Using Narrative Film in Second Language Acquisition: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach

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Introduction

This paper is essentially an introduction to a wider and more extensive study outlining an holistic contextual content-based approach to using narrative drama films in the L2 classroom that addresses a multitude of issues including authenticity of text, the problem of passivity, the relationship between literal and cultural translations in subtitles, and most importantly the adoption of a cross-disciplinary approach utilizing film theory. The paper is in effect an overview of the key issues outlined in the wider study with a specific focus on a process of teaching that recognizes the film as a whole, and not as a text.

That is it will not be treating transcribed *film dialogue* or it's spoken recording as an entity in and of itself able to be analyzed in a vacuum, but rather as part of an artistic artifact - the film - containing as it does both linguistic and non-linguistic information. Whilst the need to situate films culturally has been discussed widely (Mishan, 2004; Stempleski and Tomalin, 2001), this paper will specifically outline the advantages of exposing students to the basic key elements of film theory required to `read` a film (visual literacy) so as to enable them to develop a heuristic relationship with the language from within a filmic space. From a process perspective, a complimentary relationship with their knowledge gained from *film language* and context informing and being informed by that gained from the *film dialogue*. As such it is important for the purposes of reading this research paper to note that the use of `film` as an authentic text here refers to both the *film dialogue* as both a written and spoken text specimen of the target language and to the *film language* aspects of the film as whole communicative artifact.

Film as Authentic Text

It is not surprising that one of the most contentious issues raised in the use of film in the ESL setting to date has been the validity or otherwise of film dialogue as an authentic specimen of the spoken form of the target language (and the logical extension of that being to what extent is being an authentic text desirable in the context of spoken language learning). It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive summary of all the issues pertaining to what constitutes authentic language texts however a brief outline of the central issues are necessary insofar as they pertain to the key contentions made here in describing an holistic approach to using narrative drama film in an ESL environment, and in particular to the question of whether or not spontaneity should be considered a defining factor of authentic spoken texts.

The extent to which any text, film or otherwise, can be considered authentic within the scope of ESL research is subjective as evidenced by a multitude of definitions proposed in recent times but which generally agree that an authentic text is one made for a social purpose (Grellet, 1981; Lee, 1995; Little, Devitt, Singleton, 1989). The problem in specifically defining film dialogue or films themselves, as an authentic communicative text is even further complicated. This can be evidenced by the two very similar yet subtly different definitions of

authentic written texts for ESL environments. Kramsch (1993, p.177) states that `the term authentic refers to the way language is used in non-pedagogic, natural communication' (1993, p.177) whilst Lee (1995, p.324) contends that `a text is usually regarded as authentic if it is not written for teaching purposes, but for a real life communicative purpose, where the writer has a certain message to pass on to the reader.` Lee's definition would appear to include narrative films and film dialogues as they certainly qualify as having been made for `a real life communicative purpose' whereas Kramsch`s added qualifier of the requirement of authentic texts to be `natural communication' would appear, at first glance, to disqualify films.

In his wider analysis of the methods and criteria for choosing authentic texts in the compiling of the Collins Cobuild project, Willis (1990) makes some key points pertinent to this paper. In his extensive analysis, focused on the limitations and problems of contrived language structures authored specifically for pedagogical purposes in ESL, he describes authentic text, in the written context, as being `those produced by language users in the course of their everyday lives for some communicative purpose external to language teaching` and being `typical of real English`(p.74). However, in defining authenticity, Willis differentiates between written and spoken specimens of text in the sense that authenticity in the spoken form also be necessarily spontaneous, and claims authenticity for the spoken texts used in the building of the Collins COBUILD English project on the fact that they were `texts which were unscripted and unrehearsed`(p.74). Yet he also acknowledges the logistical and legal difficulties in obtaining such authentic spontaneous spoken text for the classroom, by admitting that these same spontaneous spoken texts used by his research group `were produced not in the course of everyday life, but at our request and in artificial circumstances.`(p.74) Willis` differentiation between what constitutes authenticity in written and spoken texts, specifically that spoken texts should be spontaneous, and his pointing to the intrinsic problems in finding authentic specimens of the latter, provide a neat segue into the key issues outlined here in the use of film in an ESL environment.

There are a number of questions and distinctions that need to be made here: film dialogue, in it's written form, quite obviously fits into the broad majority of definitions of authentic text in the sense that it is non-pedagogic and made for real life communication purposes and where the author has a message to pass onto to the reader or listener. It is however, at first glance, not typical of real English at the performance or spoken level as it is scripted and rehearsed (and edited). That is, as a written text film dialogue satisfies almost all definitions of authentic text and yet the spoken `performance' of that authentic text is clearly not, at least usually, spontaneous.

Film as Artistic Artifact

This distinction between film dialogue as a written and spoken text leads to a second distinction, and it is within the context of this second distinction that this cross-disciplinary approach to using film in ESL environments is to be read. Whilst the research regarding the differences between the written and spoken forms of film dialogue insofar as they qualify or fail as authentic texts are instructive as are the few empirical studies highlighting the differences between real life conversation and script, this paper will contend that in a pedagogical context, the more important distinction to be made is between the `film` itself as an holistic communicative artifact (of which film dialogue is only one part), and the film dialogue as separate text - in both it's spoken and written forms. Or paradoxically, that making any distinction between film dialogue and the film as a whole severely

compromises the heuristic value of the dialogue in an ESL context. The problems associated with perceived lack of spontaneity in film dialogue cannot be overlooked in qualifying film dialogue as an authentic text (this issue is examined briefly in the next chapter) but that becomes a semantic exercise if the benefits and aims of a holistic cross-disciplinary approach are adopted.

Returning for a moment to his work in The Lexical Syllabus, Willis (1990, p.127) summarizes the problematic issues that arise from text books and curriculums based on the use of inauthentic written and spoken texts (simple texts) that focus on the grammatical `form` of the target language stating that `contrived simplification of language in the preparation of (ESL language learning) materials will always be faulty, since it is generated without the guide and support of a communicative context`. This idea that authentic texts provide ESL learners with a more comprehensive and accessible guide to the target language due to the fact that they provide language in context has gained widespread support within recent academic enquiry. Among the pedagogical approaches used to support the use of authentic texts include Krashen's (1981) input hypothesis theory, which suggests that authentic texts are more comprehensible and therefore have a greater communicative value than simplified texts and `whole language instruction` (Goodman, 1986) which advances the view that ESL learners need to be introduced to enriched context such as authentic texts so that they can use functional language and see language in its entirety. Cummins's (1981, as cited in Crossley, Louwerse, McCarthy and McNamara, 2007, p.17) theory of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) suggests that rather than simplifying language, teachers should embed language in meaningful contexts through the use of authentic language and text.

I contend that film qualifies as an authentic text in that it provides a natural communicative context for the language (dialogue) contained within and that lack of spontaneity need not be an obstacle. I also contend that the employment of a cross-disciplinary approach utilizing analyses of the language not in a vacuum, but rather through the prisms of cultural context of story and cinema language itself, that authenticates the use of film. That is viewing the film in a holistic fashion as a both a communicative and cultural artifact. And it is this point which needs to be taken into account in any analysis of it's heuristic value in an ESL context, whether or not it fits the definitions of authenticity of text provided by the various second language acquisition sites of enquiry. The next section addresses some issues regarding film dialogue as alluded to above before the final chapter, which will outline a process of teaching to culturally and cinematically contextualize the language.

Film-Speak and Normalization

The notion of `Film-Speak` is attributed to that language that is designed specifically for the demands of film communication and that which is altered or at least edited with audience comprehension and the need to avoid superfluous information already provided by the visuals in mind. It is categorized not by it's form or style or by what it contains, but rather by what is left out. Alvarez-Pereyre (2011, p. 51 in Piazza, Bednarek, & Rossi) states that the fact that films are most usually commercial enterprises `explains a general tendency for universal outreach, the most salient linguistic aspect of which is speech "normalization"`. He describes this process as `a propensity to minimize phenomena such as backchannel (e.g. uh-huh), repair, overlapping, simultaneous speech and unclear words`(p.58). Quaglio (2009, p.189) in his extensive empirical analysis of the American situation comedy `Friends` adds that the process of normalization also includes filtering linguistic features associated

with vague language, such as hedges and vague reference. He concludes that `essentially (real-life) conversation is more vague, less emotional/emphatic and more narrative` than the television drama.

The normalization of spoken language that occurs during the writing, rehearsing, filming and editing process of film production result in, under the strictest definitions, film dialogue not exhibiting the speech characteristics of spontaneity. (Although it should be noted that those films made by the practitioners of neo-realism and docudrama do not suffer this problem to the same degree as the scripts are made organically in the rehearsal process in spontaneous situations). As a filmmaker and writer and having authored and directed various films for international consumption, I would argue that whilst the outcomes of these processes of normalization have the cumulative affect of making the film dialogue more linguistically intelligible from a listening perspective, and are therefore not representative of `real English` in the truest spontaneous sense, in the context of verbal and listening competency, the normalization can actually have benefits. For example, if a student is focusing on the possible meanings of dialogue based on the context of the story and the information gleaned from the film as an holistic artifact (that is from all the information that is contained in the mise en scene (frame), the soundtrack, and cultural context) as is contended in the next chapter, then the unfiltered aspects of real life spontaneous conversation can actually be a diversion and provide unnecessary `noise`.

Context and Process

It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline all salient aspects of the proposed process of using film in an ESL environment outlined in the wider study, but the key principles upon which the process is based are described here along with the essential reasoning for and benefits of such a method. If spoken film dialogue is to be denied the label of authenticity under the strictest definitions due to it's constructed and non-spontaneous nature it stands to reason that this very constructed nature of film should be highlighted in the ESL environment and used to advantage. That is, to acknowledge the film as being an artificially constructed text imitating real life situations. To see the film as an artwork made by a person (Director/Writer) within the parameters of visual film language with a purpose (or possibly even an agenda), and to design the approach to the study of the language within the film, in this context.

Motivation is often quoted as a positive aspect of using films in the classroom due to students associating the form with being entertainment and as a genuine example of the target language they wish to become proficient in. Mishan (2004) states the key motivating factors for language acquisition are integration with the target culture and/or to achieve a practical goal, and that of the two, integration is the most compelling. `It is integrative motivation, furthermore, that authentic language texts appeal to most directly; real material from the target culture which learners can perceive as being 'a stepping stone' towards their own integration with, and understanding of that culture (p.26)` However this advantage is somewhat of a double-edged sword in that it brings with it the problem of passivity.

However, if students are set the task of emotionally removing themselves and led to see the film as a human made object containing information first and foremost (film theory approach) as opposed to an entertainment object that happens to contain examples of the target language, then the possibilities for pro-active interaction with the language are increased enormously. In a real classroom situation, this in effect means to constantly

situate the student in the seat of the Director and/or Actor using basic film and inter-cultural communication theory, as opposed to situating the student as a passive spectator. Pre-feeding students excessive information to help them contextualize the film before viewing, can often add to the problems of passivity long associated with film in an educational context.

However, if the holistic film theory approach is adopted, passivity is negated as student engagement is reinforced via the new approach. The question then becomes "What information is the Director/Actor trying to tell/show you here? How is he/she using visual and body language to do that? As opposed to the passive question form, "What do you think is happening here? Why do you think so?" This approach involves the introduction of at least a rudimentary level of visual and cultural communication theory to each class including visual elements of the `mise en scene` in the former and body language and non-verbal communication in the latter. It also forces the student to express their response to a question about visual information (as opposed to about language comprehension, which follows later) and to a question that has no correct definitive answer thus allowing freedom from the fear of making mistakes.

There is much debate about whether students should watch a film in its entirety or in segments. Cohen (2009, p.104) argues that there are benefits and disadvantages to both but claiming that it is irrelevant if the film is treated as a complete artwork existing in a context. Wood (1995, in Mishan, 2004, p.218) supports the view stating that 'one-track activities, such as listening-comprehension-only strategies, fail to exploit the multi-modal potential of video movies. Not only should activities achieve a balance of target modes - including picture, movement, language, sound and captions - but they should include techniques that actively involve students in building an awareness of the interplay and various relationships that exist between the different modes.'

In film theory contextual approach described in this paper and the wider study, the process involves students being given a brief background to the film in terms of culture/country of origin, accompanied by only a rudimentary outline of the story and characters. They then examine segments of usually between 3- 6 minutes depending on the their L2 proficiency and on the amount of dialogue contained within the segment.

Structurally and in simplest terms the process that follows is this:

1. View segment twice in target language (no native or target language subtitles, visual and target language audio only)

2. Students to list all information about situation, character, motivation, relationship that they can ascertain or suppose from the segment.

3. Third viewing in target language accompanied by target language subtitles and hard copy of target language dialogue so as to be able to read and listen to the dialogue.

4. Teaching of and discussion of the example target language in the context of the film.

5. Students to complete the subtitles for their native language.

6. Segment to be viewed with native subtitles and a comparison between the official subtitles and the students' version.

This is a cross-disciplinary approach, and as such a full and complete discussion of all the relevant issues would require a broader framework than this paper provides. However, for the purposes of this introductory paper the pertinent aspects of such a process are these: Students are denied any access to even a written hard

copy of the target language being spoken in the film until the third viewing therefore necessitating that their initial analysis of the segment be based on their hearing proficiency and visual and cultural literacy alone. In the third viewing they are able to read and listen to the target language increasing comprehension enabling their undertaking the next step - an in-depth teacher-led analysis of the language (dialogue) in question - in the context of the film. It is extremely important at this stage to identify instances when particular language is appropriate in general usage or only limited contexts/relationships/situations as per in the particular film scene.

The final stage of the process in which students for homework then complete the native subtitles and compare them with the official version in a teacher-led environment in the following class has multiple purposes. In basic practical terms it provides feedback on their comprehension of the language taught in the previous lesson, however the process also introduces students to more sophisticated concepts such as the inseparability of language and culture and the merits of literal versus cultural translation in any given situation. It should be noted that the accuracy of their subtitles as compared and contrasted to the official version is not used as a measure or indeed as an assessment of their progress as these translation choices are subjective. Rather, the learning objectives are met in the *process* of the comparison.

Conclusion

There a multitude of pedagogical issues related to the use of fictional narrative films in the ESL environment. They range from but are not limited to the practical considerations such as length of films and viewing environment to heuristic and linguistic considerations such as authenticity of text, language normalization, passivity, and the problematic of subtitles, culture, and context. It is only recently however that a body of work is emerging in support of a holistic film-based approach to the use of narrative fiction in the ESL environment. This new approach, in broad terms, advocates the use of a content-based model as opposed to a purely comprehension model wherein the appreciation of film as a cultural and artistic artifact is central to the language acquisition that follows. This paper provides an introduction and general outline of the pedagogical considerations raised in a content approach. Moreover, it extends upon the key elements of a content based approach by contending that the adoption of an inter-disciplinary process that acknowledges film not only as a specimen or artifact of the target language, but as an artistic language in and of itself, can encourage and enable students to engage with language from within another discipline outside of language studies.

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A Cross-Disciplinary Approach

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Abstract: Given that the use of narrative film in second language acquisition settings is relatively new in a formal sense, it follows that the research, both theoretical and empirical, about this method is still in the embryonic stages. There have been a number of different approaches within this new area of research investigating a wide range of topics related to the use of film in the ESL or T2 classroom emanating from various disciplines including film studies, intercultural communication, linguistics and second language acquisition and it is thus not surprising that there is yet no identifiable core body of work supporting one approach at the expense of another. Empirical studies comparing film dialogue with natural spoken communication have been scarce although those that have been completed also show disparate and contradictory results. Given the diverse and contradictory nature of the conclusions, as a basis this paper will give a summary of the key and most contentious points raised in this work before embarking on it's central thesis. The key contention of this paper is focused on an area not often touched upon in the research to date. That is, the importance of the concept of film literacy, and by extension cultural literacy, in any narrative film based ESL curriculum as an integral part of the process. The paper will argue that for this process of studying film dialogue as a means to proficiency in the target language to have any heuristic value, then that process must provide students with at least a rudimentary knowledge of the key aspects of visual and film literacy. Accordingly this paper will suggest a practical process for the use of narrative film in the ESL classroom. It will argue that basic understanding of film language (film literacy) can complement and reinforce a student's ability to contextually situate the text and in the process of doing so greatly diminish any problems that may be caused by the peculiarities of `film-speak` or passivity.