

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Theoretical and Curricular Background	1
Learning Goals: Disciplined and Explicit Analysis, Denaturalizing the Medium of Film	2
Example Lesson 1: Interiority and Melodramatic Form	3
Self-Training for Designing and Teaching Introductory Film Materials	4
Planning at the semester scale: Mapping out a Linked and Progressive Program of Lessons	5
Example Lesson 2: Prejudice and Documentary Form	6
Implications and Applicability	7
Micro-Bibliography	7

Introduction

My project started from the presumption that there are many different modes of teaching and studying film in a non-specialist language classroom, and that specific strategies needed to be found to productively integrate film in the **advanced** language classroom. At UC Berkeley, like at most universities, these courses largely function as core courses for majors and non-majors alike: they teach not only advanced language skills and a basic stylistic self-consciousness in L2, but also rudimentary formal and textual analysis skills. In this context, and building on my experience teaching the same skills in L1, I piloted a semester-length lesson sequence for fourth-semester Spanish, as well as adapting one of the five lessons to a fourth-semester Italian class by way of comparison.

Theoretical and Curricular Background

*Literacy is the use of socially-, historically-, and culturally-situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a **tacit** awareness of the relationships between **textual conventions** and their **contexts** of use...It draws on a wide range of cognitive abilities...on **knowledge of genres**, and on cultural knowledge.*

—Kern 2000: 16-17 (emphasis mine)

Literacy-oriented language teaching makes knowledge of discourse genres and their codes a central goal of SLA, using the term in a more flexible and sociolinguistic sense than in literary or filmic studies, where it often refers to refereed and market-driven boundaries between self-consciously cultural texts. Yet from genre studies in that latter context, we could abstract out a whole toolkit of methods for making explicit and teachable the conventions that define and distinguish genres; this is the basic function of most literary core courses, whether in L2 or in L1.

Similarly, the terms “media-literacy” and “film literacy” have, in recent years, taken on a range of uses that sometimes stray considerably from the core concept of literacy in SLA terms. For my purposes here, the students are building on a pre-existing “literacy” by training more sophisticated ways of “reading” audio-visual texts, according to the **codes and conventions** of film form. (For a recent theoretical and cognitive framework for film literacy and media literacy, see the work of the University of Western Australia's Mark Pegrum, in particular his 2008 article on film literacy.)

This article will show how advanced language students can be taught to read those “codes and conventions” critically **in tandem with** linguistic and literary ones, and how reflexivity in any one of the three modes **supplements and reinforces** reflexivity in the other two. Rudimentary literary analysis is usually the central (but rarely the exclusive) occasion for building “tacit awareness” of conventions and discourse genres at the advanced language level. Students’ sophistication and reflexivity in “reading” films could (and should) develop **in tandem with** their reading of literature across this bridge.

Film’s utility lies primarily in its **familiarity**—unlike literature, its codes and formal conventions are almost universally known by both instructors and students. Many students come from high schools where literature and film were already taught in tandem in L1. Yet the downside to this familiarity is habit: in this case, habits of uncritical reading which treat film as “transparent” (making stylistic analysis counterintuitive) and as entertainment (making students resist close or technical reading). There is an additional affective filter specific to L2, namely that students assume the purpose of any and all film viewing in the L2 classroom to be purely linguistic and/or cultural, and focus primarily or exclusively on parsing dialogue and cultural details. The assertion that film is a medium to be dissected as carefully as literature or music is, for many students of language, as off-topic as it counter-intuitive.

The pay-off, however, to overcoming these habits and affective filters is a kind of “A-ha moment” when students see this familiar, “light” medium through more critical and transcultural eyes. This is achieved through an incremental process of “denaturalizing” and making explicit the sometimes transcultural and sometimes culturally-specific conventions of the medium, the rhetorical and stylistic choices that go into making a film, and the unconscious cognitive processes that viewing a film entail. The stark contrast between unconscious and “college-level” viewing, achievable in a matter of days at the expense of depth, is central to much L1 film teaching at the introductory and core-course level. This is why I sought to make materials that could replicate those little breakthroughs in the advanced L2 context, without requiring the instructor to be particularly well-versed in film as an academic discipline.

Learning Goals: Disciplined and Explicit Analysis, Denaturalizing the Medium of Film

Key to training good critical thinking and analytical reading is an organization of the component skills of both along a kind of spectrum from internal to external. Using standard film-studies terminology, we could define the spectrum for film interpretation in particular as follows:

Figure 1: Levels of interpretation of a film

Diegetic	Language, events, and meaning within the fictional universe of a film
Extradiegetic	Form, style, design, production
Rhetorical	Intended interpretation or message
Cultural & Transcultural	Original audience's cultural context vs. L2 classroom context

Language courses earlier in language sequences often jump pragmatically from diegetic to rhetorical or cultural analysis, leaving formal analysis for upper-division courses and/or core classes outside the department. In my specific curricular context the final course of the language sequence was the most appropriate “bridge” to those core-skills courses. Rather than emphasizing the new skills of formal analysis as primarily learning goal of the course, however, I think it’s more useful (and manageable for the students) to instead stress the continuity between the four levels **as an end unto itself**. The linear and incremental movement from the text itself to cultural reflections is a habit of thought that makes learning and teaching formal analysis much easier in future courses.

Here are some principles that I tried to follow in writing my materials, and which I believe could be generalized as truisms of this kind of course:

- 1.) Emphasize depth (connecting formal to rhetorical and cultural analysis) over breadth (exhaustive formal analysis).
- 2.) Emphasize argumentation as goal of analysis, tying discussions to writing or other argumentative exercises
- 3.) Be explicit, reflexive, and responsive about the emphasis and focus of all film lessons and exercise.
- 4.) Fine-tune exercises along the way, responding to student interest and difficulties.

Of course, every department’s sequence and learning goals will be different, so a useful exercise is to assess, in terms of the levels of analysis (from diegetic to meta- or trans-cultural), those courses that the students for whom you are designing materials take before and after the target course. To this end, I recommend filling out the chart provided here as “Figure 2”:

→ [Figures 2 & 4](#)

Example Lesson 1: Interiority and Melodramatic Form

Having sketched out those guiding principles, let me jump into an example of what constitutes one of these five lessons. This is the first of five lessons from the sequence I made for Spanish 4 in fall semester of 2012 with Katy Lambe. I’ll describe the planning that went into the lesson after walking you through it. The three handouts can be downloaded or opened in another window here:

→ [Example Lesson 1](#)

→ [Link to LFLFC Clip #23511](#) (requires LFLFC account)

The first page is a pre-viewing handout, taken home the day before viewing the clips, which contextualizes the clip enough to be able to watch it independently of the film from which it was excerpted. It presents context and vocabulary for diegetic parsing, but also for exegetic and cultural level as well in the last box. The handout also sketches out the **structure** of discussion to take place the next day as an **active**, not passive, exercise with film; this is an important precedent to set explicitly early on, and reiterate at each lesson, to resist the affective filter of film as passive “entertainment.”

The second page is a lesson-plan written for the instructor. It includes a rough time breakdown and timetable for writing on the blackboard: discussion should feel pre-structured yet open. Note that the class watches the clip twice, having been explicitly told to read the film diegetically the first time and exegetically the second time drives home the point that active viewing is about bringing specific questions to viewing, just as analytic reading of a literary text would. Note also that in the blackboard schedule, the topics are **numbered** to progress up the analytical spectrum (and to signal that directionality to the students). **Terminology** is never asked for explicitly in the questions, but the instructor should try to re-use any terminology volunteered by the students to reinforce terminological precision, while also encouraging dialogue between students’ interpretations. Topics and questions are hierarchized by importance/necessity, and include multi-part questions, optional questions, etc. This first film assignment in the program establishes the expectation that film discussions will lead directly to thematic discussions and active, argumentative exercises.

The synthetic exercise for the next day puts rhetorical and transcultural questions on same level, and asks very open-ended interpretive questions of the students. Since this is the first of the five lessons, early in the semester, little thematic complexity is demanded of the students, but the form of future lessons is driven home: pre-loading, close and repeat viewing, open-ended formal discussion, and then more focused, thematic conclusions.

Self-Training for Designing and Teaching Introductory Film Materials

Clearly, this kind of teaching puts substantial demands on the instructor and syllabus designer: flexibility, subtle control over the direction of open discussion, familiarity with the forms of analysis taught and common pitfalls in their application, familiarity with analogous analytical skills the students bring to the classroom (literature in particular). Many instructors and lesson-designers report feeling **underprepared** to “teach film” without a sound methodological and terminological background, perceiving film studies as a monolithic and foreign academic discipline. On the contrary, however, it can be quite easy to acquire such a background well beyond what **this** context requires with a little self-training and reflection. There is no shortage of materials for giving yourself that background, of course, not only in the literature of film studies, but also in the literature of second-language acquisition (most of it geared towards more introductory levels) and of L1 composition/rhetoric pedagogy (primarily focused on the core skills of analysis, adaptation theory, and on the analogy to literary analysis).

I recommend a self-training program that could fit neatly into a single intercession or part-time week. First, read Jessica Sturm’s article “Using Film in the L2 Classroom” (Foreign Language Annals, 2012),

which documents a pedagogy course aimed at preparing SLA instructors for film teaching. Then, read the “Signs and Syntax” unit from James Monaco’s **The Language of Film** (most recent edition, 2012), a standard film-studies textbook for introductory/core courses. To front-load the second of these readings and structure the rest of the week’s film-viewing and analytical practice (ideally done with as many interlocutors as possible), I recommend printing out this schematic overview of film analysis basics, adapted primarily from James Monaco:

→ [Figure 3](#)

The primary function of this chart is to serve the self-training reader of Monaco as a kind of checklist, facilitating the expansion of Monaco’s often speedy crash-course into a set of possible student exercises and micro-breakthroughs of denaturalization. Many instructors would benefit from translating this checklist into L2; doing so in particularly non-technical, non-threatening language can even yield a document useful to self-directed or extra-motivated students, who want guidance going beyond what’s strictly necessary for the class exercises and writing assignments.

The distinction between a more student-friendly version of the checklist and the “teacher’s edition” of the original, and between teaching a family of related topics and more slowly addressing one or two digestible subtopics, can be easy to lose in the enthusiasm of teaching film—the latter, however, is far more advisable and productive in this context. I like to think of this restraint as the teaching of “**the tip of the iceberg**”: an instructor should gesture towards how much further formal analysis can extend and related topics, but s/he definitely shouldn’t reward students who outstrip their classmates or bring in familiarity from prior courses. This kind of restraint differs little from the analogous one required of instructors teaching literary analysis at the same level.

Planning at the semester scale: Mapping out a Linked and Progressive Program of Lessons

When embarking on a semester-scale plan, it’s important to resist the temptation to teach formal analysis as an end unto itself. It’s a Pandora’s box! Instead, designers and instructors should always direct form to intention, subtext, and/or interpretation. Structure exercises around a small set of stylistic choices that reinforce one another and can readily be connected to **relevant** rhetorical and cultural meanings. Think of the goal of each lesson as one, distinct, manageable chunk of “Formal analysis with the training wheels on” – suggest the relevance clearly to the students, and invite them to go beyond your suggestions and the structure of the exercise only after they’ve made the most salient connections and basic moves.

A quick note on **terminology**: I find it’s best to give students a little more than they need upfront and let them choose (individually and collectively) how much of it to use. Collaborative analysis can be more natural with film, which is habitually viewed collectively. One benefit of this relatively effortless collaboration is that terminology tends to be shared between students, who pick up and build on what others before them have said. When I visited Anna-Maria Belleza’s Italian 4 classroom, I was quite impressed by the results of telling the students that they would be graded on how constructively and

accurately they built on each other's analysis. It was a clear example of the old pedagogical mantra: "rubric and ye shall receive!"

Having dwelt perhaps too long on generalities, I present an overview of my program of lessons, the selection process for which was primarily topic-driven. The chart linked to below was filled out from left to right, importantly—the spread of regions, time periods, and genres was less important than the analytical learning goals. I would encourage designers of such programs to make explicit for their current and future instructors the criteria that lead to the selection of a given set of film clips and the design of a given set of lessons. Depending on the level of syllabus modification allowed and encouraged by each department, it can be crucial that instructors know these criteria so that substitutions* won't result in straying from standards and learning goals with respect to other sections or semesters.

→ [Figure 4](#)

*Note: Substitutions can be found by searching the BLC's Library of Foreign Language Film Clips by topic.

Example Lesson 2: Prejudice and Documentary Form

An example from later in the sequence might help show how much more is demanded of students later in the semester. The fourth of the five lessons explicitly asks students to connect style with persuasion and bias (as part of their syllabus unit on "Prejudices").

→ [Link to LFLFC Clip #11269](#) (requires LFLFC account)

→ [Example Lesson 2](#)

The first page shows the pre-viewing exercise, which asks students to plan ahead to argumentative assignments and to look in the clip specifically for formal "evidence" of bias and intention. Since this is a documentary, this could be fairly counter-intuitive to the students if lessons 2 and 3 hadn't focused on the rhetorical pay-offs of stylistic choices, sound design, art direction, and montage.

The second page focuses on the speakers, rather than on the director and editor: it asks students to analyze metaphorical language as persuasive and polemical. It then returns to style by asking students to parse perspective and feeling as stylistic effects. The exercise finishes by foregrounding cultural subtexts, which lead directly into the synthetic homework exercise.

This last exercise asks the students to synthesize these observations on style and persuasion into arguments for or against the topic of the excerpted chapter of the documentary (namely, the decriminalization of medicinal coca within Bolivia). The high-level interpretive questions that structure the debate are, of course, given to the students after the viewing to prepare for the synthetic debate overnight. These questions do not explicitly refer to the film's style, but students are, by this late in the semester, accustomed to thinking of films as debatable texts and analysis of them as evidence.

Implications and Applicability

As I've mentioned before, departments and curricula vary greatly, and simply plugging these materials into the courses of another department uncritically would hardly be useful. The materials presented here as presented as examples for better understand the process of their creation—I strongly recommend filling out Fig. 2 (linked above) and being in dialogue with curricular authorities before embarking on such a process. This account will, I hope, inspire instructors to self-train and author their own lessons, if not entire programs for entire departments, at least for themselves. Similarly, I would hope that, like Jessica Sturm's article, mine could be a springboard to productive discussions and exercises in pedagogy courses and other teacher-training contexts.

The style of teaching and learning that I've focused on here could lend itself to many possible permutations outside of a conventional language semester-sequence. The sequence of lessons could even be assigned (or published on a department website) as "loose" curriculum for self-directed intercession study, or as supplemental materials for independent studies and/or film courses. Bridge courses and elective "film clubs" could also benefit from these kinds of lessons and materials.

As language departments are increasingly called on to teach upper-division film courses, and to integrate film into their cultural offerings more generally, it is an open question as to when exactly students can acquire the skills of college-level film analysis, particularly given the zero-sum mentality imposed by institutional austerity, rising rates of student employment, and shrinking class-time per unit/semester. I would hope, however, that the analogy to literature and the utility in training cultural analysis generally could justify the class time "distraction". I believe that taught the way I've presented it, film takes little time away from those other pursuits, and helps students address them more reflexively, maturely, and self-consciously.

Micro-Bibliography

Culture and Literacy in SLA

- Kern, Rick. *Literacy and Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.

Film theory and writing

- Corrigan, Timothy. *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*. New York: Longman, 1998, 2010.
- Corrigan, Timothy, and Patricia White. *The Film Experience: An Introduction*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004. Print.
- Monaco, James. *How to Read a Film: The World of Movies, Media, and Multimedia : Language, History, Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981, 1992, 2000, 2009.

Film in SLA and Applied Linguistics Research

- Kaiser, Mark. "New Approaches to Exploiting Film in the Foreign Language Classroom," in *L2 Journal*, 3:2 (2011). Retrieved from: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/6568p4f4>

- O'Halloran, Kay. "Visual Semiosis in film", in *Multimodal Discourse Analysis*. London: Continuum, 2004.
- Pegrum, Mark. "Film, Culture and Identity: Critical Intercultural Literacies for the Language Classroom," in *Language and Intercultural Communication*, vol. 8:2 (2008), pp. 136-154.
- Sturm, Jessica L. "Using Film in the L2 Classroom: A Graduate Course in Film Pedagogy", in *Foreign Language Annals*, Vol. 45:2 (2012), pp. 246–259.