

Using Foreign Film in Initial Teaching Training: Être et Avoir – Intercultural Beacon and Pedagogic Inspiration?

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INTRODUCTION

With the statutory requirement, from September 2014, to teach foreign languages at Key Stage Two (KS2) (Department for Education, 2014), there is a need for all Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers to develop and enhance the foreign language aspect of trainees' experience. Moreover, programmes of study at both KS2 and KS3 should place positive emphasis on the benefits of foreign language study, including the intercultural competence learners can develop.

Languages are part of the cultural richness of our society and the world in which we live and work. Learning languages contributes to mutual understanding, a sense of global citizenship and personal fulfilment. Pupils learn to appreciate different countries, cultures, communities and people. By making comparisons, they gain insight into their own culture and society (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2007, p. 165).

Film as a Gateway to Cultural Experience

Whilst many Higher Education Institutions (HEI) offer language courses and training to non-specialists, the focus is usually on the development of language skills (Gallagher-Brett & Canning, 2011). Within teacher training courses, the intense nature of programmes of study and limited time available for foreign language work, require emphasis on encouraging students to develop autonomy in working with foreign languages and an understanding of the relevant target language culture, in order to be able to support work in Key Stage Two. Therefore, is it possible for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers to help trainees to develop this culture specific knowledge?

► Key Point

Cultural artefacts, such as films, can be powerful educational tools to develop students' linguistic and cultural awareness.

One of the ways in which this can be addressed is by using cultural artefacts, such as film, to stimulate discussion and develop both linguistic and cultural awareness. Film can enhance learning from a number of points of view, including:

1. Supporting learning the language **in** the film.
2. Enhancing visual literacy i.e. learning the language **of** the film.
3. Making cross cultural comparisons and gaining intercultural understanding.

The third aspect resonates strongly at national level with the current KS2 Programme of Study:

Learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures. A high-quality languages education should foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world. (Department for Education, 2013, para.1)

How then might this work in practice? In order to develop undergraduate students' language learning skills, and motivated by a real desire to get trainees to "lift their heads up" and celebrate the cultural richness of the world around them, the Modern Foreign Language (MFL) specialist ITE team at Liverpool Hope University proposed a period of focused study on the French film **Être et Avoir** (Philibert, 2002). Research has shown that a well-chosen film can be a powerful educational tool, allowing both exploration of scenarios and identification with the characters depicted (Champoux, 2007).

Être et Avoir (To Be and to Have)

Être et Avoir is an account of a year in the life of a rural French primary school where 12 pupils across KS1 and KS2 are taught by Monsieur Georges Lopez, a teacher of some 35 years' experience. Commercially **Être et Avoir** achieved huge success, was seen by more than two million people in France in the year of its release, was shown at the Cannes Film Festival and released in seventeen other countries. It was acknowledged as a significant cinematic event, which was culturally and critically relevant in French society.

This thoroughly delightful documentary by Nicolas Philibert has a miraculous simplicity and clarity - and yet displays its own deeply intelligent sort of sophistication. (Bradshaw, 2003, para 1).

The film itself has many episodes that convey a keen sense of life in a rural French school. The scenes include an evocative, wintry introduction, a rickety school bus driving through the snow, the interior of the school where the pupils work round the wood-burner, the infants learning to write and make pancakes, one of the children working at home on a farm, etc. All these scenes provide learners with ample opportunity for focused discussion on cultural features and for exploring the similarities and differences with their own experience. As

the subject matter is an everyday account of primary school life, the film has potential for use both by the teacher to provide pupils with insights into French life and **for** the teacher to provide personal cultural and language development. With this in view, *Être et Avoir* might well seem to be an ideal vehicle to provide cultural insight.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

The film was first used as a medium for teaching in 2014 with ten second year students enrolled on the BA (Primary) with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) Special Interest Group. The trainees were asked to reflect on their learning from a sequence of sessions, in the form of a viva. The outcomes of this viva focused on promoting intercultural understanding. Trainees were given the following guidance prior to the viva.

Please come prepared to talk about how you would exploit/use the film in class for promoting intercultural understanding. Be prepared to talk about the following themes:

1. The region where the film is set.
2. How the children learn.
3. Scenes where we see the pupils having difficulties with their learning.
4. The humour.
5. The pupils' home life.
6. How the classroom / school is set out.

In terms of your own professional development I am very happy for you to talk about:

7. Monsieur Lopez's role as the teacher.

The role of Monsieur Lopez as the class teacher was set as an additional question, with the intention that trainees would largely focus on the other themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of student responses during the viva revealed that, contrary to expectation, of the ten trainees, eight chose to focus their discussion predominantly on the impact that Monsieur Lopez might have on their future professional practice. What then was it about him that drew them to reflect more deeply on this aspect?

Trainees commented on the impact the teacher had on the lives of his pupils, on his calmness and his gentle but probing questioning. They were intrigued by the frank answers he gave to the pupils when asked about his oncoming retirement. They were drawn to his sense of humanity when talking to one of the pupils, Olivier, about his chronically ill father. They were surprised by his invitation to pupil Natalie to return to visit him after she started at secondary school and was also moved by the way he spoke to her mother to help her accept the special needs of her daughter. They were impressed by the way that he set clear parameters to instil an atmosphere of quiet, mutual respect in his classroom.

Monsieur Lopez inspired similar reactions across France when the film was released in 2002. Frederique Deschamps, writing in *Liberation* in September of that year, described him as the “masculin d'Amélie Poulain” (2002, para 1), suggesting an iconic role model, like the heroine of another critically acclaimed film (*Amélie*, 2001). Jean Claude Loiseau, reviewing the film in *Télérama*, described it as being of a “luminous simplicity” with Monsieur Lopez “at its centre of gravity as the primary school teacher that we would all have liked to have had” (Loiseau, 2002, n.p.).

When questioned regarding his rationale for choosing Georges Lopez, director Philibert stated: “Jen'ai pas choisi de montrer un maître modèle; mais j'ai pensé que ce maître-là donnait une belle image de son métier” (“I didn't choose a perfect teacher but one who gave a good image of his profession”) (Cercle de Recherches et d'Action Pédagogique Colloquium, 2002). The notion of a role model, whose practice and example has impact, is one which appears also to resonate with those watching the film and observing his interaction with the children in his care.

Trainees' reflections on the impact that Monsieur Lopez might have on their future professional practice hints at a humanising experience for both tutor and trainees, who through an intercultural learning opportunity are led to consider the deeper and wider role and impact of the primary school practitioner.

► Key Point

Harnessing the potential of films as a cultural focus enhanced intercultural understanding.

Trainees' reflections on the film also led to development in three aspects of linguistic and cultural awareness:

- Learning about French culture
- Understanding translation issues through the use of subtitles
- Developing intercultural understanding

On the question of enhancing intercultural understanding through engaging in the medium of film, one trainee observed:

“Through watching French films I feel that my ability to ‘act interculturally’ has improved, as I have been able to learn about cultural difference as well as considering effective methods of communication between cultures, including my language choice.”

Impact on Future Training

The implications for future training suggest the potential of film as a cultural focus in order to:

- Provide extracts that transport trainees/teachers to another place, linguistically and pedagogically, that can be integrated into the taught course.
- Build a reflection point from which trainees/tutors can discuss their response to the film not only as a group but on an individual basis, to define their own practice.

► Key Point

Exploration of scenarios and characters that resonate with trainees provided a humanising experience that encouraged reflection upon wider aspects of professional practice.

“Ce film nous met sur le chemin de l'existence, le cœur battant.”

This film leads us, with hearts beating onto the path of life (Strauss, 2010).

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