
Perceiving and Enacting Language and Culture from Film in a Tertiary English Classroom in Vietnam

Truong Bach Le

Lecturer, English Department, Hue University of Foreign Languages, Vietnam

Email : mtletruong@gmail.com / tbachle@hueuni.edu.vn

Abstract

This paper aims to introduce a way of teaching cultural language learning through film in the classroom. It will report on a trialled classroom-bound session where the teacher guided the students to discover sociocultural features in a film scene. The experience engaged students in a cognitive exploration and physical experimentation of these elements with the teacher provided scaffolding support for the students' understanding and enacting of the context-influenced verbal and non-verbal behaviors. The participating students' feedback indicated their acknowledgment of the benefits and challenges encountered in this integrated way of cultural language learning through film. The experience holds promise for an effective way to gain entry into the actions and mindsets of the people in the target language society.

Keywords : film, cultural language learning, sociocultural knowledge, Vietnamese tertiary learners of English

บทคัดย่อ

วิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อนำเสนอแนวทางในการสอนการเรียนรู้ภาษาทางวัฒนธรรมจากภาพยนตร์ในชั้นเรียน ซึ่งนำเสนอเกี่ยวกับชั้นเรียนทดลองที่ครูได้แนะให้นักเรียนรู้จักลักษณะทางสังคมและวัฒนธรรมในฉากภาพยนตร์ ประสบการณ์ทำให้นักศึกษามีส่วนร่วมในการค้นหาความเข้าใจและการทดลองทางกายภาพขององค์ประกอบต่างๆ เหล่านี้โดยครูเป็นแรงส่งเสริมให้นักศึกษาเกิดความเข้าใจและการใช้พฤติกรรมที่สื่อด้วยคำพูดและไม่ใช้คำพูด การตอบรับของนักเรียนที่เข้าร่วมแสดงให้เห็นถึงการรับรู้ประโยชน์และความท้าทายที่พบในวิธีการแบบบูรณาการการเรียนรู้ภาษาทางวัฒนธรรมจากภาพยนตร์ ประสบการณ์เหล่านั้นก่อให้เกิดวิธีการที่มีประสิทธิภาพซึ่งนำไปสู่การปฏิบัติและทัศนคติของคนในสังคมภาษาเป้าหมาย

คำสำคัญ : ภาพยนตร์ การเรียนรู้ภาษาทางวัฒนธรรม ความรู้ทางสังคมและวัฒนธรรม ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษในระดับอุดมศึกษาชาวเวียดนาม

1. Introduction

Culture is often a contested term in today's language studies field. In foreign language teaching, following Kramsch (1998) and Scollon & Scollon (2001), it is generally taken to mean introducing learners to the historically transmitted values and beliefs on human nature, human relationships and communication, and the artefacts in use that are generally shared – or at least known about - by the language-using group. They are needed by learners because these worldviews are reflected in a community's ways of living, influencing the choice of language and non-language behaviours. As a meaning-making system, language transmits, reflects and constitutes culture (Halliday, 1978; Kramsch, 1998). In communicating, people exchange meanings in contexts that carry information about common experience, points of view, and social values. Interlocutors project desired interpersonal relationships, and therefore implicate actions befitting who they are. Within this same view, Halliday (1991) establishes the importance of studying text in context of situation as the means of exploring manifestations of culture in language use.

The view of language as social practice has suggested the need for new ways of looking at the teaching of second/foreign language and culture, one which integrates language with culture, and making central the meaning-making role of social context in language use (e.g., Kramsch, 1993; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). As writers in language pedagogy have shown, it is essential to afford learners opportunity to engage with the practices of the target culture so as to discover the values and beliefs reflected in language use, and to become aware of their own presentation of self when using the target language (e.g., Liddicoat, 2005; Orton, 2002).

While there is a perceived need for developing this cultural understanding in Vietnamese tertiary students of English (e.g., Nguyen, H C, 2002; Ho, STK, 2009), the instructional conditions do not accommodate this need. The problem lies in the inadequacy of sociocultural information in textbooks, the inauthenticity of material, the teaching methods that tend to separate language from culture, and lack of time for integrating culture as part of language learning. In this situation, it is believed that films may be of help. Like any other medium of representation, film constructs its pictures of reality by way of the codes, conventions, myths, and ideologies of its culture as well as by way of the specific signifying practices of the medium (Turner,

2006). Examining ideology in a film allows us to understand the relationship between film texts and their cultural contexts. From the social context, connections can be made between a film and social movements or between a film and contemporary events. In language teaching, film is identified as potentially valuable for providing sociocultural information on the target community and for examining the influence of sociocultural context on language and non-language behaviours (Kaiser, 2011; Pegrum, 2008; Sherman, 2003).

2. Research Objectives

This paper reports on a lesson at a university in central Vietnam where the teacher assisted the students in discovering the cultural affordances from a themed scene in the film “Million Dollar Baby”. The lesson was one of those conducted in a teaching project that aimed to explore how feature films made in the target language could be successfully used for teaching the sociocultural knowledge foreign language learners need to access and enhance their intercultural competence.

3. Research Methodology

In preparation for the teaching project, a film was selected, significant themes within it identified and key scenes revealing each theme selected. The selected key scenes were then analysed for cultural affordances that can be used as content for learning language and culture.

The chosen film was shown to a group of 16 Vietnamese students in a trial-teaching stage conducted over 8 weeks. The entire film was shown with English-language captions to the students and then the three key scenes were shown in three individual lessons at which time they studied certain lines in particular and after rehearsing, acted them out. Each lesson was divided into two main parts: Scene exploration and Embodied experience. The order in which the lessons proceeded is summarised in the table below:

Stages	Activities	Purpose
Scene Exploration	<p>Students view the scenes within a theme, then study in depth a focused scene</p> <p>Under teacher guidance, students explore meanings in the context through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - verbal and nonverbal behaviour - emotion - underlying values - sociocultural information <p>Teacher uses guided questions about the context for discussion, pointing out what students do not recognise, providing cultural explanation, guiding students to make cross-cultural comparisons</p>	<p>Developing skills of observation, inferencing, analysing, recognising own culture and target culture</p>
Embodied Experience	<p>Students practise the key lines containing stress, pausing, intonation, gestures and emotions. The major steps include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - watch the scene and listen without repeating the words to capture the way the characters speak and use body movements - identify connected speech (stress and rhythm), i.e., noticing stress and unstressed syllables, elision, obtaining the right stress and rhythm - identify segmentals (long vowels, unvoiced consonants) - identify nonverbal elements and accompanying attitude or emotion. - practise intonation - practise body movements - combine verbal and nonverbal 	<p>Deepening understanding of native-speakers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - practising part of the conversation in order to know what it is like to be an English-native speaker. - Familiarising students with the rhythmic organisation of the sentences - gaining synchrony of voice and body movements

Stages	Activities	Purpose
	Students rehearse the lines: - act out the lines, incorporating gestures and speech	
	Students act out, trying out self-presentation in target language and culture: - act out in front of class	
	Students discuss the experience of acting out.	Reflecting on self in target language and culture.

Data from the teaching process comprised video recordings of the actual lessons and reflective journal notes written by the students. The video-recording data were examined to find incidents that showed what the students already knew, what they needed to be taught, their practice and performance of the protagonists' language and behaviour and what reactions they displayed during the lessons. The students' journal entries were examined for themes that reflected their thoughts and feelings on the sociocultural information that the teacher had presented the class activities and the learning materials, and the way of learning and teaching.

4. Research Results

What follows is a recount of what happened in one lesson where the teacher guided the students to discover the cultural features in a key scene within the theme of Irishness.

The key sociocultural elements to be learnt about were the personal qualities, the relationship between the characters, the protagonists' roles, the nonverbal behaviours displayed, and the underlying beliefs. These were addressed as set out below. All the 16 students participated in the discussion to different extents. The aim was to guide the students to achieve adequate understanding of particular cultural features in the scene. Therefore, on an on-going basis in the actuality of the classroom, the teacher sought to judge whether a certain contribution by a particular student showed adequate awareness of a particular cultural feature and then decided on the spot to provide further aid, in the form of prompts, questions, or explanations to fa-

cilitate better understanding of it. Furthermore, given the time constraint of a lesson, he could not nominate all those who wanted to contribute. Since it was necessary for the teacher to re-play the focused scene for the students to perceive a particular cultural feature, the class at times proceeded slowly.

Scene exploration

The key elements to be learnt from this key scene, which derived from in-depth discourse analysis in preparing teaching content, were Irish traits such as love of nature or fantasy about rural life, humour in face of hardship, optimism, loyalty, and feminine domesticity. These were addressed as set out below. The key elements to be learnt about were the personal qualities, the relationship between the characters, the protagonists' roles, the nonverbal behaviour displayed, and the underlying beliefs. These were addressed as set out below. After seeing the key scene, when asked what came to mind, three students (S2F, S3F, S12M) perceived by themselves the intimacy and mutual care between the two characters. For example, one (S12M) said, "It's the best relationship between Frankie and Maggie. He teaches her to read the Gaelic poem."

When students could not say more about the scene, they were prompted to consider which Irish traits were manifested here; they were able to point to the trait of loyalty in Frankie. Many students were also able to recognise the humour and optimism in the setting as typical of Irish people's humorous style that indicates their toughness in time of hardships. They pointed out Maggie's smiles, Frankie's remarks "I love the stink too much, ...That's terrible" and Maggie's comments such as I can bake a lemon pie as dry humour and flippancy. When asked to relate the feature of humour above to Vietnamese people, students had different opinions. One (S2F) said, "It's special because for Vietnamese people, they wouldn't behave like that", but others disagreed saying that they have this type of humour and optimism in hardships. Some students expressed appreciation for Maggie's strength manifested in her joking.

Discussing the poem, one student (S2F) recognised the traditional role of a woman in a family in Maggie's dream of feminine domesticity expressed as I could learn how to bake.

Asked what the poem evoked about Irishness, they mentioned love of nature and the dream of idyllic life. Explanations of the meaning of Innesfree and its location

in Ireland, and the Irish poet William Butler Yeats and his nostalgia for the beautiful nature of his homeland were all of interest to the students. When asked to think of an image in Vietnam similar to the cabin in the idyllic lifestyle in the poem, one of the students (S8F) suggested the traditional and romantic ideal of home as “a thatched hut with two golden hearts”. They also compared the materials of the cabin and the Vietnamese hut, i.e., clay and wattle vs. clay and thatch and were intrigued to find similarities in this vision in the two societies.

The teacher referred to the love for poetry of the Irish and related it to the softness that Frankie displays in many scenes in the film showing him reading the poetry, a practice which can still be found in Irish Americans. This idea shattered a stereotype about Western people. Said one student (S15F): “I see that Western people are usually very strong, active, and cold. In this film, Frankie is very sensitive, soft.”

The class had an opportunity to reflect on their own ethnicity as part of the Vietnamese society when considering Gaelic as a language still used by some in modern Irish communities. A student (S10F) volunteered that she herself was ethnically Muong and she said a few words in the Muong language. When asked what they think of as being a native-speaker of English, they included the newly-learned Irish traits and said native-English speakers may have similar literary habits to the Vietnamese. One (S1F) concluded that a native-English speaker can be an Irish person or any ethnicity.

Embodied experience

The teacher asked the students first to identify the rhythmic patterns of the poem by themselves. However, it was not easy at all for them to do so. Although able to place word stress correctly, they had difficulty knowing where to pause between phrases in the lines as, for example, the first one, with its four stresses followed by three stresses (I will arise and go now and go to Innisfree), a pattern which also occurs in the second and other lines. Nevertheless, they practised actively.

Watching Frankie while he read the poem, the students were not able to perceive that he steps in time with the word stress as he walks round the room.

In rehearsing, all the students stood up and tried to walk with rhythm when reading the poem. In the performance part, 9/16 students volunteered to play Frankie; the others played the inert Maggie. Delivery problems which intruded were noticeable, especially in the pacing of delivery, with several students rushing at the start or

finish. The word Innisfree was especially troublesome with more than half stressing the middle syllable instead of the first. The 9 students enacting Frankie adopted his body movements to different degrees. The seven females did better at this than the males who generally looked uncomfortable walking around reciting the poem and did not look at “Maggie” while they were doing so. A couple of the females managed to get the rhythm very well and performed very closely to the model on the screen.

In the discussion on the performance, those who had played Frankie said it had been really exciting. They said that it had been their first experience of reciting a poem in English and it was particularly good to have a native-speaker model to render it verbally and nonverbally. Four of them (S1F, S6M, S12M, S13F) said they had had to pay attention to keeping balance with the stress, rhythm and the steps, while another two said the idyllic content of the poem “inspired” them and “evoked the feeling of a native-English speaker living in a peaceful setting”.

Students’ views on the lesson

The students wrote reflections on their learning experience after each lesson, prompted by written questions. The major points they raised in response to each question for the scene of Irishness are presented here.

The students perceived how the lesson had benefited them in cultural language learning as shown in the table below:

<p><i>Gaining cultural insights into the Irish subculture and the social identity of native-English speakers (11/16)</i></p>	<p>I learnt to discover the personality or hobbies of the characters that reflect their culture. For example, people in Irish communities love literature, sport, and nature. (S3F);</p> <p>Frankie is also an American of Irish origin and can speak the old language of Irish people. They make up part of the English communities and Western societies. (S12M)</p>
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<i>Acting out deepens understanding of the target culture and difference between the home and target languages and cultures (10/16)</i>	I felt closer to the Irish way of living when reading the poem....Then we talked about how different it felt to act like them. (S13F); In the class discussion on the role-play I recognised the different pronunciation and stress that I used and the difficulty in using their nonverbal behaviour. (S14F)
<i>A new way of learning (7/16)</i>	A very good way of teaching, motivating students. (S 1 F); I was more confident when speaking in front of the audience, increasing my speaking ability. (S5F)
<i>Native-English speakers as model for verbal and nonverbal behaviours (6/16)</i>	We don't have much opportunity for access to native-English speakers. Through observing the pronunciation, gestures, intonation, and the use of stress of native speakers, I can imitate and speak English more accurately and fluently. (S15F);
<i>Focusing on specific scenes to understand deeply content of the story (4/16)</i>	Focusing on one scene in one theme helped me see more deeply how that theme is displayed in language and nonverbal behaviours of the characters and the context. (S11F)
<i>"Living" in the target culture (4/16)</i>	There is no better way to understand people from another culture than living in that culture, penetrating that culture so as to understand it adequately. When we take the role of a character, we can understand their minds, feelings, and behaviours and so appreciate the depth of the film. (S10F); Although we could be a Vietnamese person thinking the thought of native-English speakers for a very short time, it was valuable. (S14F);

<i>Comparing cultures (3/16)</i>	We can make comparisons with our culture and draw lessons for ourselves. (S12M)
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The students also noted the difficulties in accessing the cultural features in the scene and made suggestions for improved access, as shown in the table below:

<i>Adopting native speakers' behaviours (8/16)</i>	The rhythm of the poem and the walking of Frankie were difficult to do. (S12M)
<i>Recognising Irish features (6/16)</i>	I was not able to understand Irish cultural features without the teacher's guidance, for example, the fantasy, the idyllic of Irish people. (S1F)
<i>Unfamiliarity with nonverbal elements (6/16)</i>	We have always learnt with information in the form of words, not in images and nonverbal behaviour. (S4M)
<i>Combining verbal and nonverbal behaviours in performing the script (4/16)</i>	It was hard to use the gestures and read the poem correctly at the same time. (S2F)
<i>Psychological and physical stress (4/16)</i>	Concentrating on the screen made us tired and our eyes also got tired. (S3F); It was stressful to do the role play after studying the scene. (S5F)
<i>Ethnocentric attributions (3/16)</i>	There were also other ways to understand a situation in the film and we tended to interpret the film based on our own culture. (S3F)

5. Discussion

In the Scene Exploration part, it is evident from the students' contributions that they could perceive by themselves the intimacy and care between the characters and the traditional role of women in Maggie's fantasy. All the remaining attributes that related to the enactment of the theme "Irishness" needed to be taught, but could

then be perceived with prompts and explanations. These were Irish humour in hardships, loyalty, optimism, love of nature and the Irish ethnicity as part of native-English speaker identity (e.g., a native-English speaker can be of Irish decent). What needed to be further taught and explained was the male softness combined with strength. In making cross-cultural comparisons in terms of the humour and the idyllic life-style, some students' opinions about the tough character of Western people showed the influence of stereotyping.

In the Embodied Experience part of the lesson, a few students mentioned the difficulty in balancing the verbal and nonverbal elements, while several acknowledged the feeling of being in a native-English speaking setting.

In their journal reflections, most students were able to perceive the attributes of the Irishness theme. The majority admired Frankie's care for Maggie and the Irish optimism in face of hardship, while some expressed surprise and confusion about their relationship. They discovered both similarities and differences in Vietnamese and western societies in some cultural features. The lesson had modified and expanded their preconceptions about western people.

The students discerned the authenticity in content and the engaging opportunity to explore the integrated verbal and nonverbal contextualised language use which they could use as a model. In relation to content, a great number of them perceived the opportunity to gain insights into the ways of living of a subculture in central English-speaking countries. What was new in their reflections was the perception of some students of the opportunity for "living" in the native-speaker environment, though only, as one of them said, very briefly.

The specific difficulties in this lesson mentioned by the students were in adopting the way to recite the poem. The main challenge was to be able to recognise features such as the Irish traits exemplified in a specific person like Frankie (e.g., loyalty, softness and strength). This also reflects accurately the teacher's class observation - that students were ignorant of many of these features. This could have been the reason why one student suggested showing films with touristic content about English-speaking countries. In addition, many of the students attributed the influence of Vietnamese culture to their interpretations of the scene. Furthermore, the teacher noted the psychological and physical strain of the activities on the students, as some of them felt that observation and role-playing were stressful. Realising that time was

an important element for mastering the combination of language and behaviour of the target language, some of them expressed the need for more time for role-play practice.

6. Conclusion

The paper has showcased a classroom-bound session where, under the teacher's guidance, the students were engaged in cognitive exploration and physical experimentation of sociocultural features in a film scene. The lesson showed that the students lacked much knowledge of Irishness though it is a significant part of the native-English societies they are studying. It is rewarding to find that some students were deeply engaged in the affordances of this scene, partly because of the content of this film segment. It is also pleasant that they seemed to start to learn that perceptions are often stereotypical, as they acknowledged in the journal entries on their preconceptions of western people. Working with a sample of native-speaker English also seemed to teach them the true significance of thinking and behaving appropriately in the target language culture and doing this also asked of them cognitive, physical, and psychological investment. Using film for cultural language learning is not new, but the instructional strategies reported on in this paper promises a new effective way to gain entry into the actions and mindsets of the people in the target language society.

7. Recommendations

From the study results, the following recommendations are made:

7.1. Using film in the classroom by engaging students in cognitive exploration and physical experimentation of the focused cultural elements as reported above can be an effective way to accommodate the perceived need for developing intercultural understanding in Vietnamese tertiary students of English among the different constraints, e.g., inadequate sociocultural information in textbooks, inauthentic materials, and inappropriate instructional strategies.

7.2. Teacher training should be provided in exploiting and teaching film for

cultural awareness in the classroom where scaffolding is given for students to explore the context of culture underlying language use in culturally themed film scenes.

7.3. In preparing film scenes for teaching, Vietnamese teachers of English should seek collaboration with native speakers of English to enrich their understanding of cultural themes in selected films.

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