

Approaches to teaching film

1 Introduction

Film is an artistic medium and a form of cultural expression that is accessible and engaging.

Teaching film to advanced level Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) learners can be central to developing their cultural knowledge, linguistic expression and artistic awareness; indeed, it can be a way of igniting a life-long cultural interest. Most MFL teachers will have watched and enjoyed many foreign language films over the years, but watching for pleasure is not the same as viewing for learning. This short guide is intended to help teachers develop approaches to teaching film that appreciate the value of film as *content* and not just as a resource or vehicle for discussing social or political issues.

Teaching film, therefore, is not the same as teaching *with* film, or teaching *through* film.

Teaching film requires us to engage with and deconstruct the combination of **words**, **images** and **sounds** that creates a unique narrative form. This guide is not exhaustive and it does not go into film theory but there is an array of electronic resources at your disposal to support teaching and learning and to go beyond the basics should you wish.

Clearly, every film is a product of a cultural context and its meaning lies to some extent within that context; it provides us with unique cultural insights. But more broadly, when we teach film, as when we teach a work of literature, we would also expect to extract and explore universal themes and global images that illuminate contrasts and commonalities between particular contexts and that provide the learner with a special window on the world.

We can do this through considering three key aspects of film:

- the **story** – an initial situation, a setting, some characters
- the **narration** – how the story is told and how elements are ordered
- the **manipulation of images** – types of camera shot and visual sequences.

Some films present significant aspects of everyday society, life-styles, moral values and culture in a direct way, while others reflect them through imaginary worlds. Both are fictional depictions and while they may, in differing ways, appear as a mirror on society, every film must be explored for meaning on its own terms. Moreover, it is not necessarily the plot, but the way the story is told or filmed through the imagination of the film-maker that creates a work of art. It is the combination of visual and narrative elements that sets film apart from literature.

We do not need to be experts in film studies to be able to teach film well, although to do so does require a fair amount of preparation and rudimentary knowledge of specialist vocabulary in the target language, as well as, hopefully, some familiarity with technology. Most teachers now have access to a range of technological support and materials that can easily be accessed in the classroom. We can draw on activities that we use with other media but, most importantly, we can explore the moving image in its specific terms and in the target language, through **learning to view**, that is developing visual literacy and teaching the basics of film criticism needed for assessment at advanced level.

We can also use film content to **view to learn**, that is to learn new language, develop oral discursive expression and begin to think critically and write analytically. The following sections present some ideas to begin exploring film both culturally and linguistically in preparation for examination, while at the same time arousing learners' interest in this art form.

2 Starting out – learning to view

Starting to work on one of the prescribed feature films may be daunting both for teachers and learners if the medium has not been part of MFL learning at Key Stages 3 and 4. One gentle, but no less important and useful, introduction could be through short films. Short films offer an introductory experience of film for teachers and learners and there is a huge number available, for example on YouTube or Vimeo. Typically, short films or 'shorts' are only four to six minutes in length, which means that they can be explored in their entirety and the basics of film narrative can be introduced more easily.

The sort of activities and approaches that apply to feature films – such as learning about a range of film styles, periods and genres, selecting short sequences to watch and discuss, close listening to dialogue, inferring, describing and predicting – are perhaps more easily introduced through short film. Since they often centre on an easily understandable point or theme, and may have a rather quirky slant on life, they appeal to learners of all ages. **All approaches used with short films can transfer to feature length films.**

Use of technology

Starting out with film also provides an ideal opportunity for both teachers and students to become familiar with some of the software programmes like MovieMaker or iMovie, by trying out techniques like importing still frames or short sequences into PowerPoint, Prezi or a similar presentation format, for recording voiceovers or adding subtitles. There is ample guidance material online for using these packages and, once mastered, the software makes the exploration of film so much easier, more creative and more attractive. However, it should be stressed that what is important are the teacher's ideas for exploring its cultural and linguistic potential, not the technology. This cannot be over-emphasised – no amount of technical wizardry can replace imaginative teaching ideas.

We can take sounds, images and words as our starting point, together with learning some film vocabulary through examining camera shots and short sequences. These elements can promote spontaneous discussion and the recycling of structures and vocabulary outside the 'topic silo'. Nor is there any shortage of opportunities for written work. As far as possible, everything should take place in the target language.

Sounds

The opening sequence of a film sets the scene and the accompanying music or sounds can provide an excellent way in for students to consider what the film might be about. This can be stimulated by a 'tell me grid', which involves just listening to the opening music or sounds, with no visual element.

This first activity creates a simple framework for breaking down the elements of the film.

Activity

Tell me grid

CHARACTER
STORY

SETTING
MOOD

- 1 Divide the class into four groups and give each group one of the above aspects to think about as they listen to the opening scene of the film.
- 2 They then either write or discuss their ideas and impressions of what they have heard.
- 3 The opening sequence is then viewed and discussed in relation to how sounds and music contribute to the film.

Background music or sound effects in later scenes could be discussed in terms of the atmosphere being created in that particular scene or in the film as a whole.

The role of silence is another unique feature of film to be considered.

Images

The visual elements of film are worth examining specifically from the outset, perhaps with the sound muted. Encourage students to describe the scene, imagining what the dialogue might be and drawing out meaning purely from the visual clues. Students can create their own scripts, and predict what happens next. This type of activity enables them to develop their speaking and writing abilities as well as gain insights into film narrative.

The camera acts as a 'narrator' and leads us into the story through selective camera shots. Different camera shots signify, for example, a dramatic moment or a view from a particular character's perspective. The 'language of film' is easily learned in the target language and a number of glossaries are available.

Selected short sequences can be used to examine camera shots and how they contribute to the building of the narrative.

Words

Perhaps one of the most important things to emphasise when starting to examine a film, whether it's a short or full-length feature film, is that not everything needs to be understood. Learners can be supported with sub-titles on a first viewing, although it is important not to encourage learners to depend on them. The careful selection of sequences for close study is important and techniques such as pre-teaching of vocabulary or revision of a grammar structure may well be necessary. Otherwise, all the usual activities can be used:

- reordering dialogues
- gap fill
- proof-marking during viewing
- translation-based activities
- comprehension activities.

It might also be interesting to use short scenes of the actual film script for a range of such activities. Working on dialogue helps to build an understanding of characters as well as the plot.

Sounds, images and words work together to create film narrative, principally through the **plot**, the **story**, the **setting** and the **characters**.

3 Moving on

Once students are familiar with the basic elements of film study in a foreign language, both in terms of simple film analysis and the appropriate language, they can move on to consider more detailed and complex aspects. This might also be a good time to present a broad overview of film in a cultural, historical and social context.

Teacher Tip

One way that MFL teachers have successfully supported their film teaching is by the creation of a film workbook. Each student develops their own booklet as they work through the course.

As well as providing progression and focus, the booklet can include a full glossary of film language for students to refer to and use. All film-related activities and exercises can also be recorded. Colour images can be incorporated relating to different activities along with references to clips of film that may have been viewed in lessons, as well as most of the written work completed. Students thus have a complete record of their film study in one document.

The following suggestions for exploring a film include important work on linguistic development and analytical skills, as well as developing understanding of film as an artistic medium. Much of the language that may already have been learned in terms of film narrative will be recycled here. It is assumed that most work will be conducted in the target language, at an appropriate level.

When planning lessons, software packages can be used to import images and clips into PowerPoint, Prezi or a similar presentation format. These can then be reproduced in each student's own film workbook.

Every film has its own meaning and must be explored in its own right. What follows, therefore, are some ideas to help teachers uncover meanings for and with their students and increase their knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of film. The ideas are generic and have no particular group of students in mind, but they could all be 'scaled up' or 'scaled down'. Equally, it is likely that to fully explore the film, it will need to be viewed several times. While students can work on some aspects as independent study, collaborative work and discussion should ideally be encouraged.

Activity

The film in context

- Start with a 'tell me' grid with discussion, then view the opening sequence of the film.
- Alternatively, show students the commercial poster of the film, consider the title and elicit ideas on what they think the film is about.
- Provide any contextual and background visual and written information about the setting – geographical, social, historical, political. This could be a reading/comprehension activity.

Provide some background information about the director and the principal actors, possibly using some press-cuttings or a critical review of the film. This could be used for translation practice or as a reading comprehension.

Activity

Focus on plot, story and character

- View the first 20 minutes or so (up to one third) of the film – enough to introduce the plot and main characters. This can then be summarised, characters described and pen portraits written. Hold a Q & A session about significant aspects of the setting and story so far, including predictions about how the story will proceed. Consider at this point providing a written summary of the film, possibly for translation.
- Teach any necessary new vocabulary or expressions.
- Recap the story (oral or written), then watch the next part of the film and discuss, exploring linguistically in appropriate ways and summarising. Character development could also be a focus here – possibly through an exploration of relationships or events, or how a particular character behaves in certain situations.
- Students could summarise the story so far and possibly write their own versions of the ending.
- View the final part of the film. Following some discussion, students could write their own summary of the story, or consider how a particular character is developed during the film.

Activity

Focus on themes and film techniques

- You could begin by returning to the characters and their relationships, focusing on scenes where meaning is conveyed through camera shots, for example how feelings and thoughts are inferred from facial expressions, gestures or looks between characters. Very short sequences and stills work well for this.
- Both camera shots and sound could be discussed in relation to the building of the mood, atmosphere or action in particular scenes and then linked with any dialogue. This type of work is best approached through teacher-led questioning. An analysis of a short clip naming camera shots and describing their effect could be an interesting activity for groups of students to present to peers.
- What are the themes of the film? Answers could be elicited verbally or students could produce a written summary as a basis for discussion. This could also include a gap-filling or proof-reading activity, or you could provide a range of statements for students to agree or disagree with.
- Use clips of film that relate to one theme, then challenge students to view the film again and find clips that illustrate other themes.
- Symbols, hidden messages and 'point of view' are further aspects that could be drawn out, discussed and possibly written about.
- Students could view the film a second time as a whole and then write their own review of the film, perhaps relating to a published review with points of agreement and disagreement.

Assessment

The exploration of a film as outlined above, if taught thoroughly, will develop students' insights and critical ability, as well as the ability to 'read' a film and express their views clearly. Students will appreciate the distinctive nature of film as an art form and be confident in discussing and writing about a chosen film. The examination specification requires students to give justified points of view, arguments and conclusion, with evidence from the work that they have been studying. They will be required to 'develop a detailed understanding and appreciation of the works studied, by writing critical and analytical responses in the language of study to the works'.

In preparation for the examination, students will have completed many formative pieces of work designed to develop their oral and written expression and their critical awareness. Their ability to analyse film and express their ideas in the language of study will have developed over time through systematic study of their chosen film. They will have learned to 'read' film and appreciate its artistic qualities; along the way, they will hopefully also have gained important cultural knowledge and enjoyment.

References

Useful websites for further ideas and materials:

Film Education resources: <http://www.filmeducation.org/resources/>

British Film Institute resources: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/teaching-film-tv-media-studies>