



Theoretical Overview on the Inclusion of Cinema in the Teaching of French as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

The teaching of French as a foreign language (FFLT) often becomes a tough task owing to different factors, above all, students' demotivation, which has been shown to be rather common. Thus, there is a need for more dynamic and appealing teaching strategies which stimulate learners. Research indicates that the seventh art is a helpful didactic resource in this respect. Nonetheless, it is not commonly used for TFFL, and there is scarce academic production on this topic as most studies on the educational use of cinema focus on the teaching of languages in general or of other disciplines. Thus, the present paper is aimed at providing a theoretical background which synthesizes recent findings on the use of films for TFFL. Firstly, the authors discuss the main challenges French instructors face when teaching the language, and the effectiveness of cinema to face such obstacles. Afterwards, a brief literature review is presented, highlighting the main research gaps in this field. Then, the authors detail the linguistic, cultural, and motivational advantages of films for TFFL, fostering, in such a way, its implementation. Several concluding remarks and suggestions for future research are provided at the end.

Keywords: *French as a foreign language, French teaching, cinema, linguistic competence, culture, motivation.*

1. Introduction

One of the major obstacles to learning French as a foreign language (FFL) is students' demotivation. French learners find instructors' teaching practices unappealing because many of them still adhere to outdated textbook based methodologies [1][8]. Moreover, the didactic materials French teachers commonly use hardly contemplate the global spread of technology, which, in accordance with Zaki [15], is already present in every aspect of our lives. Consequently, instructors struggle to adapt the teaching process to the students' experience [13], creating an isolated and monotonous classroom environment which does not stimulate them to learn.

The seventh art has been shown to be an effective solution to this problem for diverse reasons. Firstly, most French learners enjoy watching films, and they have expressed a positive attitude towards the exploitation of cinema for the teaching of French as a foreign language (TFFL) in several studies [4] [7] [8]. Secondly, the film-based approach allows FFL teachers to target varied learning styles, benefiting, especially, visual and auditory language students who may improve at a slower pace in a traditional classroom setting [7].

In spite of this, French teachers rarely introduce cinema into their lessons [8], and research on the exploitation of films for TFFL is scarce. Plentiful scholars have examined the implementation of the seventh art in the teaching of second and foreign languages in general [2][5][7][14]; and there is much academic production on the use of films when teaching other particular languages such as English [3], Portuguese [9], or Indonesian [6]. Nonetheless, the greatest amount of available information on the inclusion of cinema in the teaching of FFL corresponds to master's degree dissertations and doctoral theses, and there is very little research on this topic in standardized scientific sources. As for the latter, the bibliographic search conducted has revealed that recent research on this field is mainly empirical [4][8][11][13][15], and that some scholars have concentrated their studies on only some of the advantages of the film-based approach when learning the French language. Pereira and Pinheiro-Mariz explore the implementation of cinema to teach reading skills [10], and Tjahjani and Jinanto deal with the cultural aspects of films [13]. Hence, the aim of this paper is to present a comprehensive theoretical overview on the main findings concerning the exploitation of the seventh art for TFFL in order to show the diverse benefits it has for French learners and to promote the implementation of this method in the FFL class.

2. Benefits of cinema-based French teaching



Research has demonstrated that working on cinema has several advantages for French learners which are related to their linguistic and cultural knowledge and that, besides, it is highly motivational. Nevertheless, playing a film in the classroom is not enough to take full advantage of this material. Scholars advise teachers to implement carefully planned film-based tasks which tackle all language competences for French students to achieve the desired learning outcomes [13][14]. Also, when planning these activities, FFL instructors have to consider key factors such as the appropriateness of the film to be used as regards the learners' age, language level, and necessities [15]. The currently available data on the benefits of cinema for TFFL will be detailed below, which have been classified into different categories.

2.1. Linguistic aspects

Most available results on the effect of cinema on FFL learning are related to linguistic improvements. Essentially, researchers claim that working on francophone cinema allows French learners to enhance the four language skills. They can improve their oral comprehension because, apart from listening to what the actors say, they receive visual input such as gestures and expressions, which facilitates understanding [7]. French teachers may design listening comprehension tasks on short selected excerpts, script dictation, or even activities in which learners compare different French accents [14]. Since films represent authentic oral interactions between French native speakers, showing the day-to-day language, and the actors' word articulation, students may try to repeat this speech afterwards, enhancing their oral expression too [7][13]. Indeed, as students feel pleased when watching films, the cinema-based approach reduces the anxiety many language learners feel in the classroom, and this stimulates them to speak because they feel comfortable [13]. Concerning reading skills, French students may practice their reading ability if the film is played with French subtitles [5], and they may be asked to read film reviews too [9]. Moreover, as stated by Perira and Pinheir-Mariz, studying the language through films encourages learners to read other text genres [10]. French teachers may also plan film-based writing tasks such as writing an opinion essay or a report on the topics depicted throughout the film [6].

Furthermore, the authentic input French students receive when watching films helps them to learn grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics. As learners see how certain grammatical structures are used in a realistic communicative interaction, they understand them better than when reading sentences in a text [7]. Such input also allows them to enrich their vocabulary because, throughout films, they discover colloquial lexical items and expressions [3][6]. Besides, when working on specific scenes, they can learn technical words related to the field of cinema [14]. Regarding pragmatics, films usually reflect communication problems such as distraction when conveying the speaker's message or expression failures, and, therefore, French students learn how to face these types of situations when speaking in French [13].

2.2. Cultural aspects

The seventh art also addresses cultural knowledge, which, as supported by countless scholars, is essential when studying a foreign language [11][12]. Many French learners do not have the opportunity to experience firsthand the French culture; however, francophone films give them a true insight into the target community as they often show French people's customs, daily routines, education, religion, geography, music, and social relationships, among other key features of the society [6][7][13]. Proof of this is Helda et al.'s study, in which learners themselves affirmed that film viewing helps them to comprehend cultural characteristics more easily than written materials because they can see them in a visual and contextualized way [6].

2.3. Motivational aspects

Since the seventh art is familiar to most students, they feel happy and entertained when watching films in class [6]. As asserted by multiple researchers, these feelings contribute to turn the FFL classroom into a pleasant environment which stimulates French students to learn [7][13]. Apart from the motivating nature of cinema per se, French learners may be asked to produce a short film themselves at the end of the semester and watch them together in class so that they can notice their progress and achievements. According to Jabbarova and Umarchanova, this will further stimulate them to continue studying the language [7]. This benefit has also been empirically verified in some studies, in which FFL students have confirmed that the cinema-based approach makes French learning more appealing than when doing traditional language activities [2][4].



3. Conclusions

In brief, FFL teachers need to make formal language instruction more attractive to French learners so that it can be effective. They can do so by using additional resources which complement conventional approaches such as the seventh art. As argued above, cinema is an excellent material to this end because it forms part of students' lives, and, besides, it allows French instructors to individualize teaching and to introduce technology into education. Thus, the film-based approach contributes to humanize French language teaching while adjusting education to an everchanging society. Beyond that, working on films has been proved to have linguistic, cultural, and motivational benefits for French learners which help them to hone varied competences. This paper provides a synthesis of recent research on the use of films for FFLT, which might foster its implementation in the French classroom. Still, further research should be carried out on this topic. Especially, future studies should explore the impact films have on French students' language learning holistically, that is to say, tackling all its benefits either empirically or theoretically.

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