

## Film as a means for Teaching Civilization: Advantages and Challenges

### Nouara KHAROUNI

Université de Constantine, kharouni.nouara@gmail.com

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#### Abstract

Films have been widely accepted as useful and effective tools for teaching a foreign language because they motivate learners and give them exposure to an authentic language. Additionally, the rich culture content of film makes of it a valuable resource for teaching culture. This paper discusses the advantages of the film in the class of civilization and demonstrates that this medium can be an effective instructional material to reinforce the course objectives in terms of enriching students' cultural knowledge and developing their critical thinking and intercultural competence. The paper also examines its limitations and how these can be reduced or overcome. Finally, it shows instructors how to make the best use of film to improve and vitalize their civilization lessons.

**Key words:** Film, civilization class, cultural knowledge, intercultural competence, critical thinking.

#### الفيلم كوسيلة لتدريس الحضارة: المزايا والتحديات

#### ملخص

تعتبر الأفلام كأدوات مفيدة وفعالة لتعليم اللغة الأجنبية لأنها تحفز المتعلمين وتسمح لهم بالتعرف والتمكن من اللغة الأصلية. إضافة إلى ذلك فالمحتوى الثقافي الغني للفيلم يجعله مصدرا قيما لتدريس الثقافة. يتناول هذا المقال مزايا الفيلم في درس الحضارة ويظهر إمكان هذه الوسيلة أن تكون دعما وموردا تعليميا فعالا لتعزيز أهداف المادة من حيث إثراء المعرفة الثقافية للطلاب وتطوير مهارات التداخل الثقافي والفكر النقدي. كما يبين المقال من جانب آخر عيوب هذا الأخير وإمكانية تخفيضها أو التخلص منها. وأخيرا يظهر للمدرسين الكيفية المثلى لاستخدام الفيلم في تحسين وتنشيط دروس الحضارة.

**كلمات المفاتيح:** فيلم، درس حضارة، معرفة ثقافية، مهارات تداخل ثقافي، فكر نقدي.

#### Le film comme moyen d'enseigner la civilisation: avantages et défis

#### Résumé

Les films ont été largement considérés comme des dispositifs avantageux et efficaces pour enseigner une langue étrangère, par le fait qu'ils motivent les apprenants et les exposent à la langue authentique. En outre, la richesse du contenu culturel du film constitue une ressource précieuse pour l'enseignement de la culture. Cet article met en exergue les avantages du film dans la classe de civilisation et démontre que ce support est un moyen d'enseignement efficace pour renforcer les objectifs du cours en termes d'enrichissement du savoir culturel des étudiants et du développement de la pensée critique et de la compétence interculturelle. Il examine également ses limites et la façon dont celles-ci peuvent être réduites ou surmontées. Enfin, il explicite aux instructeurs comment utiliser au mieux le film pour améliorer et dynamiser leurs leçons de civilisation.

**Mots - clés:** Film, classe de civilisation, savoir culturel, pensée critique, compétence interculturelle

**Corresponding author:** Nouara Kharouni, kharouni.nouara@gmail.com

**Introduction:**

In this era of technological development, media such as television programs, music, film, computers or the Internet have been increasingly introduced as teaching aids in the foreign language classroom to create efficient learning environments. The film is particularly considered by some scholars<sup>(1),(2),(3); and (4)</sup> as an effective medium to enhance culture learning in a structured foreign language classroom.

Despite the advantages offered by the film, its use in cultural instruction in Algerian universities is still rare and it is not considered a conventional part of the programs of civilization. When teachers by their own initiative introduce this medium, it is usually used as stimulation at the end of a semester in order to get out of the routine of the lectures but not as an instructional tool to enhance learning.

This paper argues that the film can be an effective supplement to be used in culture instruction to motivate students, enrich their cultural knowledge and help build critical thinking and intercultural competence.

**A rationale for using film to teach civilization:**

The main goal of including the subject of civilization in the foreign language syllabus is to provide socio-cultural knowledge and understanding which complements and contextualizes language learning<sup>(5)</sup>. Learning about another culture and civilization does not only help students to gain cultural information but also to critically evaluate this information. So, another purpose of teaching civilization is to provide students with skills in cross-cultural analysis and aid them in developing critical thinking. This is highlighted by Ingram <sup>(6)</sup> when he writes “I believe that the special strength of the civilization course is its ability to provide students with skills in social and cross-cultural analysis”. The other important purpose of teaching culture is to help students develop intercultural competence and build a feeling of tolerance towards diversity and difference<sup>(7)</sup>.

The film motivates students and this constitutes a powerful argument for its inclusion in cultural instruction. Yet, the mere viewing of a film in the classroom does not guarantee learning results. A film has a pedagogical value when it is used to enhance students’ learning and meet civilization course objectives.

In order to understand the advantages of using the film in teaching civilization and how it can reinforce the course objectives, one needs to look at films, not only as a form of popular entertainment but also as a cultural product which reflects society, its culture, ideology and cultural representations. For Lee, a “film is a cultural text produced in society” and “provides the audience with images of the society in which they live”<sup>(8)</sup>. In the modern world, the film has become an important component of native speakers’ cultural capital<sup>(9)</sup> which does not only reflect society but also shapes it and even determines the target society’s cultural identities, especially in societies where cinema is an important part of contemporary life and entertainment.

Therefore, films can be considered as cultural and historical documents which can be used for learning about cultures and societies. For instance, supplementing a lecture on the American civil war with the films *Glory*, *Cold Mountain* or *Lincoln* would enrich students’ knowledge about this period, and films like *Titanic*, and *Bend it like Beckham* or *Brick Lane* can be used to reinforce the theme of immigrants and immigration in the twentieth century. The anthropologist Weakland<sup>(10)</sup> states that feature films are “in the broadest sense- cultural documents by definition” and that they are particularly effective in the study of the general patterns of culture on the grounds that they: “tell 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”. It is clear from this quotation that a film presents culture in real life contexts offering invaluable insights into the lives of different peoples and cultures. It depicts cultural values and traditions and portrays the important social, political and economic issues of a particular period.

An important advantage of the film in the class of civilization is its high visuality which makes of it an “efficient and effective link to the target culture(s)” <sup>(11)</sup>. The film gives a visual access to the target culture and shows students the places they study and read about. It gives them a picture of what the target community looks like in ways that cannot be matched by other teaching material like books and handouts; it shows real people, places and events, dress styles, food, the inside of a house or a school, marriage ceremonies, battlefields, and many other details which the instructor cannot explain easily or efficiently. Furthermore, it brings them into direct contact with real language use in its natural context with stress, intonations, gestures, idioms, slang and body language.

It can be said that, exposing students to orally and visually authentic films not only gives them exposure to the history, geography, and institutions of past and present cultures, but also allows them to immerse themselves in ‘the way of life culture’. For instance using the film *Malcolm X* to teach the civil rights movement in the 1960s reinforces students’ knowledge of some historical events and figures and also depicts bits of daily living conditions. For that, it gives insights into the clothing fashion, hairstyle, means of transportation, music, and the social attitudes of the time leading to deeper understanding of what life was like during this period.

Visual media like films makes it easier to teach abstract themes and concepts included in a course of civilization. Champoux <sup>(12)</sup> observes that a “film is an excellent medium for giving meaning to theories and concepts” and Michalczyk <sup>(13)</sup> emphasizes that one of the best means of concretizing abstract concepts like ‘culture’ in a course of civilization is the use of a film as a vehicle for communication. One can illustrate this point with the film *Dances with Wolves* which offers a visual portrayal of the myth of the ‘American frontier’ or the movie *Citizen Kane* in which Orson Welles provides a realistic example of the American Dream. By presenting these two concepts in a visual and verbal form, they make them more accessible to learners than a written text or a lecture by the instructor.

The visual and auditory elements of a film create a sensory experience for learners which help them understand and remember better. Chao <sup>(14)</sup> points out that “learners can quickly acquire the cultural information they receive through multi - sensory inputs from film”. Loewen <sup>(15)</sup>, writing about his experience of teaching race relations in the USA with film, argues that he prefers to teach his students about slavery using a movie like *Gone with the Wind* rather than more accurate high school texts because students “often remember images they see rather than descriptions they only read” and also to help them “unlearn false images” <sup>(16)</sup> conveyed by the film in order to develop their critical thinking.

In fact, one significant advantage of the film in the class of civilization is that it can be used to hone students’ critical thinking. A film, like in literature, is a fictional work which gives an interpretation of reality and thus helps to see the same event or issue from different perspectives. Additionally, a film generates motivation in students and stimulates class discussion and debate. The vivid images and scenarios conveyed by film trigger emotions and elicit views and thoughts, thereby enhancing students’ interpretation skills and communicative competence.

Yet, it is important to ensure that students understand a film as a means of entertainment and propaganda and take this aspect into account when discussing and appraising a film. Duquette <sup>(17)</sup>, speaking about historical movies, argues that the vivid images of a film and other effects like sound and music give a convincing interpretation of events and issues which affect the students’ opinion. In order to avoid that students take the film version of a specific event at face value, she cautioned instructors to play an active role in helping them use it critically. Michalczyk <sup>(18)</sup> among other proposes that students consult other sources of information in order to compare their interpretation with that of the film. This method will enhance their interpretation skills and critical thinking.

Since a film portrays the target community’s cultural norms and traditions it facilitates comparisons between attitudes and values in their own culture and that of the target culture.

Zoreda<sup>(19)</sup> argues that a film is an important resource for enhancing intercultural reflection because, as an art object, it has the power to “submerge us imaginatively and completely in “otherness” and offers the possibility to enter “an intercultural space” facilitating cross-cultural comparisons which is essential for developing intercultural competence.

Likewise, The Modern Language Association report <sup>(20)</sup> highlights the role of films in developing intercultural competence and considers it as an important resource for challenging “students’ imagination and to help them consider alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding things”. Students are exposed to characters’ emotional reactions to real-life situations and events. This approach helps them understand that people from different cultures understand and interpret the world in different ways. This can be explored by instructors to develop students’ intercultural competence through discussion or written exercises in which they ask them to compare between situations in the target culture and their own or to give their reaction to specific situations and events of the movie.

Mishan<sup>(21)</sup> holds that the film is the medium that is “designed to appeal most directly and fully to our emotions”. A film depicts culture and society in an authentic experience of life. Learning culture with films allows students to see, hear and feel the foreign people, not just learn information about them but the cultural learning experience becomes more real. This approach involves students emotionally in the culture and therefore be able to identify with the protagonists, to empathize with them and this can enhance their sensitivity and tolerance of difference.

From the above discussion, it can be deduced that foreign language instructors can integrate films in the class of civilization to reach the following objectives: 1- Motivate students to learn about language and culture, 2- enrich their knowledge and enhance understanding of the target culture, 3- build critical thinking and intercultural competence, 4- promote language learning and communicative competence. All these possibilities offered by the film go hand in hand with the objectives to teaching culture/ civilization.

Despite the intrinsically motivating language and cultural input offered by the film, some researchers question its effectiveness in the foreign language classroom <sup>(22)</sup>. In fact, using a film for teaching language, and mainly culture is not necessarily always easy and can be challenging. The factors that hinder the development of the creative use of a film in culture instruction are explained in what follows.

### **Challenges with using a film in the class of civilization:**

An important issue that may cause concern in using films is some students’ and even teachers’ attitude that a film is mere entertainment which makes them passive viewers. Using a film as a medium of entertainment which students enjoy does not imply providing them with relaxation from the arduous task of culture learning. On the contrary, research in foreign language learning shows that students learn more efficiently when they are motivated by the teaching material and precisely a film creates a highly motivating atmosphere for culture learning. Yet, the screening of a film in the classroom can be a source of distraction and passivity for learners when it is used as time filling element and not to help attain learning goals. For that, a film should not be used as an end in itself but as means to reach an end. This is why it is necessary to support the film with appropriate activities to enhance active viewing by keeping the students watch with a purpose<sup>(23)</sup>. This sustains students’ motivation and prevents their passivity. It is also important to make it clear for them that though the film is diverting, it is also meant to be a learning experience.

Some may criticize the use of film in the foreign language classroom because of its dense and idiomatic language which makes it difficult for students to cope with it. Yet ironically, it is this rich linguistic and extra-linguistic input which makes it a challenging teaching tool. The film provides a full visual context and addresses different senses simultaneously which helps students’ comprehension and helps them also overcome the language obstacle. When watching film, students do not only listen to the characters but also watch their movements and behavior, their facial expressions and gestures. This non-verbal language supports the

verbal message and provides a focus of attention for students while they listen<sup>(24)</sup>. Even when students do not thoroughly understand the language of a film they can enjoy it and learn from it.

It is necessary for the instructor to choose the movies that suit the students' language level, in which language is not too fast or colloquial to be understood. When some features of authentic language used in films such as dialects, unclear articulations, idiomatic expressions, and slang may be challenging for the students' level, using subtitles in English is often helpful to support students' comprehension of the film.

The length of films and the restricted classroom time are other factors that make this approach impractical. Most films which generally take two hours are usually too long to show in class or to show them repeatedly. Another drawback is that showing the entire film may distract the learners from the lecture and leads them to lose interest and motivation.

Even though some researchers advocate showing films in their full length to keep their meaning, numerous other researchers stress that when there is no classroom time to show the whole movie, teachers can show the important scenes without losing the general meaning of the film's story. Duquette<sup>(25)</sup> considers teaching with film clips or extracts as one of the better methods of using films in the classroom because it allows the teacher to select clips that suit learners' needs and a specific lesson objectives to show repeatedly and discuss in the classroom. In fact, because of limited classroom time, it is preferable that teachers extract sections of a movie to work with students as one or some key scenes are sufficient to illustrate and discuss a cultural point or to stimulate classroom discussion. At advanced levels of language proficiency when attention is not paid to details and the objective is rather to understand the overall meaning or get the general impression about the movie viewing a full-length film may be necessary.

Poor equipment is another factor that complicates the use of films. There is an ardent need to equip universities and mainly language departments with audio-visual materials, media rooms and, computer laboratories, to make them prepared for the implementation of innovative methods. Besides, university libraries should make films more readily available to facilitate their use by both instructors and students. As a matter of fact, nowadays, a broad range of films is available on the Internet for free downloading. Many of them are also available in video shops/rentals.

The lack of teachers' formal training in the use of multimedia equipment can be another hindrance for teachers to implement films in their classes of civilization. Therefore, teachers should receive adequate preparation to be able to use films to enhance their lessons.

Another difficulty that may discourage teachers from using films is the extensive preparation that is required. First, it takes time and effort to locate suitable materials. Second, it is important to plan the film - based lesson carefully and to prepare related activities for making the viewing of a film a rewarding learning experience. As a result, some teachers feel that using movies is time - consuming, too demanding and has no place in a civilization curriculum already overcrowded.

Given the advantages of the film outlined above, one can deduce that despite practical problems that may arise from teaching with this medium, when instructors use the appropriate methodology the advantages of using film will ultimately outweigh its drawbacks.

### **Making the most of the film medium in the class of civilization:**

In order to make a film-based class of culture a rewarding learning experience, certain factors need to be considered.

#### **Film selection:**

Finding the appropriate film is necessary to reaching pedagogical objectives. When selecting a film for a lesson of civilization, the teacher has to make sure that it has a pedagogical value, i.e. it can ameliorate and enhance the designed lesson. Then, the choice of a film depends on the content of the lesson, the learners' needs and the didactic aims which the instructor needs to accomplish. A film selection is also based on a number of matters like

the availability of the film, the students' academic level, their linguistic level and previous cultural knowledge, and the length of the film.

Films with complex topics or dense colloquial language should be avoided because they inhibit comprehension and even create discomfort and anxiety with students. In addition to this, because of different cultural backgrounds and values, films from the Western World may contain kinds of content which are inappropriate for our students or unacceptable in our cultures like films containing scenes of violence, suicide, despair and sexuality. Voller and Widdows<sup>(26)</sup> give other criteria for film selection. They suggest that learners understand better when "films have strong story lines and easily recognizable main characters". On the other hand, they recommend that instructors avoid "slow-moving films that contain frequent monologs and that require detailed background knowledge".

### **Instructional strategies:**

After selecting the appropriate movie, the next step is preparation. Clear pedagogical objectives and tasks should be selected beforehand. For designing lesson plans that make use of film many researchers (<sup>27</sup>, <sup>28</sup>, <sup>29</sup>) propose a structured method based on three phases as outlined below:

#### **1- A pre-viewing phase:**

The pre-viewing phase prepares learners for the viewing phase; introducing and contextualizing the film makes the actual viewing of the film more meaningful. Background information is provided according to the teaching objectives. The teacher can introduce a brainstorm activity to activate the learners' background knowledge related to the main theme(s) of the film and focus attention on specific concepts, notions like stereotypes, **segregation**, feminism, etc. He can also elicit what students already know about the film: The actors and the director, the awards owned by the film, its importance in film history, etc.<sup>(30)</sup>.

Another useful pre - viewing activity is reading the script or discussing the movie poster advertisement. Students can also be provided with a short synopsis. Because of time constraints, it is helpful that students read the script of the movie at home before watching it and make a list of new or difficult words and concepts. It is also important to teach difficult vocabulary before the students actually watch the film. The teacher can hand out a list of difficult words and expressions taken from the film.

The aforementioned preliminary activities will ensure that students have gained necessary information about the movie and therefore are more prepared for the viewing phase<sup>(31)</sup>.

#### **2- A viewing phase:**

In the viewing phase, students are guided in observing, comprehending and discussing the film. The activities introduced in this phase enhance active viewing and ensure that students watch carefully and understand the movie. One idea from the literature is to use a comprehension check or viewing worksheet consisting of simple questions which students answer while watching. This helps them focus on specific aspects of the movie, for instance, a specific conversation, custom, or other cultural or historical knowledge<sup>(32)</sup>.

#### **3- A post-viewing phase:**

The post - viewing phase encourages further reflection on the film. Students are guided to draw connections between the different sets of information they previously acquired in the lecture, to synthesize information, and give their own ideas and conclusions. They can comment on issues about culture, politics, characters and other elements studied in the lecture or conveyed by the movie. It is preferable that teachers use open - ended questions which encourage critical thinking. Another possibility is to ask students to discuss in groups or make group presentations on their understanding of the film or role-play. Through these activities, students will not only deepen their cultural understanding but also enhance their communicative abilities. At more advanced levels, teachers can introduce more complex themes and discussions and students can engage in more complex activities like writing a film review and give their critical response or they can write an essay in which they compare the film with other cultural or historical documents.

**Conclusion:**

The article highlights the main advantages of supplementing the course of civilization with film as instructional material. A film is a treasure trove of cultural information mainly 'the way of life' culture. As such, it provides the teacher with a strong support to enrich students' cultural knowledge and help them acquire a deeper understanding of the target culture. Furthermore, a film provides a realistic setting to discuss the foreign culture and compare between the target culture and one's own culture or other cultures which help learners to develop intercultural competence and critical thinking. To realize these advantages, it is not enough to show films in the classroom, but appropriate guidance from instructors should be offered. Appropriate film selection should be provided and instructional strategies and activities should be included to scaffold the learner comprehension and discussion of the film. Furthermore, given the amount of time needed to use a film in the classroom, the time devoted to its screening and discussion must be rigorously controlled. The problem of in-class time constraints can be reduced with using film clips and by expanding students' work outside the classroom.

To conclude, teaching culture and civilization with films can present a challenge, but the benefits the students can make in cultural understanding and critical analysis makes the challenge worthwhile. Incorporating feature films in culture instruction curriculum will certainly motivate students to learn and revitalize the teaching of civilization in our universities.

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