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Teaching a Film Clip in a Multiliteracies Framework

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Working within a multiliteracies framework, this paper moves beyond the traditional concerns with comprehension of a video text or the use of video for communicative purposes and demonstrates how a film clip might be used in a language classroom to explore the meaning-making process in film. Specifically, I investigate how language, filmic devices, and the representation of culture come together to create a cohesive text, and how an exploration of a clip's meaning contributes to the development of students' translingual/transcultural and symbolic competences.

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INTRODUCTION

In this article I will document the wide range of possibilities for language and literacy education afforded by short scenes in feature and documentary film. In my experience, many language instructors see great potential in film, but at the same time they use film for communicative information retrieval only (or even only as a source of entertainment), despite the copious literature on video and language education. Until quite recently that literature has tended to focus on what can be done (subtitles, captions, advanced planners) to aid in listening comprehension, or on whether students are able to identify cultural features, but not on how to work with a filmic text to achieve linguistic, communicative, visual literacy, or intercultural learning goals.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to examine how we might use a film clip as a mechanism for developing linguistic, communicative, intercultural and symbolic competences in a multiliteracies approach. After a brief review of the literature, I will demonstrate the broad potential of a clip from an English language feature film in an ESL lesson. I have chosen an English language film to reach the broadest possible audience – this same approach is used in my own teaching of Russian and is applicable to any language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before getting into a review of the literature, I would like to take up three issues which, in my view, have not been addressed in the literature on the use of video in language education: genre, affect, and place of viewing.

Genre. Video, a term analogous to the idea of "writing" for written/printed text, comprises a wide range of genres—a fact largely ignored in the literature on teaching with video. Just as a restaurant menu and a poem will differ in their form, their purpose, the language used, and their impact on the reader, different genres of video (e.g., TV commercials, newscasts, interviews, films) will differ in their use of language, the filmic devices employed, the goals of the video production and the impact on the viewer. For example, a newscast

might be well suited for retrieval of factual information or teaching students to differentiate fact from opinion; a commercial for the ways in which image and language are used to persuade; a feature film for an analysis of narrative structure or character development. And just as written genres have at their disposal a variety of literary devices, video genres will employ to varying degrees filmic devices (camera movement, camera angle, lighting, framing, juxtaposition of shots, length of takes, editing, etc.) to establish point of view, convey a mood, and tell a story. And just as we are more liable to find more interesting language use in a poem than a menu (which is not to deny the potential for poetic functions in a menu), similarly, a feature film is more likely to exhibit more creative use of filmic devices than a newscast or typical television commercial. And, continuing the comparison with writing, the lines between genres can be quite blurry - for example, many contemporary television serials, such as *Black Mirror* or *Westworld*, would be difficult to differentiate from film in their use of formal devices, which is not the case with the typical TV sitcom.

Affect. More than just the richness of its formal devices, it is film's affective power through storytelling, character development, the characters' interactions, and the expression of emotions that differentiates film, fictional and documentary, from other video genres. These characteristics make film a particularly effective medium for exploring questions of identity and the portrayal of values and attitudes in the target culture. In particular, the practice of having students create new scenes, writing themselves into the script, and then acting out those scenes with others affords an experience of self in the target culture environment, as I will discuss below.

Place of viewing. A third important consideration ignored in the literature is that beginning in 2009 a fundamental change occurred when the Library of Congress removed for non-profit educational institutions the prohibition on circumvention of copy protection schemes on DVDs. This made it possible, within fair use guidelines in the U.S., to extract films from DVDs and make them, or clips cut from them, available to students over the Internet in password-protected learning management systems. No longer were films limited to showings in class: they could now be assigned as homework, leaving more time in class for discussion and exploration of the film's semiosis or a close viewing of individual scenes, under the assumption that an initial exploration of the text, with the aid of subtitles/captions, slowed audio, vocabulary lists, previewing guides, or other heuristics, can be accomplished outside the classroom. No longer is comprehension limited to a single classroom viewing, since students can watch the assigned film or clip multiple times at home. And just as the transition from VHS/Beta to DVD involved changes in pedagogy (King, 2002), the move from DVD to streaming impacts how video is used in language classes (Kaiser, 2011). And yet, much of the literature on the use of video in the foreign language curriculum is concerned with comprehension. Researchers in this area who assume the student has only one viewing may logically conclude that pre-viewing activation of vocabulary or the use of captions or subtitles is therefore necessary for comprehension. If the student is watching the video at home, multiple viewings and heuristics other than subtitles or captions become possible (Kaiser, 2011).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the extensive bibliography on the use of video in foreign language teaching. Indeed, the benefits of video are well documented: as a motivator (Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Pegrum, Hartley, & Wechtler, 2005); as an effective tool in developing listening comprehension generally (Herron, York, Corrie, & Cole, 2006), and through the use of organizers (Yang, 2014) or subtitles/captions (Winke, Gass & Sydorenko, 2010; Winke et al., 2013); and as a mechanism for acquiring cultural knowledge (Herron, Cole,

Corrie, & Dubreil, 1999; Lütge, 2013) and intercultural competence (Wilcox, 2009). Vanderplank (2010) provides a summary of research from the late 1990s up to 2009.

Although much of the literature on video is equally applicable to film, it is nevertheless striking how little has been written specifically on film. Sherman (2003) provides dozens of exercises based on clips from feature films, but her approach is limited to a communicative language teaching model, focusing on getting students to describe scenes, narrate events, hypothesize on what happened before or after. Film is seen as a prompt for communicative exercises only. Kaiser (2011) describes an online database of clips culled from films with a variety of heuristic devices supporting comprehension and language acquisition. Film clips are used as models for the teaching of Japanese pragmatics (Kambara, 2011) or for its portrayals of the clash between urban and rural Chinese culture (Zhang, 2011). The efficacy of film for developing intercultural competence in ESL students is documented by Truong and Tran (2014) and Chao (2013).

Another recent strand concerns film and the development of symbolic competence. Kaiser and Shibahara (2014) describe three different ways that a film clip might be used to develop students' symbolic competence: through analysis of filmic devices, interpretation of the characters' dialog (i.e., their subject positions and power relationships), and finally by having students write scripts placing themselves into a scene. Etienne and Vanbaelen (2017) report on an interesting experiment whereby groups of students are exposed to different components of a filmic text: some saw the image but heard no dialog, some were given a transcript of the French dialog only, and a third group saw only an English translation. Their study comprised an analysis of how the students understood the information and what other sources they drew on to complete an understanding of what they saw or read. Their approach points out the necessity of engaging students with both the visual (filmic devices) and aural (language and music) elements of filmic semiosis.

A compelling case is made by a number of scholars for the inclusion of film within a multiliteracies approach (Kern, 2015; Paesani & Willis-Allen & Dupuy, 2015, Pegrum, 2008; Viebrock, 2016). As Viebrock (2016) writes, "The stories told by feature films as well as a reflection on how they are told are well suited for extensive discussions in the classroom and versatile meaning-making processes" (p. 14). The primary focus of these scholars within film literacy has been on camera work: the distance of the camera to the subject (i.e., shot length), camera angles, and camera movement. For example, Kern (2015, p. 210) notes "…camera angles, framing, and focus have long been known to guide the viewer's attention and to influence interpretation in meaningful ways." Viebrock (2016) discusses filmic devices in the abstract, mentioning other filmic devices beyond camera work, and she also addresses issues such as what to show: a whole film in one sitting? A whole film but segmented into 15-minute viewings? Or isolated clips, which she sees as beneficial only to illustrate specific filmic devices. But, as I hope to show in the remainder of this article, a clip is a rich source for not only discussing filmic devices, but for how a critical analysis of image and language together can be used to develop students' linguistic, communicative, symbolic and intercultural competences.

THE CLIP

Boyhood (Linklater, 2014) tells the story of Mason, his older sister Samantha, and their divorced parents over a 12-year period. Mason is 6 years old at the film's start and 18 years old by its end. Mom (her name is never given) remarries to a professor who becomes an alcoholic and is abusive to "mom," Mason and Samantha, and his own kids from a previous marriage—

Randy and Mindy. After a particularly violent episode, mom, with the help of a friend, removes her children from their home. The scene previous to the three in the focal clip I discuss below shows the mom driving her kids to the friend's house, trying to reassure them that everything will turn out fine. An instructor could choose to provide students this broader context I have outlined here, or she could have students speculate on what happened based on what is portrayed. The choice of how much background information to provide would depend heavily on the linguistic and cultural knowledge of the students.

This focal clip is 3'50" long and comprises three scenes: in the kitchen/family room at the friend's house (24 shots); dropping Samantha off at her new middle school (13 shots); Mason arriving at his new elementary school and being introduced to the class (19 shots). The clip occurs at 57'22" into the film.[1] Please watch this clip by pasting one of the URLs into a browser:

No subtitles:
http://blc.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/making_adjustments.mp4

With English subtitles:
http://blc.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/making_adjustments-s.mp4

The goal in working with this clip is to go beyond the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar and cultural facts. Rather, the intent is to advance students' understanding of the cultural context, to sharpen visual literacy skills and a critical awareness of the construction of an artistic filmic text, and finally, to foster the development of intercultural and symbolic competence. I will employ the framework of noticing, comparing, reflecting, and interacting (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). That is, *noticing* language use and filmic devices, *comparing* characters' behavior, speech, shots, scenes, L1 culture and L2 culture similarities and differences; *reflecting* on the significance of what has been noticed and observed in comparisons; and finally, *interacting* or actively engaging with the L2 culture.

Beyond vocabulary and grammar. Following Sherman (2003), we begin by working on students' communicative competence and acquisition of vocabulary. So, for example, students could watch this clip at home and come to class prepared to retell what happened in each scene, which would necessitate regurgitation of some of the vocabulary spoken in the clip. During the discussion the instructor could prompt for more vocabulary by asking questions such as, "What did Samantha seem worried about in the first scene?" or "Why was Samantha angry at her mother in the car? What did she complain about?" Students could describe the rooms, the clothing, the faces, and the characters' emotions. They could practice using reported speech constructions by restating what each character said. None of this is particularly new, and it represents what is typically done with a clip in a language class.

However, to leave matters at that misses an opportunity to develop other competences that students will need if they are going to be able to understand how native speakers use the language and how they themselves might use the language productively. So, we ask students to think about register and what uses of language are more typical of a colloquial style, in pronunciation (e.g., contracted forms and "gonna"); in syntactic constructions (e.g., tag questions); in vocabulary (e.g., endearing forms, noting the differences between mom's "honey" and the boys' "dude" as endearing forms).

We can explore with students not just the meaning of words or grammatical forms, but also the function of the utterances. For example, we can draw students' attention to the surface

level meaning versus an underlying meaning when dealing with a locutionary request for help ("Hey, Abby, why don't you come help me with this?") that entails an illocutionary act of getting her daughter to stop singing (and annoying the guests), or to the ellipsis in "I have you and your brother" (with an unstated but understood "to take care of"). We can look at emphatic particles "even" (by Samantha) and "right" (by mom), noting not only the usage, but also asking students to explore why they are used, to identify the emotional weight they add to the meaning of the utterances. We might look at Samantha's use of progressive tense forms when complaining in the car and ask students why that tense was used. Could a different choice have been made and what would the difference in meaning have been? We could focus on individual words and ask why that particular word was used. For example, Samantha accuses her mother of "dumping" her in "some parking lot." By pointing out other uses of that verb in English, for example, "to dump a boyfriend," "the city dump," and "to take a dump," students would acquire a sense of the connotative meaning of that word. What other verbs could have been used here and how would their usage impact the meaning (e.g., "You are dropping me off …")? We can see that "dump," the progressive tense, the indefinite "some," and the emphatic "even" are all working together as part of Samantha's act of complaining and emotional attack on her mother, culminating in "This sucks!" and a slammed car door. Thus, our focus needs to be not only on the meaning of the individual words, but also on the word choices made and how they affect the meaning of the text.

Beyond cultural facts. We might ask students about matters that we, as native speakers, immediately recognize: the socioeconomic status of the mom's friend given the kitchen/family room layout and her ability to bring three people into her house. We could have students use the Internet to investigate the concepts of legal guardianship and the institution of Child Protective Services. For our ESL learners, would the state of affairs in the school classroom before the teacher began speaking seem normal or chaotic? What about the mother/daughter relationship? Is the way they treat each other within familiar social norms? Why does Mason avoid his mother's attempt to kiss him goodbye? Dropping off kids at school, picking them up after school, lunch money, the buddy system, introducing a new student to the classroom are all American cultural practices that may seem strange or very familiar to ESL students, depending on the practices in the students' native culture.

And finally, this clip begs commentary on violence in American culture. The theme of violence runs through the clip, and I will address this more thoroughly below in the discussion of textual cohesion. However, we might start out by asking students to consider how violence is represented in this film, in their other encounters with American culture, and in their own culture as well. We might also ask whether they see violence as a social issue, or one of individual responsibility.

Visual literacy. An awareness of literary devices enhances our appreciation of the literary text, and the same can be said of filmic devices and the filmic text (for an introduction to film analysis, see Fabe (2004) and Monaco (2009); however, note that their analysis of the filmic text does not include any discussion of how language contributes to filmic meaning). As cited above, scholars working within a multiliteracies framework have noted the importance of camera work as a meaning-making device in a general sense, but I feel a specific example is warranted. Contrast two images (Figure 1) of the stepfather and "mom" driving a car in different scenes from *Boyhood*. The image of the stepfather is approximately at a 60-degree angle (i.e., he faces us more), the camera is slightly lower and looking upward, and is slightly closer to him, so he fills more of the frame. In conjunction with his facial expressions of anger and frustration, the way the shot was made makes him more imposing and threatening; with

"mom" we are at 90 degrees (as a passenger in her car) and at her eye level, both of which contribute to our reading of her as a much more sympathetic character. The contrasting images (whiteout vs. grassy lawns) outside the windows add to the effect. These shots occur several minutes apart in the film, so the impact on the viewer is more one of perception and affect, rather than the cognitive comparison provided here.

Figure 1. Two shots of drivers from *Boyhood*

But as important as camera work is, it is only one of the many tools available to filmmakers. Lighting, tinting, colors, length of takes, accompanying music or sound effects, transitions between shots, juxtaposition of shots, and the dialog all contribute to filmic semiosis, which I will now show.

We begin the analysis of filmic devices by asking students to compare how each scene in this clip begins. Scenes 2 and 3 have establishing shots (both are also tracking shots) indicating to the viewer the location of the ensuing action. Scene 1 lacks an establishing shot and stands out as a result – the shot of the boys playing the video game is a sharp transition from the previous scene of mom driving and the camera puts the boys literally in our face, hitting us, the viewers, as they play the game. This is followed by a jump cut to peanut butter being spread on crackers/celery, seemingly incongruous to the action of the first shot. We might ask students what purpose this food shot serves in the film. The third shot resolves the ambiguity of the first shot, as the camera tracks the mother taking the snacks to the family room from the kitchen, followed by a reverse shot of her offering the food to the boys, who ignore her. The situation has now been clarified for the viewer, but the momentary visual confusion is jarring – the psychological result of being hit by the boxing boys, perhaps. The mother returns to the kitchen. Already we have established visually important themes – women in the kitchen preparing food and discussing relationships, separated from the boys playing at violence in a different space.

The reverse shots between mother and daughter dominate the rest of the scene, and then are repeated in the car as tension mounts between them. The third scene's establishing shot is complex – it tracks the mom and Mason as they walk down the hall, then pans right following Mason into his classroom, but holds for a fraction of a second longer than necessary on the sign "You are responsible for your own actions." The warmth of the teacher's and Lenny's greeting is contrasted with the blank stares of members of the class as the teacher exhorts them to welcome Mason. In a series of rapid reverse shots between Mason and the classmates, Mason's demeanor is increasingly uncomfortable as the blank stares of his classmates are less than welcoming. What happened to the words in the girl's song at the beginning of scene 1: "We're all in this together?"

Students are asked to contrast the reverse shots in scene 1 with the reverse shots in scene 3. In scenes 1 and 2, when the camera is pointed to either the mother or the daughter, the over-the-shoulder shot captures a part of the other character. Thus, even though there is

tension between them, they are still linked visually and still form a unit. This interconnection between mother and daughter is reinforced by the use of J-cuts (the audio shifts to the other character before the video) in two instances. In other words, we hear Samantha's voice while still seeing the mother, or vice versa in the latter, reinforcing the connection between them. In scene 3, all of the cuts between Mason and the classmates show isolated students, with no sense of any connection, visually or aurally, which isolates Mason. Exploring these phenomena with students is a two-step process: first, recognizing what is happening, and then speculating on why the director chose that technique – perhaps in scenes 1 and 2 to reinforce the bonds of family even in the midst of significant differences and tension, and in scene 3 to invoke in the viewer feelings of sympathy for Mason as the blank faces he encounters while the teacher welcomes him to the class undercut her words and leave Mason isolated.

The text. We have already noted visual ties between the scenes: the reverse shots between mother and daughter in scenes 1 and 2; the school setting in scenes 2 and 3; and the tracking shots that establish the setting in scenes 2 and 3. What else pulls these scenes together to form a cohesive text?

First, there is language. The word 'suck' repeats four times in this clip—three times in scene 2 and then once more by the student in scene 3, Lenny, as he welcomes Mason to class. Perhaps even more noteworthy is the grammatical parallelism between mom's "slam your head against the wall" as Samantha walks away (just a second after Samantha had slammed the car door shut) and the boys' muted exclamation of rapture when they recount the actions at a concert when the musician (?) "…smashed that board against the microphone… ."

The clips are tied thematically as well. The violence of Samantha and Mason's stepfather in a preceding scene echoes in the video game and in the lyrics ("wildcats in the house") of the girl's song, in the verbal violence between Samantha and her mom in scene 2, and in the adulation of violence recounted by classmates from a concert in scene 3. The girl's other song ("We're all in this together")—the lyrics of which are ironical given the separation of the boys and women in the scene—contrasts with the sign on the wall in Mason's school (scene 3), which stresses individual responsibility, and Mason's individual isolation is made obvious at the end of that scene.

These are, of course, one set of interpretations and students could have other ideas on the meaning of these scenes. As instructors our goal would be to get students noticing and comparing (e.g., scenes, characters, language) by asking leading questions, if necessary. For example, students may be asked whether the lyrics of the girl's song have any significance, or if they see any connections between these scenes, or why the first scene began the way it did? It is important that students come to understand that choices were made in making these scenes (everything was chosen: the shot, the camera angle, the colors of the clothes worn, the transitions between shots, the language spoken, etc.) and that those choices have a purpose in the construction of meaning. To make students aware of the choices and get them thinking about the potential meaning-making ability of the filmic text is to develop their visual literacy, and as we shall see, their symbolic competence.

Translingual/transcultural and symbolic competences. The call for translingual/transcultural competence as the goal of foreign language education (MLA, 2007) cites the "ability to operate between languages" and the training of students "to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture." We have seen how this clip could be used as a vehicle for exploring English language usage, American culture, and cinematographic devices, but what the MLA calls for is to have students reflect on their own language and culture as well. Students are asked to consider whether the mother/daughter

relationship depicted in the film is typical in their culture, and if not, what aspect was atypical – the daughter's rebellion, the mother's reaction? Would they consider the exchange a violent one? What about domestic violence in their culture? How is violence condoned in subtle ways (for example, here, in video games and rock concerts)? Is violence more typical among boys and men than among women? Does talking about their own culture in English, rather than in their native language, change their perceptions of their own culture, and how does talking about America in English as opposed to their L1 change their feelings about America? How do they think Americans view the portrayal of American culture in this clip: the mother/daughter relationship, violence, and the school environment?

Kramsch (2006, 2009, 2011; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008) theorizes and provides examples of language as symbolic action, but for the purposes of this paper I will quote Kramsch's definition: "symbolic competence is the apprehension of the affordances of the context to create meaning" (Kramsch, 2013). Symbolic competence then is both an interpretive skill, i.e., the ability to recognize and understand the meaning-making process in the utterances and texts of others, and the ability to create meaning using whatever affordances are available in any given context. Our examination of language usage, culture, and filmic devices in these three scenes involves the application of interpretive skills (Liddicoat & Scarino's noticing, comparing and reflecting), but how might we develop students' productive symbolic competence (Liddicoat & Scarino's interaction)? How might we afford them the opportunity to engage in meaning-making?

Several scholars have proposed pedagogical models for developing students' symbolic competence. Kearny (2016) uses images on Vichy posters as her source material and has students interpret those images; Kaiser and Shibahara (2014) use film clips to get students to interpret filmic devices, characters' use of language, and the power differentials revealed therein; the discussion in Vinall (2016) on relationality, transgression, and potentiality as components of symbolic competence is highly relevant to the way this clip has been treated: relationality in that the meaning of this clip is revealed in an analysis across modalities (visual and aural) and across contexts (the three scenes); transgression in that students must transgress their own culture and place themselves into the culture represented in the film; potentiality in that the analysis not only develops students' communicative, analytic, and interpretive potentials," but also fosters a recognition of "the potential to create new meanings…" (Vinall, 2016, p. 5).

As modeled in Kaiser and Shibahara (2014) and elaborated in Kramsch and Shibahara (in preparation), students are asked to create a new scene for this film, placing themselves within it. For example, after having witnessed Samantha's scene with her mother or Mason's discomfort in the classroom, students are asked to imagine that they are on the playground and see Samantha or Mason standing alone. They write a new scene for the film, where they engage the film's characters from behind their own fictional mask. Students may film their dialogs, thereby making decisions about which filmic devices they will employ and to what end. Finally, they discuss their choices with the larger class. Students thereby gain a greater appreciation for the artistry in this filmic text. Such an exercise invites students to explore how they would represent themselves and their own L1 culture in that dialog with Samantha or Mason, opening up opportunities to create new meanings, but relying on what they have learned from a close viewing of these scenes.

Integrating clips into the curriculum. Language instructors are still left with a dilemma: with textbooks establishing the topics for the curriculum and with significant pressure on instructors to complete a set number of chapters across the academic year, how does an

instructor find a clip that works with the course textbook or find the time to include it in an already crammed curriculum? Where would this clip from *Boyhood* fit into an established ESL course? If there is a topic dealing with parent–child relationships, or growing up in America, or violence in American society, or elementary school culture, then this clip fits in quite naturally. But, what if there is no such topic? An alternative would be to carve out time from the textbook for other topics and choose clips from films along with other texts. Such an approach not only affords instructors creative opportunities, it allows them to be more responsive to the interests of their students. However, we will leave the problem of the tyranny of the textbook for another time and place.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

In distinguishing film from other genres of video at the beginning of this article, I noted the affective power of feature film and documentaries. However, the affective impact of film on students is an area needing further research. Kramsch (2009) has eloquently described the striving of students to find another way of being, another lens through which to see the world. We know that film offers alternative ways to see the world. What, then, is the impact of a foreign film on students who are exploring their identities? This is an area worthy of further study.

As we have seen with this clip, film offers a wealth of material for exploring language use in a visual context. Some clips (e.g., a car chase scene) will allow little more than stimulus for student talk, such as using verbs of motion to describe the movement of the cars. But for many clips, a close examination of the language, the representation of culture, the filmic devices, and the ways these come together to create meaning will provide intellectual stimulation that goes far beyond talk for talk's sake. Moreover, a close viewing as described here works best with a text limited in scope. Too often when we have students watch an entire film, we miss the opportunity to explore the richness of the language and the interplay of language and visual elements in the filmic text. Ideally, we do both: students watch an entire film and then engage in close viewings of individual scenes, but when time is constrained, clips by themselves still offer instructors much to work with.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTES

[1] The film is available from the Criterion Collection on DVD and BluRay and from a number of streaming services; readers with access to the Berkeley Language Center's Library of Foreign Language Clips (aka Lumière) can find this clip by switching to English and searching for the clip titled "Making adjustments in a new place."

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