the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* include specific cultural skills which correspond to successive levels of language mastery. Culture forms the setting which imbues words with their connotations, determines basic assumptions about the world, and assigns values to behavior. As Kramsch suggests (236), videos contribute to teaching ‘culture in a multidimensional authentic way. Anthropologists turned to feature films to study human behavior, therefore we should be able to integrate anthropology into language class, to refine and broaden the understanding of the culture of that language.

Already in 1975, the anthropologist John Weakland argued for feature films as “in the broadest sense-cultural documents by definition” and considered them “especially useful in the study of general patterns of culture (246). Fictional films “tells a story, that is they present an interpretation of some segment of life by selecting, structuring and ordering images and behavior...and compared to daily life, a fictional work represents a more highly ordered and defined unity, whose premises and patterns can be more readily studied (246). The challenge, is not teaching culture from a primarily linguistic and literary perspective but develop assessment strategies that measure cultural competence.

My approach is to use feature films to provide a wide variety of pedagogical options, and gather resources of intrinsically motivating materials for my students. Most recently, I chose *La vita è bella (Life is Beautiful)* to teach it as part of a fourth semester Italian course at Southeastern Louisiana University, an institution of approximately 15,000 students in Southern Louisiana. It was an alternative way to work with language and culture in context. The most popular Italian textbooks on the market today, although organized thematically or by language

function, are ultimately constructed around points of grammar. Teaching with films was a way to motivate my students while, at the same time, following the curriculum.

La vita è bella's relatively quick-moving plot appeals to undergraduate students; it narrates "an unforgettable fable that proves love, family, and imagination conquer all" as cited on the movie poster add. Students appreciate the fact that it embeds historical facts in an engaging, emotional, melodramatic fictional love story. *Life is Beautiful* provides geographic and historic distance for viewers in the United States to reflect on the circumstances based on socioeconomics, racial, or ethnic differences, and encourages them to identify viable links, differences, and similarities among cultures.

Before working on *La vita è bella*, a few basic considerations include developing activities to spark interest in a generation of students who for the most part are too young to having even a grandparent witnessed WWII; conveying sophisticated content to intermediate language learners; inventing strategies to organize the wealth of information the film offers; enabling students to comfortably work with and increase their vocabulary; and avoiding broad generalizations in reference to the Italian political system. Without advance planning, teaching *La vita è bella* can turn into an obstacle course and discussion may primarily focus on the first part of the movie, or in the love story only.

The teaching units proposed are designed for college students who study *Life is Beautiful* as their first feature film in the target language, and instructors who favor study guides that move from descriptive toward subtle interpretative work. I taught *Life is Beautiful* while completing the lessons in *Prego*. I taught pre-viewing, viewing, and post-viewing activities in three-four weeks. The first phase of the project involved viewing the movie and then discussing it in class. The discussion took place over a period of two classes; the first discussion, which was relatively brief, was a somewhat routine one consisting of ensuring that everyone understood the plot line, the situation in which the characters found themselves, linguistic obstacles with the dialogue, and so on. After summarizing the plot and resolving comprehension difficulties, the class was informed that they were going to write a movie review and the method was to divide the class into groups with each group having to work on one aspect of the film so that each segment would make up a part of the review.

One common mistakes made by some language teacher is to show their students a film with no language preparation or focus. This results in frustration for the students who feels they will never be able to use the foreign language. In these cases the teacher chooses a film of his/her preference and after showing it to his/her students asks them to write a summary in the target language. The teacher does most of the talking about the film because the students did not understand it, could not see the subtitles, and thought it was boring. The summaries are poorly written because the students cannot explain the details or express their opinion since the vocabulary and grammar are often beyond them.

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

In the pre-viewed activity, after providing the students with a synopsis of *Life is Beautiful*, I used some introductory material in *Italian through Film* (Borra, Pausini) which begins with asking some questions about the Holocaust, followed by a fill-in-the-blank vocabulary activity. An alternative to working through *Italian through Film* basic approach is to work with *Ciak, si parla italiano* (Garofalo, Selisca), which offers fundamental clarification on themes such as *The Manifest of Race*, the deportation of Italian Jews, and the armistice of September 8th, 1943. As the film abounds with historical references, students' knowledge of Italian history needs to be activated and any gap needs to be filled. Toward that goal, vocabulary work has to address historical and political terminology and facts and dates of twentieth-century Italian history. Activities range from semantic mapping of the Regime and life under fascism to study sheets where students match dates and events and practice verbs in the simple past form. Often students share their experience from other disciplines such as political science or history.

Outside class, students watch *Life is Beautiful* (110 minutes) with subtitles. I have often found that already after their first viewing they retain quite a few details and entire idioms. Once they have seen the whole film rather than bits and pieces, they venture into two rounds of viewing activities that require three seventy-five minute sessions each. Students are aware that they will need to watch the film several times to answer all questions, have a

good grasp of it, and enhance their language skills. The first three sessions focus on historical context, plot and characters. In session four they work on their study guides, which are intended to help them move from guided to independent work, from the overall picture to details, from partner and group work to presentations, and from generic text-and context discussion to specific aspects of anthropology and sociolinguistics. They present their work in session five and six. Finally, session seven brings closure to the project, discusses the essay assignment that is due a week after the unit, and addresses format, grading policies and due dates.

In the very first session students spontaneously respond to *La vita è bella*; share views on the most dramatic, humorous, effective, or favorite scenes; bring five questions on content to class; make a list of the characters; and finally, as a partner activity, summarize the plot based on images taken from the screenplay to which keywords are added. If time is short, each group describes one scene only and students finish the rest at home.

For the second meeting students draft a historical timeline, a list of dates and events surrounding Guido and Dora's encounters. Additionally, they gather facts on Italy in WWII readily available on the Internet in English and Italian. Class starts with a lively discussion about the huge difference between the first and second part of the movie, and the duality of comic and tragic in Italian film. In the third session on character analysis, students distinguish among round, well-developed, three-dimensional, and flat characters. This format makes it easy to organize information and expand on vocabulary. At the end of the study, they will have a brief plot summary in English or Italian; vocabulary list; cultural news as needed; comprehension activities; discussion questions; communicative activities; writing assignments; and answer key. The most comprehensible report describes Guido, Dora, and Giosuè, but they should also prepare one for Guido's uncle, Eliseo, or Doctor Lessing.

Now that the students are reasonably familiar with *Life is Beautiful* and have acquired sufficient vocabulary along with cultural-historical information, they are ready to tackle in-depth independent projects. They are divided into four groups of three students; each receives a different study guide to analyze *Life is Beautiful* from four different yet interrelated viewpoints that explore stories Italy tells about itself from aesthetic, anthropological, and sociolinguistic angles and pay close attention to the interplay of culture and language. After carefully study the guides, they will need to watch the film again and consult the screenplay. As a group they present their findings in class in Italian and distribute a handout, their completed study guide. So that students attentively listen, take notes, and ask questions, they receive a copy of the study guides after the presentations. To ensure quick feedback as well as grammatical and factual accuracy, they submitted their completed study guides electronically via attachment. At the end, all the students have four complete study guides. The four groups, which focus on different critical point of view, will have, for example, answered to the following questions:

Group A, the aesthetic critics; focus on style, structure, symbols, and mood.

1. Roberto Benigni tells a story settled in Fascist Italy. Which images actually tell history? List five of the most powerful images.
2. Gesture express human behavior, anxieties, or hopes. Describe the gestures at the beginning of the film and explain how it sets the tone for the rest of the story.
3. What are recurring images, songs, or public spaces? What is their effect?
4. Find five adjectives that best describe the mood in *La vita è bella*.
5. How does Benigni announce life-changing events? Think of the signs on his bookstore, or his uncle's painted horse.
6. Research the film's critical reception in the United States and in Italy.

Group B, the anthropologists; focus on dress styles, the interior of apartments, and social behavior.

1. Describe the outfits wore by Dora and her mother. What do they say about women?
2. Describe the hotel Guido and his uncle work.
3. Describe and explain the importance of hats for both women and men.
4. What are the differences between Guido's home with his wife, Dora, and that of her mother?
5. Describe people at the opera.
6. Describe the cake at Dora's engagement party, explain the connection with Ethiopia.

Group C, the communication specialists; scrutinize the dialogue, at home, at school, at the concentration camp:

1. How do the first and second parts of the film differ?
2. What are the political slogans written on the shop, horse, and what is their meaning?
3. Name two incidents of miscommunication.
4. Describe Guido's first encounter with Dora
5. Describe communication in the elementary classroom
6. Describe the communication between the school inspector and Guido at the restaurant.

Group D, the sociolinguists; analyze the nexus between language and ideology:

1. What charges are brought against Guido and why Dora is not on the list?
2. Who is Doctor Lessing and how can he help Guido?
3. How the soldiers react when Dora insists on getting on the train?
4. What does Guido make his son believe about the concentration camp?
5. What are the 'showers' in the concentration camp?
6. Why does Giosuè shout "Abbiamo vinto" (we won) at the end of the film?

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

To allow for reflection on the entire film and draw connections between the different activities and sets of information, groups of three students fill out a chart listing politics, fashion, music, and lifestyle typical of the 30s and 40s in Italy. As homework, they add a U.S. perspective in English. As they begin to contrast and compare, they also explore interconnectedness on a national and international level. In new groups of three they reflect on general issues that can divide or unite a nation, give examples of recent events in U.S. politics, and comment on whether and how those affected their lives, such as the war in Iraq, or the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

Especially at the intermediate level, skits are popular and an excellent way to summarize the film. Students can act out crucial scenes and incorporate their newly acquired cultural knowledge in a mini-drama. Then I give them reading comprehension questions in order to help students capture more details. The final assignment is an essay done in process writing: a vocabulary list, an outline, the essay, and a rewrite. They choose one of the three topics for a one-page essay, double spaced and typed: 1) what does the comparison made by Guidos's uncle with the sunflowers and the act of serving mean and why is this important to understand the film? 2) Compare life is Beautiful with another holocaust movie, such as Schindler's list. 3) Describe madness in *La vita è bella*.

Finally, students prepare a film review in which they give a brief background of Roberto Benigni, summarize the critical reception of the film, include a brief plot summary, give their critical response, and, as a conclusion, give their rationale on whether or not they would recommend the film.

ASSESSMENT

The wide array of approaches, ideas, and materials for teaching culture unfortunately is not matched by effective ways of testing. Educators agree that fill-in-the-blank activities to test vocabulary, short essay questions, essays, true/false statements, and multiple-choice questions to a large extent test knowledge but fail to adequately assess cultural performance. The activities I propose give students the opportunity to demonstrate process, performance, and knowledge. Traditionally, results improve once students assume responsibility for their own learning process as they select topics, organize material, and implement their research agenda.

CONCLUSION

In a curriculum that envisions a shift toward cultural studies, this intensive study of a feature film can lay the groundwork for fostering cultural competence: it places language in context; gives students an in-depth understanding of an important chapter in Italy's history, sparks interest for a study abroad trip; maintain or even

generate interest in further study of the language. Most important, students learn to look at language as a vehicle instead of an obstacle, gaining more confidence in their language abilities: the film, therefore, becomes the gateway to language and culture.

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NOTES