

USING FILMS TO TEACH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Introduction

As teachers of general or academic English, we employ a range of media and explore a variety of topics in the process of providing stimulus and practice for our students. Yet few resources have the easy and universal appeal of film. It is perhaps the most interesting and accessible medium we can use with students to stimulate real discussion and debate in the classroom. What's more, it provides near-authentic listening material, and generates a wide range of associated reading material, from the irresistibly scannable BFI and IMDB websites, through to newspaper articles and reviews, and academic journal or book treatises.

Exploration of the culture and society of a linguistic community has always been an implicit part of language teaching, and film offers an abundance of interesting perspectives on people, periods and places. Furthermore, film dialogue is unlike most of the somewhat idealised discourse provided in coursebooks, in that it tends to reflect the whole gamut of social and regional variation in the language.

So how can we fully exploit this rich medium? This article presents two ways of building courses around film in the language departments of two universities: the University of Manchester, and Oxford Brookes University. The approaches and activities we have developed were designed to meet the objectives of the particular courses in question, but could easily be adapted for use on a range of language courses.

Background and Objectives

Both of us sought to develop these courses because we were 'film fans' and saw an opportunity to share our enthusiasm for this rich medium within the context of an academic framework. However, the objectives of the courses differ to a certain extent, leading to some divergence in approach and course content.

The course at Oxford Brookes (*Modern British Cinema and Society*) is part of the International Foundation course, which contains several 'content' modules that deal mainly with ideas, information and interpretations. In contrast, the course at Manchester (*Language and Culture through Film*) runs as part of the undergraduate LEAP (*Language Experience for All Programme*) suite of courses, and is intended as a course which builds on students' English language skills while developing academic literacy. Of course, there is no clear divide between our two approaches: students develop their expression through the discussion of ideas, and working on accuracy and range of expression can help to clarify ideas.

The target group for the courses is international students with a language level of upper-intermediate or advanced; the courses involve analysing a selection of films in terms of how they reflect and represent British culture and society. At Oxford Brookes, a selection of films from World War II to the present day reflects changes in attitudes and values; at Manchester, the focus is on contemporary films and issues. Our students analyse the films, and discuss their ideas, interpretations and opinions. They may focus on plot, characterisation, dialogue, or more visual aspects of the films, as well as the themes, issues, and the representations of culture or society that are constructed. At Manchester, the students also look at examples of social and regional linguistic variation in dialogue.

Choice of Films

Both the present writers wanted to select films which would reveal new or less familiar aspects of Britain, and perhaps challenge some preconceptions about its culture and society. Criteria for selection were threefold: a) quality, i.e. films which have critical acclaim, and for

which we have some personal affection; b) content, i.e. films with some cultural and linguistic relevance; and c) 'exploitability', i.e. films with subject matter which will appeal to students and provide sufficient 'meat' for analysis and discussion. We have made changes and additions as we have learned more about what students are interested in or can cope with.

At Manchester, films were loosely grouped under the following themes/issues:

- **Class** – *Kes; Billy Elliot; The Queen*
- **Immigration/Multicultural Britain** – *Dirty Pretty Things; East is East; This is England*
- **Popular culture** – *24 Hour Party People; Control*

At Oxford Brookes, the films were chosen to reflect the period in which they were set, and shown in chronological order:

1940s – *In which we Serve*

1950s – *I'm All Right Jack*

1960s 'New Wave' – *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning; If ...; Kes*

1980s – *My Beautiful Laundrette*

1990s – *Trainspotting; Secrets and Lies*

2000s – *Billy Elliot; The Queen*

Both approaches allow for a lot of flexibility, enabling us to further focus on certain eras, issues, events and subcultures - such as the 'swinging' 60s, Thatcherism, the 1984 miners' strike, 'skin' culture, or 'Madchester' - depending on the particular interests of the students. Many of the films we use are rooted in social realism, which, as well as being profoundly influential in British cinema, lends itself to this particular type of course. However, there is scope to explore other genres, such as costume dramas, *Ealing Comedies*, or James Bond, with its highly stylised portrayals of 'Britishness'. The beauty of working with such a dynamic medium is that it resists stagnation, with the course changing shape as new films are added or new avenues explored.

Practicalities

There are many ways of approaching the practicalities of viewing and discussing the films. At Oxford Brookes, there is a group viewing of the films; at Manchester, the films are available through the University Language Centre library. (Small group viewing facilities are available for those who prefer to watch the movie with others.) Weekly seminars take place in which students discuss the films. Students are equipped with background information, glossaries, and details of relevant articles, books and websites. At Manchester, students can access most of these directly through 'Blackboard', a web-based system designed to support traditional teaching methods. Technical or theoretical input is limited to providing students with some basic analytical tools, though some of our students prove to be informed film enthusiasts with technical knowledge of their own to contribute, sometimes educating their tutor a little along the way!

Assessment at Manchester comprises a 1000-word review or 1200-word essay (depending on level), a group presentation, and an unseen exam featuring short questions and scene analysis. At Oxford Brookes, there is a 2000-word essay and an in-class written assessment, where, students are required to demonstrate their understanding of the films and their themes or issues. There are also a number of *non-assessed* tasks through which students are able to receive substantial formative feedback on their writing.

Methods and Activities

Students are asked to complete background reading and to reflect on a series of questions which will later inform the class discussion:

1. Context Questions

- i) Where and when is the film set?
- ii) How do the films represent their time and place? (Consider clothes, decor, music, reference to important events or figures).
- iii) How is the language characterised?
- iv) Are there any accents or dialects?
- v) Are there any period features?
- vi) Is the use of authentic language important in the film?

2. Genre Questions

- i) How would you describe the genre of the film?
- ii) What are the characteristics of this genre that the film displays?
- iii) To what extent does the film *Dirty Pretty Things* conform to the thriller genre?
- iv) Does *East is East* work as a comedy whilst simultaneously tackling serious issues such as racism and domestic violence?

3 Narrative Questions

- i) Is there a narrator?
- ii) Is the narrative linear, or are there jumps or flashbacks?
- iii) What is the effect of these narrative choices?
- iv) How do the narratives of two films dealing with similar topics (e.g. *Kes* and *Billy Elliot*) compare and contrast?
- v) Do we see events through the eyes of a particular character?
- vi) Is there any use of original or documentary footage? How effective is this?
- vii) Which scenes would you identify as key?

4 Characterisation Questions

- i) Which character do you most sympathise with and why?
- ii) Analyse a particular character X:

X is a typical hero because ...	X is <i>not</i> a typical hero because ...
Reason A	Reason A
Reason B	Reason B
Reason C	Reason C

Aspects of X's character	Evidence from the film?
Characteristic A	Scene where such and such happens
Characteristic B	His/Her attitude to ...
Characteristic C	Suggested through ...

5 Meaning/Interpretation Questions

These can apply to the film as a whole. Examples are:

- i) Do you think the title of the film is well chosen?

- ii) Why do you think a particular image recurs?
- iii) What is the role of music in the film?

Alternatively, questions might apply to individual scenes, which students might be asked to analyse according to a model. Examples are:

- i) What is the dramatic significance of the scene?
- ii) How does it fit into the wider context of the film?
- iii) How does it relate to the themes and issues explored in the film?
- iv) Does it advance the plot in any way?
- v) Does it develop characterisation in any way?
- vi) What is noticeable about the language used?
- vii) Does the dialogue feature the use of slang or expletives?
- viii) Do the characters have regional accents or use dialect?
- ix) Are there any significant differences between the different characters' use of language?
- x) What effect does the overall use of language in the scene have on the viewer?
- xi) What effect is created by the *mise-en-scène*?
- xii) What effect is created with the camera work?
- xiii) How does the scene create a dramatic effect?
- xiv) Is there use of humour in the scene? How is it constructed?
- xv) What effect is created by the juxtaposition of this scene with others?

6 British Culture and Society Questions

- i) Comment on the portrayal of working class life in the films.
- ii) How is the British class structure reflected through the main characters of *In Which We Serve*?
- iii) What is the significance of the figure of Enoch Powell in *East is East*?
- iv) What is the significance of the 1984 miners' strike in *Billy Elliot*? Are the miners portrayed sympathetically? Would you say *Billy Elliot* is a 'political' film?
- v) How does the portrayal of immigrants in *Dirty Pretty Things* compare with their treatment in the British media?
- vi) How would you describe the subcultures depicted in *Trainspotting*, *24 Hour Party People* or *This is England*? How are these subcultures characterised in the films?
- vii) How is the city of Manchester portrayed in *24 Hour Party People*?
- viii) How are the machinations of government portrayed in *The Queen*?
- ix) What societal changes are apparent across films from different eras, in terms of class, attitudes to authority, work and family life, dress?

7 Language Questions

Identify lexical/grammatical features of northern English in *Kes* and *Billy Elliot*:

- a) Brother: Have you been playing my records again?
Billy: I never played **nowt**.
- b) Friend: Are you still going to ballet every week?
Billy: Yeah, but don't say **owt**.
- c) Brother: Shut it!
Billy: I'll tell me **mam** on you.
- d) Billy: She [the bird] could fly off – I **were** terrified.

Explain these examples of colloquial English in *24 Hour Party People*:

- e) Someone'll **nick** the car.
- f) It was a good **gig**.

Conclusion

We have found that the film medium pushes open a door onto British society, history and culture and presents the people, places, periods, events and speech of Britain in all their complexity; while all this is happening, students are being entertained and engaging in genuine, meaningful communication. There are very few practical textbooks on cinema which can be used in class with students: the two we know of are *Film* by Stempleski and Tomalin, published by OUP, which is essentially a methodology handbook with suggestions for EFL teachers on using short extracts of film in classroom activities, and *Teaching Contemporary British Cinema*, produced by BFI Education, and largely aimed at those teaching AS and A level Media Studies. Therefore, it has been a pleasure for each of us to create new courses and develop our own ways of exploring film. Perhaps there are others out there in the IATEFL world who are working with film in similar ways: if so, we would love to hear from you in order to share ideas on exploiting this wonderfully rich medium.

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- Film Unlimited <http://www.filmunlimited.co.uk>
- Internet Movie Database <http://www.imdb.com>

Films

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- A Taste of Honey* (Richardson, 1961)
- Billy Elliot* (Daldry, 2000)
- Control* (Corbijn, 2007)
- Dirty Pretty Things* (Frears, 2002)
- East is East* (O'Donnell, 1999)
- If...* (Anderson, 1968)
- I'm All Right Jack* (Boulting, 1959)
- In the Name of the Father* (Sheridan, 1993)
- In which we Serve* (Coward & Lean, 1942)
- Kes* (Loach, 1969)

My Beautiful Laundrette (Fears, 1985)
Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (Reisz, 1960)
Secrets and Lies (Leigh, 1996)
The Queen (Fears, 2006)
This is England (Meadows, 2006)
Trainspotting (Boyle, 1996)
24 Hour Party People (Winterbottom, 2002)

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