

Narrating picture books through film: Student teachers get moving

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Dieser kurze Artikel führt in die Didaktische Beilage ein, die zum thematischen Teil dieser Babylonia-Nummer passt. In einem sechsmo-natigen Projekt untersuchten Lehrerstudierende der Pädagogischen Hochschule Zürich Möglichkeiten, wie Bilderbücher, die filmisch umge-setzt werden, die rezeptiven und produktiven Sprachkompetenzen von Primarschülerinnen und -schülern fördern und dabei motivierende und unterhaltende Sachinhalte vermitteln. Der Beitrag fasst theoretische Grundlagen zusammen und beschreibt den Prozess und die Ergebnisse des Projekts, die sich als interessant und wertvoll zeigten. Drei der erarbeiteten Filme und die dazugehörigen Arbeitsblätter sind auf www.babylonia.ch > Didaktische Beiträge > no 73 zugänglich (Passwort).

Preliminaries

It seems evident that films are a valuable medium in the language classroom. They address more than one of the human senses and they increase the density of information conveyed and potentially the comprehension of input (see Vanderplank, 2010, for a survey on learning effects in video-based teaching sequences). Surkamp (2004) looks at the reception of films as a fifth skill (“*Seh-Verstehen*” = viewing comprehension). Short films also have the potential of motivating pupils by bringing interesting subject matter about far-away cultures, nature or technology into the classroom (Stotz, 2007). Viewing films ties in with young people’s media habits; however, this is not always unproblematic: film-watching is associated with entertainment rather than work and study so that learners might be unwilling to engage in while-viewing or follow-up activities. In addition, the visual channel in contemporary films does not always support comprehension as there may be a divergence between image and commentary.

Independently of films, stories have long played an important role in foreign language classrooms. Significantly, films share at least three essential characteristics with stories in general:

- they are organised in time in basically linear fashion, although this property can be exploited and transcended in interesting ways (flash-backs, pre-views);

- they evolve from the actions of identifiable protagonists so that a narrative space with more or less complex relationships emerges;
- understanding stories and films both require literacy skills which have been culturally transmitted – in other words, the more experience someone has in dealing with films and stories in a conscious way, the more familiar he or she becomes with the required receptive and interpretative competences.

The student teachers who had joined the project (Forschungs- und Entwicklungsmodul) at PH Zürich were introduced to both the theory and the practice of visual literacies and story-telling. In the latter area, it seemed important to remind ourselves of the simplest story structure, which is nearly universal: Orientation (setting) – Complication (problem) – Resolution (solution) – Evaluation – Coda. This pattern has been shown to underpin oral stories told by young city dwellers as shown by William Labov in his seminal text “The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax” (1972). Picture books for children typically follow this model, sometimes with interesting permutations or fairytale-like repetitions (e.g. the recurring obstacles to be overcome in “We’re going on a bear hunt”).

With respect to visual literacy, students analysed picture books, graphic novels and animation films based on stories, thus building up a repertoire of analytical tools as well as a critical awareness of the modes of communication in these media. Based on publications by Burmack (2008), Enever (2006), Surkamp (2004) and Elsner (2012), an analytic framework has emerged which considers the following dimensions:

- unpacking anchor images
- seeing films as a plurimedial mode of representation (image, voices [on-/off-screen], noises, music soundtrack)

- observing camera perspective and movement, close-ups, distorted lenses
- following or breaking conventions in montage (rhythm of takes, transitions such as straight cut, fading, dissolving, parallel montage)
- visual effects, lighting and colour schemes

A next step was to transfer the collected experiences and findings to educational situations and to determine criteria that should inform the selection or creation of story-based films in foreign language classrooms. A preliminary list comprises such requirements as comprehensibility, language level adequacy, adequacy to pupils' life experiences, topics and scope of topics, scenario/narrative considerations, documentary techniques as well as the question if a film has been made especially for language-teaching or general school purposes or if an existing film has been edited and/or simplified. If films are to be used in classrooms, by small groups or individually, a number of methodological issues have to be resolved: What kind of language teaching methodology is suited for the exploitation of the film? What arrangements have been made to embed the film in a task environment? What kinds of roles are assigned to the pupils and the teacher involved in doing the task (e.g. teacher as coach, differentiation for learners with differing abilities)?

Generally, it was felt that pre-viewing, while-viewing and post-viewing activities are essential to unleash the potential of classroom-based films. Still, the conventional repertoire offered in many course books that have a film component is rather limited and often does not go beyond comprehension questions and the task of summarising a film or parts of it. Many published ideas for activities (e.g. in Surkamp, 2004) are directed at older students who focus on the aesthetic and generic qualities of feature films, and require upper intermediate or advanced language skills. The field of early language teaching would thus benefit from simple hands-on activities in connection with film-viewing (see *Der Fremdsprachliche Unterricht Englisch*, No 112/113, 2011, for some examples).

Film creation projects

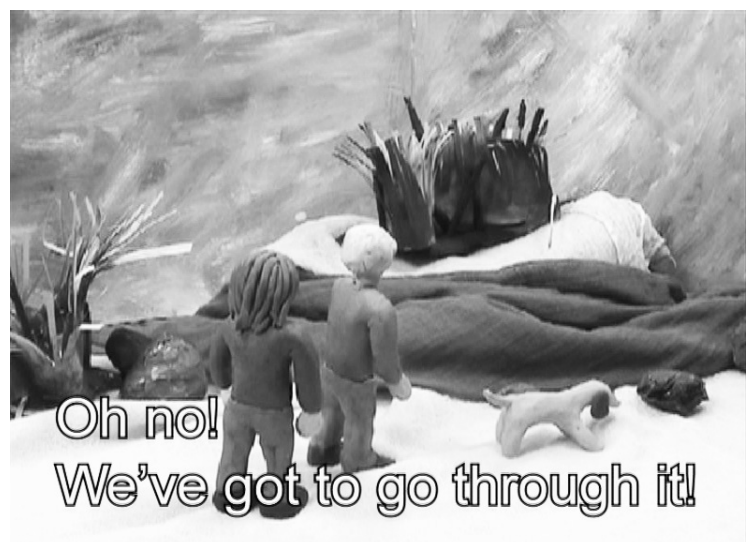
The brief for the student teachers for the final part of the project was to develop a language learning scenario for primary school pupils based on a short film created by the students themselves. They were free to either choose an existing picture book or graphic novel as a basis or to

develop their own story. The infrastructure of the Digital Learning Center at PH Zürich proved to be valuable, as did the students' prior media and IT know-how. Rather than teaching technical skills beforehand, it seemed more useful to provide a set of resources such as pre-installed software (e.g. Audacity, iMovie, Adobe Photoshop, Handbrake etc.), manuals and borrowable hardware (still and video cameras, a table-top set for stop-motion films with a dedicated camera, media workstations) as well as a small budget for students to buy materials for plasticine figures and props if necessary.

Students worked with the following techniques:

- picture book animation: working with scans of the picture book pages, students digitally cut out figures or props and moved them around the scenery in a series of still pictures which were then merged into a film; visual effects were used, e.g. to blot out part of a picture successively to illustrate the sentence "Darkness overcomes me" in *The Red Tree*;
- Claymation or stop-motion animation: clay (plasticine) figures are crafted as well as sets from various materials such as paper, sack cloth and felt, and the figures are animated by moving and shaping them bit by bit, photographing between 10 and 20 frames per second;
- a conventional video film based on a self-created story, filmed with animal hand puppets and dialogues recorded live.

The students had four weekly sessions (90 min.) to plan their project and four days in the media centre to create the films. Generally, students found interesting ways to work with spoken and written text so that viewers use both reading and listening strategies when following the action. Ideally, there is a version with subtitles in the target language and one without. Often, music was used to dramatize sections of a film – here, it is important to make sure that loud music doesn't overwhelm the narration in the off. The stop-motion film based on "We're going on a bear hunt" received an original soundtrack with music recorded with their own instruments and sung by the students.



Still from the stop-motion animation film "We're going on a bear hunt".

One team found an original way to manipulate their voices so the animals in the film came across with high-pitched cartoon voices (*When will it snow?*). Some groups used transitions creatively, e.g. a whirl when dissolving an image to underline confusion and troubles. It was amazing to see how small sound effects can enliven a simple scene, e.g. the creaking of a swing in *The Giving Tree*. Many teacher students are very talented in crafts and have enhanced their skills in their subject-specific training. The sets in the two films made with the Claymation technique provided ample evidence of how creative they can get with simple means.

Problems that had to be overcome (and sometimes proved quite dodgy) were differing lighting conditions while taking photos for stop-motion animation and differing picture sizes when photographing extracts from books. In some cases, the amateur film makers used limitations or emerging situations ingeniously for comic effect, such as a live cat in *Cookie Time* or a real outsize set of pliers that was used to cut off the branches of a plasticine tree (*The Giving Tree*).



A live cat appears on the scene in the video "It's cookie time".

Sceptics might obviously claim that there is nothing as captivating and effective in primary foreign language teaching as a well-trained teacher telling the story to a class sitting around her in a semi-circle, with the picture book open. It is true that in this classic story-telling situation the teacher can react flexibly to pupils' responses and use mime and gesture to support understanding and work out emotions. On the other hand, the films crafted by these student teachers show that picture book stories can be enlivened by using simple animation techniques and playing with artefacts in the film medium which children know well in their everyday lives. The various strategies used underpin particular turns in the story and enhance the interpretation of its underlying meaning. In addition, tasks and follow-up activities can be made to suit the possibilities of the film and the learners at a particular stage in their learning.

Ultimately, as can be said of films in general, they are authentic cultural products and thus receptacles of experience ("Erfahrungshaltigkeit", Surkamp 2004: 3). If student teachers or teachers develop films on the basis of well-known picture book stories, they co-create a new kind of transmedial artefact (cf. Rymarczyk & Vogt, this issue) and thus become intercultural mediators, combining digital and analog modes of story-telling. Readers of *Babylonia* are kindly invited to ex-

plore and use three samples of the students' work on the *Babylonia* website (go to Encart didactique / Didaktische Beilage No 73).*

Literatur

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* While every attempt has been made to clear the copy rights for the story books on which the films have been based, due to late responses from publishers the rights for some of the publications have not been obtained at the time of printing.

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The student teachers who contributed to the project were Dennis Maurer, Alexandros Deligianis, Rebekka Bischof: *We're going on a bear hunt*; Deborah Schlumpf, Christina Näf: *The Red Tree*; Jenny Ammann, Caroline Weimer: *When will it snow?* Bettina Gisler, Stephanie Jäger, Julia Dürr: *Elmer*; Elia Della Costa, Jasmin Gotsch, Mariam Zollanvari: *The Giving Tree*; Jennifer Donau, Corinne Knüsel: *It's cookie time*.