

Harnessing the Power of Electronic Media: Incorporating Film in the Introductory Czech Curriculum

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I received a Berkeley Language Center Fellowship in Spring 2017, for the purpose of developing interactive materials for the Introductory Czech sequence I teach at UC Berkeley. With the increase in the availability of on-line resources, opportunities for learning have been changing dramatically in recent years: our students have grown up searching the internet for information and our options for creating course sites are ever more sophisticated. Film resources, such as those made available through the Berkeley Language Center's Library of Foreign Language Film Clips (LFLFC), make it possible to work with films in detail and on multiple levels, without sacrificing classroom time¹.

The BLC Fellowship enabled me to develop a series of interactive materials based on clips from the 1996 Czech film *Kolja*, directed by Jan Svěrák and starring his father, veteran actor Zdeněk Svěrák. The clips were made available to students via Berkeley's bCourses website from clips created in the LFLFC. Some of these materials were used this Spring in the second semester of the introductory Czech language sequence, others were created too late for use this year but are slated to be used next Spring. The general style for the assignments will be used in developing similar materials using other films, both for the first semester of this course sequence and for Berkeley's second-year sequence, Continuing Czech.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have worked closely with Rick Kern, Mark Kaiser, and Chika Shibahara of the BLC and with the other fellows in our group, Jann Ronis, Kathryn Levine, and Christina Schwartz. The expertise of the BLC organizers, the synergy in the group, and the insights of the other members contributed greatly to the development of my project, as, often, did the simple fact that one or another of them was working on an aspect of language or culture in their own linguistic area.

There are clear benefits to using film in the language curriculum. Most obviously, viewing a film in the language being learned introduces students to aspects of the culture and to some cultural figures, at a minimum in the form of the director and the main actors, and allows them to hear a reasonable facsimile of

¹ This is particularly relevant for Czech and some of the other less commonly taught languages at Berkeley, since the structure of the introductory courses has been changed from a five day a week format to three days a week with an additional hour of required interactive work.

normal conversation, not limited by the constraints of the specific grammar and vocabulary being taught at any given point in a language course. This strength is, of course, also a potential weakness, particularly at the introductory level. Though I have used film for many years, I have often felt constrained by the recognition of just how challenging it can be for beginning students to try to decode the fast, often colloquial, and sometimes barely audible speech in films. Therefore, part of the task consisted of breaking down film sequences into comprehensible segments and structuring activities to provide linguistic support while encouraging cultural exploration.

Another strength of film is that it introduces students to a broader range of characters than they would discuss if simply describing their families, friends, teachers, or public figures. These are characters whose manners, personalities, and actions can be referred to, using a wide range of vocabulary, unhampered by possible reluctance to speak ill of actual people. Students often have not assimilated vocabulary for describing human character and personality beyond such simple concepts as good, bad, happy, sad, and nice. Admittedly, toward the end of the first semester, my textbook materials give students a fairly lengthy list of words they *might* want to use to describe friends or relatives, but those words are easily forgotten, unless students can associate them with an actual person--and they may reasonably desire not to ascribe negative characteristics to people they know. Film offers a shared experience of many different personalities, with all students responding to the same characters and actions. Their interpretations and reactions may vary somewhat, but they will have shared points of reference. Moreover, introducing vocabulary in an emotionally evocative context increases the likelihood that it will be retained through association with the visual and visceral impact of the film.

Finally, film provides opportunities for students to observe many aspects of culture and potentially also to explore relevant history. Clearly, some films are richer in large C and small c culture and in historical reference than others. In this regard, *Kolja* makes a very good resource, abounding in historical references, examples of large c musical Culture, and, almost by definition, representations of small c culture.

To maximize overall understanding of the material to be used in the detailed assignments, I chose to have an initial assignment in which students watch the entire film with English subtitles, then do some basic internet research on the director and main actor. Subsequent assignments are based on short clips of a few

minutes duration and consist of a variety of activities to develop linguistic and cultural competence. In successive weeks, students receive links to these clips through bCourses, without subtitles but with dictionary forms provided for words heard in the clip. Clip based assignments are worked on over the course of a week or two, depending on the complexity of the activities and the length of the clip. The final assignment then consists of watching the entire film without subtitles, preparing for questions relating to the film which will appear on the final. There is also a fairly comprehensive assignment, given once students are well into working with the film, on basic history of the Czech lands in the twentieth century, with both a linguistic and a historical component.

Preparing some of these assignments meant relinquishing certain preconceptions about how to use film and how much (or little) students in an introductory class could do with the medium. It required, in part, letting go of the purely verbal aspects of film. A film-based assignment can be multi-faceted, calling on students' visual and visceral responses, as well as asking them to draw on existing linguistic knowledge. It can also provide the immediate impetus for specific kinds of internet research. Here I will discuss the use of film both as a basis for listening and comprehension activities drawing on existing knowledge and as a starting point for exploration in the wider world of the internet.

The assignments generally consist of a bloc of related activities centered on a short segment of the film. These activities address a range of language skills (listening, speaking, writing, and even reading) as well as cultural and historical issues. Here I will be discussing primarily the activities based around a single clip, since they cover most of the types of activities developed, then turn to some broader issues which students can follow throughout the film.

The particular clip from which I draw examples here is visually, linguistically, and culturally dense, so it offers a lot of opportunities. I will briefly describe the background of the film and the clip, to provide context. The film begins some time in late 1988, the year just prior to the Velvet Revolution. Prague musician František Louka, confirmed bachelor and acclaimed concert cellist, reduced to playing at funerals after offending a petty bureaucrat, has been talked into a fake marriage with a young Russian woman who wants Czech citizenship. When she suddenly emigrates to the West, he finds himself unexpectedly father to a five-year-old monoglot Russian child, the Kolja of the title. The clip, from the protagonist's early period of

adjusting to his new role, shows the pair at the cellist's mother's house in a village. She is unaware of his marriage, of the financial difficulties which drove him to it, and of the problems it has recently produced, as he evidently routinely hides from her his difficult circumstances. In desperation, however, he is attempting to get her to take the boy for a few days while he finds someone else to look after him.

In the clip, he lies to her, telling her that Kolja is the child of Yugoslav musicians. While they eat a meal together, she comments negatively on modern parents who, she believes, have turned their son over to hers, in passing giving backhanded praise to her son for not having had children and devoting himself to his art. Despite her reservations, she is moving toward accepting the proposal to look after the boy for a while. The musician, attempting to amuse the child, dusts off an old puppet theater, likely a relic of his own youth, and begins to set it up. Kolja is momentarily intrigued but becomes distracted by the arrival of a convoy of Russian trucks on the street. The vibrations caused by the trucks shake the house, rattling the mantelpiece so that a photograph there falls over. The child rushes out and greets the youthful Russian soldiers, who play with him and talk with him in Russian. Mr. Louka hurries out to retrieve Kolja, but the damage is done: his mother now accuses him of lying to her and refuses to care for a Russian child. He acknowledges the lie but begins to argue that not all Russians are alike, at which point they are interrupted by one of the soldiers, who rings the doorbell and asks permission to wash his hands. Louka's mother wants him to say they are not at home, obviously not the case, since he has just gone out to pick up the boy. She then proposes the lie that the water is not running, which he duly repeats to the soldier, who apologizes and departs. In the background, Kolja turns on the water tap and announces loudly in Russian that the water is running. This is one of several scenes which demonstrate the interintelligibility of these two Slavic languages. Other scenes, such as one which plays on the divergent meanings of the words *krásný* (in Czech, *beautiful*) and □□□□□□ (in Russian, *red*) emphasize the opportunities for misunderstandings as meanings of apparent cognates have diverged over time.

The students get this clip for two weeks, since it was fairly long (almost five minutes) and a variety of activities and assignments are based on it. They are able to watch it as many times as they need within that period, but without the English subtitles.

We will now look at some of the types of questions and activities relating to this clip. Translations are provided here for some of the language-oriented questions, though the students read the questions only in Czech. They are presented here in nonlinear fashion, to focus on the types of activities rather than the sequence of the individual assignments. That said, I believe part of the value of the assignment for the students is that it follows the storyline in a linear fashion but calls on them to shift their attention away from the linear development of the story toward issues of history and culture, then back to the film as they rewatch the clip to deal with specific questions regarding the language used. They are asked to respond in part based on their own emotional responses and existing knowledge, in part on knowledge they acquire through internet research.

Here, I am breaking down the types of questions thematically, rather than showing them in the order in which students encountered them.

Questions relating to vocabulary development and expression of personal opinion:

Jaký je maminčin dům? Kde je ten dům? Je to větší nebo menší než dům nebo byt vaší rodičů? *What is his mother's house like? Where is this house? Is it bigger or smaller than your parent's house or apartment?* Possible answers are a) malý (*small*), b) velký (*big*), c) světlý (*bright*), d) temný (*dark*), and e) staromódní (*old-fashioned*).

The initial question uses a Czech personalized possessive, derived from the word for mom, *maminka*, but following a special declension pattern. This is a grammatical form introduced early in the semester, so the question functions also as grammar review. The question itself calls for a response to purely visual input. The words for *small* and *big* are first-semester vocabulary, shown here in parentheses to indicate that they are not glossed for the students, two new words, *bright* and *dark*, are glossed, and the last word, *old-fashioned*, can be deduced by students from known vocabulary. The village itself is familiar to students from earlier parts of the film, so the location of the house is known. The last part of this block of questions allows for subsequent discussion in the classroom, with other possible descriptive vocabulary and comparisons. Students can also be encouraged to seek out other appropriate vocabulary on their own, using internet sources or physical dictionaries.

More interesting questions in this vein can be raised about individual characters. For this scene, students are asked *Jaká je Louková maminka? Vyberte všechny odpovědi, které jsou podle Vás správné. What*

is Louka's mother like? Choose all answers which are, in your opinion, correct. The options offered are a) sympatická (more or less cognate), b) zatrpklá *embittered*, c) manipulující (meaning can be derived), d) rozhodná *strong-minded, decisive*, e) dobrosrdčná *soft-hearted, good-hearted*, and f) podezřivý *suspicious, distrustful*. Some of these adjectives describe her well, some are unlikely, though student responses were surprisingly varied. The character of Mr. Louka's mother is, in fact, an interesting question. She is clearly embittered and suspicious, being old enough to have lived through both the German and the Soviet occupations. In the few scenes in which she appears, she is quite manipulative and plays on some kind of sibling rivalry between the cellist and his older brother, successful in immigration. She is seen here as both decisive and soft-hearted, though her bitterness and anger are dominant. Students can also be asked to suggest other descriptive adjectives, if they find these inadequate to express their own opinions. Use of the special possessive *Loukova*, which is based on the musician's last name *Louka* is emphasized here as well, and serves to remind students of the manner of forming such adjectives from masculine rather than feminine nouns.

This type of question is quite basic but has wide applicability. In a later scene in which Mr. Louka undergoes a hostile police interrogation, it is used to ask students how they think the child Kolja thinks of the interrogator, based on his physical response during the interrogation. The linguistic purpose of such questions is to build vocabulary through repetition, suggestion, and exploration.

Visual elements referencing cultural and historical themes

Certain important themes can be accessed through visual references to culture and history. In this clip, the busts and photograph on the mantelpiece are significant personalities from Czechoslovak history. The photograph which falls over is that of Milan Rastislav Štáfánik, a key Slovak figure in the creation of the first Czechoslovak Republic. Students are asked to locate images of Masaryk, Beneš, and Štáfánik as part of the assignments accompanying this clip. Through introduction of the puppet theater, the scene opens the way for questions regarding the role of the puppet theater (*loutkové divadlo*) in Czech history. The instruction the students receive is to enter the term *loutkové divadlo* in a search bar to learn about its significance. In fact, it played a part in keeping the Czech language alive during the period of Austrian domination. However, the puppet theater, in juxtaposition with the presence of the Russian soldiers on the street outside, also represents

The presence of the Russian soldiers², as well as Kolja's own role as the smallest Russian occupier, opens the way for students to research the history of the Czech lands in the twentieth century.

Film dialog as the basis for cloze exercises

Film dialog can also be used as a listening exercise. At the introductory level, transcription of entire scenes is too difficult, particularly when dealing with the sound shifts between spoken and formal Czech. Therefore, I have turned to the use of cloze exercises.

With this particular clip, I created an extensive cloze exercise, for use late in the semester, which also functions as a grammar review. The exercise here serves a number of purposes: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, comparison of spoken and written Czech, with emphasis on contractions and spoken variants. The passage includes Mr. Louka's statement that Kolja is a Yugoslav, allowing students to focus on why Kolja might be more acceptable to Mr. Louka's mother as a Yugoslav than as a Russian, which paves the way for an internet research activity, exploring the history of Yugoslavia as a relatively independent communist state. Other valuable functions of the cloze exercise include vocabulary review and enhancement, grammar review and practice with the condition, which is the topic of study at that point in the textbook.

Motivating historical and cultural exploration through film

This densely packed film is particularly well-suited to give students the impetus to explore Czech history, which the exercises shamelessly exploit. Knowing the history will give greater appreciation for the depth of the film and, conversely, delving into the meaning of things seen in the film will give greater insight into Czech history. There is a background assignment for the film overall, from which the following sets of questions are drawn. It asks students to respond to a series of questions based on prior knowledge and internet research. Included among the questions are: In what year did the Czechoslovak Republic come into being?³ Find on the internet pictures or statues of these three people: Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Milan Rastislav

² Also intriguing is the little we see of these young Russian soldiers. All they want is to wash their hands, like good children. Yet they are the occupiers, as little Kolja stands as an occupying army of one in the life of the musician. The potential danger of their presence is underscored by the Russian sign on one of their trucks, *Danger Flammable*. In fact, in the scene, the soldier is perfectly polite and rather shy. The question given to students is simply does this surprise you. A creative assignment stemming from this asks students to write a scene in which Mr. Louka describes the exchange with the Russian soldiers, his mother, and Kolja to one of his musician friends.

³ They are also asked if this was before the First World War, during the First World War, after First World War, or whether it depends on your perspective. (These choices use several different prepositions, which require the use of different case forms of the Czech phrase *první světová válka*, the First World War.)

Štřfánik, Edvard Beneš and print them out.⁴ In what year did the Germans invade Czechoslovakia? When did the second world war end in Europe? What part of Czechoslovakia was liberated by the American army and what part by the Soviet army? Did these armies remain in Czechoslovakia after 1945? What happened in Czechoslovakia in 1948? Was the Soviet army there then? What happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968? What was the Prague Spring? From when to when did the Soviet Army remain in Czechoslovakia? When did the Velvet Revolution take place?

An aspect of linguistic culture which features prominently in this film is *tykání* versus *vykání*, the use of informal and formal verb forms and pronouns in addressing an interlocutor. Recurring questions seek to sensitize students about the social and emotional value of *ty* vs. *vy* forms. Building awareness of the distinction between *ty* and *vy* throughout a series of exercises transfers into the classroom with the question whom do you address as *ty* and whom as *vy* in the classroom, how would you address different people in the Czech Republic? The concept itself is important for enabling understanding of a particularly dramatic scene which takes place during a police interrogation after the flight of Mr. Louka's wife. He is interrogated by two officials, the "good cop" Pokorný and the "bad cop" Novotný, in the presence of a bored young office worker. Students are asked, based on both a cloze exercise and the viewing, to answer a series of questions, including about the personalities of the interrogators and the young female office worker. The cultural focus, however, is precisely on *tykání* vs. *vykání*. When the students have seen the film with subtitles, the substance of the key speech by the interrogator Novotný loses a lot of impact, since Mr. Louka simply objects that what the interrogator says is pretty rude. In the Czech, however, Novotný has suddenly switched from *vykání* to *tykání* as he threatens Mr. Louka with imprisonment. Students are asked, among other things, to describe not their own attitudes to Novotný but what the boy Kolja must think of him, which can be seen in the child's response, which is to run protectively to Mr. Louka, an emotional breakthrough in their relationship. The last content question in the exercise refers to a major breakthrough for the young Kolja: what are the first words of Czech spoken by Kolja? In fact, as they leave the interrogation, he first repeats Mr. Louka's lament, *Tak to bysme mřli*,

⁴ These are the people on the mantelpiece. Masaryk is the first president of the CS, Štřfánik the Slovak leader involved in the formation of the country, Beneš also an early leader and president after Masaryk, head of government in exile during the war.

then the snide greeting of the interrogator Novotný *milej zlatej*. Surprised and pleased, Mr. Louka tells him, a few more interrogations and you will be speaking Czech.

Other topics such as Czech attitudes toward death and burial, the importance of music in Czech culture, the existence and role of Radio Free Europe, and explorations of shared vocabulary among Slavic languages have been added to the curriculum via clip assignments.

Generally, the exercises encourage students to begin their research using Czech language sites, a reading exercise, but, given their linguistic limitations, to switch to another language when necessary for better understanding. (Overall, I encourage students to use the language switching capabilities of Wikipedia for vocabulary building: they can look up a concept using the English term, then click in the left sidebar on *eština* to get the Czech.) Since the adult protagonist is a musician, other research topics are music and musical instruments (the basic vocabulary for playing instruments has been taught in the first semester). A fairly early listening exercise asks students to transcribe a few words of a song sung at a cremation, then put their transcription into a search bar, thereby discovering that it is Dvořák's setting of the Lord's Prayer to music. Since Radio Free Europe is heard in the background of several scenes, another independent research activity asks students to research the history of the broadcast. The numerous interactions between the Czech speaking musician and the Russian speaking child generate assignments.

In practice, students need to spend a considerable amount of time working with the clips, both for listening comprehension and for internet research. However, working independently with the clips is interesting and exciting. Among other things, it gives them hope that they can come to understand not the Czech of textbook dialogs or grammatical examples but the Czech they will hear on the streets and in cafes. In addition, it opens the way for independent learning, by encouraging internet searches on specific topics. Moreover, if we trust the evidence of the fictional Kolja, emotional involvement with characters can lead to breakthroughs in the use of language. While film, *an sich*, as not a real life experience, it is one of the closest approaches we can make to giving students emotionally meaningful linguistic experiences.

Resources:

***Kolja*. 1996. Directed by Jan Svěrák. Made available in whole and as clips through the Berkeley Language Center Library of Foreign Language Film Clips.**

Svrák, Zdenk. *Kolja*. Primus. 1996.