



Teaching Italian Through Film

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In language teaching we aim at natural learning. A young child acquires language simply by using it, with trial and error and success. In our classrooms, we often over organize our teaching methodology. It is not that we do not require organization, but that the organization must be invisible. Any lesson with visible organization becomes classwork, while making the organization invisible changes the perception of the learners. Lessons where the organization is invisible appear to be recreational. Films are entertainment, and as long as the language learning is a direct result of using the language, it appears more like entertainment than study. There is absolutely no reason why learning should not be fun. It is merely that we have developed such a puritanical idea about study being serious business that has changed the environment of many classrooms.

Before a child goes to school, the parent generally plays with the child. Play is serious learning. However, because of the way it is done it appears to be recreation or entertainment. There is no place from which a child does not learn. In fact, the learning is accelerated the more absorbed the child becomes in the play. The same is true for learning language in a classroom setting. If the teacher can involve the students, and have them completely immersed in an activity, the students will learn at an accelerated pace (Burmark, 2004; Robin, 2008). This is the idea behind using to teach Italian, or any foreign language. In today's world of easily obtainable DVDs of Films around the world, the array of interesting stories and subjects from which the teacher can choose is immense. I chose classical Italian films, partly because the pronunciation and the context is very real, and partly because the Italian culture is integrated into the films, embedded in the stories.

The classic film *Cinema paradiso* by Giuseppe Tornatore is a delightful story, and the students become totally involved in understanding what's going on (Dreon, Kerper, & Landis, 2011). In fact, although the teacher should only assign a certain portion each week, at the end of the second week most, if not all, of the students have watched the entire movie. There is no way to insure that they have watched it without the subtitles, and in fact, it is fairly certain they have the subtitles on. However, this does not damage their ability to learn. For some students, it works best for them to watch without subtitles first and then turn on the subtitles. For other students it works better the other way around. Therefore, it is generally suggested to have students try watching without the subtitles first, at least two or three times, before switching to doing it the other way around if they believe this is better (Harji, Woods, & Alavi, 2010). By the end of the first term, some students will still be watching without subtitles first, while others have switched.

Because some Italian vocabulary is very close to English, and the words in either language that are the basic words are often very close, it is good practice to use short clips in the classroom which the students have not seen, and get them to guess the meaning of what they are watching (Izadpanah, 2010). This is done before introducing the vocabulary. This is because learning by discovery seems to last longer than learning by study (Nikitina, 2011). In this manner, the students can learn to extrapolate meaning from visual cues, auditory comparison, comparisons of Italian words with root words of English words, and from the context of the rest of the words in the sentence. Once they learn to do this, they are able to read without looking up all the words.

A vocabulary list should be created for the entire film and given to the students at the beginning of the term. In this way, they have the option of learning these words ahead of time. However, the teacher should let the students know which vocabulary words will be used for any particular week or lesson plan. Another way to treat vocabulary is to have the students create their own vocabulary list as they go to add to the vocabulary list that the teacher has given them. This is especially useful during applications where students are asked to go out on the Internet and find things. The database of the class vocabulary can be added to each week. This can be made accessible either on the college server, on Webcourses or on the Facebook page especially made for this particular class. Creating the Facebook page and adding their own activities as students go and do the activities for the classroom is another interesting way to integrate real-life into the lessons. Students between the ages of 12 and around 40 particularly like Facebook. Therefore, integrating it into classroom activities makes them feel as if they are just socializing. Depending on their level, the teacher can require that they use Italian on the Facebook page to a certain degree. Beginners level should be allowed to use quite a lot of English. However, by intermediate level the teacher can require that all postings to the Facebook page begun in Italian. Since a separate alphabet is not required is fairly easy for students to do this. This kind of an activity has a twofold result: by creating their own glossary, the students are making something that is actually real, making the learning real; by using Italian on Facebook, they are getting the kind of practice that they might have if they actually went to Italy. It is up to the teacher whether or not the students should be allowed to invite outside users as long as they use Italian. Many teachers find that this actually attracts native speakers who wish to meet people from different places, and this is always good for students to have real communication (Mississippi State Dept. of Education, Jackson., 2001). It usually results in peer exchanges among the students with students helping each other.

It is suggested that students cultivate a habit not to look up words while reading. They should mark down any words not known and continue to read. Often the students will see the words repeated over again several times, each time within a slightly different context and they begin to understand the word without looking it up. It is preferable that students not look up definitions or translation until they think they understand the words. Then the



definition served to explain the meaning which they have already acquired. In this way the information gets tagged for future retrieval, just as in a computer database. It is in the synapses that we make to a learned object that we increase the speed of recovery; the more synapses the faster the recovery.

The film environment enhances this cognitive process. The students, as audience, have suspended disbelief and have become immersed in the story, as if they are part of it. This is the nature of film. Because our brains do not discriminate between reality and the reality of Films and dreams, they all seem real. We react physiologically to each. In learning theory, it has been found that people remember more clearly when a certain amount of emotion is attached to an event (Albrecht, Haapanen, Hall, & Mantonya, 2009). If the emotion attached is totally overwhelming, then it results in the opposite effect, that is, during a trauma we often forget information. However, when a person is feeling extremely good, happy, sad, or afraid, whatever happens to be happening at that time will be stored in a stronger way, and connected very strongly to the sensations being absorbed at the same time. This is why certain smells can bring back very strong memories. One experiment that has been done in classrooms with teacher training, is to have the teachers tear off a piece of adhesive tape from her role and tape it on the tip of their noses, close their eyes, and just smell the adhesive tape. This never fails to bring some kind of memories for word from some distant past. It seems that everyone in developed countries has at some time smelled the distinct odor of adhesive tape. Because it is used in hospitals and to treat physical injuries, the attending and connected memories are often quite strong.

For these reasons, using the film is an enormous aid in vocabulary learning, and even helping the student to move towards thinking in Italian (Whiting & Granoff, 2010). A study of the applicable vocabulary of perhaps 5 min. should precede the next activity. The choices can be kept visible in order to help the students to do their practice. While running the film, the teacher can freeze the frame and ask the students to describe what the character smells. At first, the students find this to be extremely delightful and funny. They often will play around with words that are quite derogatory and students may ask, (how do you say....." So they can say something funny. It is good to encourage students to use metaphor and simile to describe what they see. This enlarges their vocabulary almost geometrically by forming cross connections (Lee, 2009).

A good example of this is on the Internet with a program called the visual thesaurus, found at www.visualthesaurus.com. This site shows visual connections among related words and their synonyms and antonyms. A good homework assignment is to ask students to take one word and create their own visual representation of this word. By doing this, they automatically increase their vocabulary. If the class is not too large sometime can be taken for individual students to present their own visual representations (Wheeldon, 2011). In a large class, it works well simply to mount these visual representations around the room for students to look at whenever they can. This is one way in which to add a different media to the learning, and it helps students to have kinetic learning abilities to develop their own methodologies for studying vocabulary. It's generally suggested to let students use whatever media they want, whether this be paper and crayon or watercolour or a program such as SmartDraw or one of any number of other useful little utilities that can do the same thing for them.

Texture is another of the senses that can be used to make connections with vocabulary. Again, a very short introduction of applicable vocabulary should be covered before doing this activity. While running a clip, it is easy to freeze the frame and then work with students to identify the various textures of what can be seen in the frame. For example, does that scene look warm or cold? What about the character's clothes? What are they made out of? How do you think they feel? In this way, students acquire useful vocabulary within a context in which they can immerse themselves. They're not studying a list, but they are applying the words to something that can appear quite real.

Students should have an Italian to Italian dictionary, and the teacher should insist that they work on using it for the first three weeks of class. Once they discover that most of the new words are the definition that they are seeking, then it becomes much easier for them to use an Italian to Italian dictionary. This is better for them, because they begin to think in Italian, and because the definition is not meaning. All the definition gives the learner is the English set of symbols that compare with the Italian. In reading a definition in English this requires the students to make two steps every time they translate that word in their heads. This will slow the students' progress toward thinking in Italian. By helping them to struggle through the first few weeks using an Italian to Italian dictionary, the teacher facilitates the students becoming more affluent more quickly, because they learn early to think in Italian. The fact that most definitions contain the same set of words, regardless of what you're looking up helps this process along quite well.

This is another reason that I introduce a film clip before introducing the vocabulary which has been prepared ahead of time for this film clip. I will play a short clip first and then we will talk about it as much in Italian as possible. From the very beginning of class I use as much Italian as the students can still understand in the classroom. I start by using English and translating to Italian immediately, or the reverse. The first few times I do this I watch the students. If I see that I'm getting through more quickly by going English to Italian then I will use that for a while, slowly adding more and more Italian to my English, and slowly eliminating the English explanation, substituting Italian synonyms and using visual cues. This is where the movie is extremely helpful. As we examine the vocabulary in the classroom, I will run through the clip and point out where it's used, playing that short little bit so that everybody can pick up on it. Once we have taken the entire clip apart for vocabulary, I run it one more time before we discuss the clip content.



The first time we discussed the clip content I give the students a paper containing the Italian equivalents for English critical phrases. For example, "this is the main character." The students will have a list of short phrases, such as "that's funny," and we use these during our time for criticism.

Following the class discussion for content, we do some vocabulary practice of vocabulary that we've already learned. I use a laser pointer and point to things on a frozen film frame, and asked the students to identify them. This is good practice and they know that as soon as we're done with the practice, I will run the clip again. This last time that I run the clip in the classroom, the students actually have understood the content.

Throughout the term, interesting activity to ask students to do is to ask them to change the content that they are watching. That is, change how the story is being told, change what the characters say. Discussions of what this will do to the end of the story even before the students have seen the end of the story is often a very interesting activity for them. This applies the act of creation and results in the learning being applied rather than merely acquired. If time and resources permit, with today's equipment, students can even create their own different scenes.

Another activity that can be used in connection with film is to criticize or report on the film. One of the most useful manners of doing this is to have students pretend to be film critics on a particular station they like. For this activity they should be paired off and create their own dialogs on a film of their choice. The film must be viewed in Italian, and the dialogue must be created in Italian. This is generally an activity that will cover several weeks. Having students break into pairs once or twice a week to work on their dialogs for five or 10 min. allows them to connect what they have learned outside the classroom and add it to the work in progress. At the end of the period allowed for this project, time should be set aside for each pair to present their critique to the class. Students often enjoyed this activity, because film critics are often quite funny. It's a great activity, and the only danger would be if students did not have enough material. Therefore, the teacher should seek out short videos and other resources in the target language on the Internet, or ask students to propose one that they found. Then the teacher can make sure there is not too much duplication.

One new addition to teaching tools for Italian teachers is presented free of charge on the Internet by Yale University. (They do accept donations) Because the series is Creative Commons and should not be used for any type of commercial gain, in many colleges, where fee paying tuition takes place, it is necessary for the teacher to assign this as homework. However, it is possible to design homework assignments based on this material for the students to turn in to ensure that they've actually done the exercise.

Another activity on the Internet connected to film is a rather eclectic project of identifying cultural factors and product placement in these films. Basically, they should be group work. Each group would be assigned to find particular cultural values in their assigned film and also to research product placement within that field. In this way the teacher can use a wide array of films, including those films which are used for the Yale Open University courses. The activity can cover several weeks with the groups reporting at the end of this time by presenting to the whole class their findings in Italian. The web quest portion of this activity requires that students will be reading Italian pages. Now there is nothing stopping them from using the web browser translator, but they still have to prepare for the presentation to be done in Italian. It is useful to keep the presentations to approximately 2 min. per student, so that a five student group would present for 10 min. In this way it only takes one class period to do all the presentations. By stretching this activity over several weeks, the actual time consumed for each portion can range between 10 and 20 minutes (Pomales-Garcia & Liu, 2006).

Teaching grammar with an activities based or film based curriculum is something which has to be planned, and also flexible. Grammar should not be taught as a prescriptive thing. That is, grammar should not be taught as a set of rules for how to use the language. Instead, grammar should be descriptive. While watching film clips students can practice the proper ways of saying things and identify how the people in the film clip are using the grammar. For example, instead of teaching past present and future tense, asking students to identify what is being used has a much more long-lasting effect. The students do not perceive this as being boring grammar, but more as an activity which allows them to discriminate how to fit in. In addition, some activities of deliberate misuse of grammar and deliberate misuse of words can be both fun and useful. The brain is plastic, so deliberately misusing grammar or word has no deleterious effect, but it can get the students to laugh, and this has a definite beneficial effect.

Basically, designing lessons around enjoyable Italian films is a very useful way to teach Italian language because it makes the language real. It also involves the students completely and changes their perception of language learning from something that is work to something that is more enjoyable, not quite play, but useful entertainment. Keeping the activities closely focused upon the unit being studied and limiting them as far as how much time is consumed at any one sitting will help to keep students motivated. By extending the use of Films to include involving all of the senses, and designing creative activities for the students to use their language increases student enjoyment and accelerates learning. With the use of the Internet, the activities described here can be expanded according to the interest of the members of the class. How well films are used and what kinds of activities are created is limited only by the imagination of the teacher and the students. It often has an extremely beneficial effect to have students involved in the creation of class activities and homework. There is actually nothing wrong with asking the students how they think would be the best way for them to learn a particular vocabulary. In this way, students and teachers become collaborative partners and by eliminating the authoritative relationship, students allow themselves to become more involved in the learning process.



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