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Views of the world in motion

Documentary films for young learners in Content and Language Integrated Learning

Cet article se propose d'expliquer l'intégration à l'école primaire des médias audio-visuels dans un enseignement des langues étrangères orienté sur les thèmes et basé sur une approche actionnelle. Que ce soit dans des activités entraînant la réception ou la production langagière, les courts films documentaires offrent la possibilité d'apporter dans la salle de classe certains aspects thématiques, qui pourraient dans une moindre mesure être compris à travers des textes ou des images. A travers des exemples tirés des DVD du manuel Explorers, l'auteur explicite ce concept. Au centre de la problématique se trouve la question de la différenciation dans les exercices tout comme l'importance de la diversité des activités communicatives qui accompagnent les séquences audio-visuelles. L'objectif de cette démarche est entre autres de rompre avec une simple consommation des médias.

Content and language integrated learning and audiovisual reception: a rationale

In numerous small projects and medium-scale implementation efforts, a fresh approach to learning foreign languages in primary and lower secondary school is currently being put into practice. It has come to be known under the somewhat technical label CLIL/EMILE for Content and Language Integrated Learning. The idea of linking language learning with subject study may not be new. It first saw the light of day when philosophy, religion and science were studied through the academic and clerical language of Latin. English or French-medium instruction was long a feature of colonial and post-colonial education, for better or worse. In fact, in many situations of diglossia such as in German-speaking Switzerland, the standard variety of a language is often primarily acquired through schooling and use of the language of instruction across most or all of the curriculum.

However, what makes the present-day trend towards content and language integration in foreign and second language education exciting is the set of options available to learners, teachers and materials writers with respect to the range of themes to focus on, of media to use and of ways of interacting they offer. By interacting, I refer both to how learners and teachers can engage with each other within and beyond the classroom, and ways in which they can get a handle on new knowledge and fresh ideas. Auditory input through dialogues and mini-lectures on tape or CD has long been part and parcel of the foreign language classroom. Cable radio with international stations and, more recently, podcasting have contributed to freeing listening activities from that slightly paradoxical situation when a whole class sit glued to their chairs and listen to disembodied voices coming through loudspeakers. Just like the mobile phone has individualised communication habits, the personal MP3 player has the potential of allowing learners to choose audio-input by linking personal interests with a more or less systematic language learning agenda.

But what of audiovisual media? Ubiquitous round-the-clock television and the easy distribution of feature films via DVDs have propelled these media far ahead even though the content that is broadcast has not always lived up to expectations of quality and interactivity. It is true that the language learning industry has not been slow to produce all kinds of video series and supplementary material. Unfortunately for teaching practitioners who look for classroom material with an extended use-by date, moving pictures look outdated even more quickly than photographs. In addition, most publishers throughout the 1990s seemed to rely on bland imitations of soap operas accompanying course books and on set pieces of business meetings and phone calls with cardboard characters. While useful to make phrases and snatches of conversation come more alive than with mere audio, most of those videos offer little to learn about real life out there and all its mediatised forms. What's more, the Internet with its push-and-pull lure has overtaken television as the medium of choice among young people.

[…] documentary films … can bring aspects of subject content, such as tropical rainforests, into the classroom. They speak to both visual and auditory senses. They provide challenging opportunities for varied reception and production tasks.

The lesson to be learnt is that many learners seek more than exposure to content chosen for them by producers and committees; rather, they want to communicate with their peers at the same time as they explore new nooks and crannies of real and virtual spaces. Back to foreign language learning, the recognition that young learners want to acquire a new language for the here and now rather than for postponed use entails a methodological shift towards marrying the children's learning process to their reality. That reality is shaped, to a considerable extent, by education rather than work, by family life rather than mindless consumerism, and by personal development in leaps and bounds rather than determined career-building. The topic-led and action-oriented approach that primary schools in the Swiss cantons of Zürich, Zug and Obwalden have adopted for English is structured by tasks that encourage the learners to explore aspects of educational topics with cross-curricular value. In doing so, they continuously link local and personal matters with more remote and general knowledge. The course that is being developed for this methodological agenda, Explorers (Achermann, Sprague & Staufer 2006 – 2008), aims to link subject and world knowledge systematically with language development. One of its key features is a concept for integrating different up-to-date media (cf. Sprague and Staufer 2006).

An example from Explorers, which was introduced to upper primary schools in 2006, may illustrate the point and prepare the ground for the argument that documentary films are ideally suited to support the content-and-language integrating approach.

In one module, which takes about eight weeks to complete, the learners first list and describe means of transport which are human-powered (e.g. bicycles and mini-scooters) and do a survey about the vehicles their classmates use every day or week. They also learn about uses of bicycles in different contexts by reading illustrated texts. Before they measure out various aspects of their way from school to home and set up their own agility course (in fact a Total Physical Response activity with bikes and skateboards in the school yard), there is a learning scenario that revolves around a film. The film's narrative is summarised in Table 1. It is decidedly documentary as it follows the story of the inventors of the microscooter, but its purpose reaches beyond documenting some facet of reality. The film One Kick Ahead

- builds a bridge between the local surroundings of the pupils and the distant place where the vehicles are manufactured
- introduces knowledge that is relevant to the pupils' every-day lives, e.g. about the origin of the products they use daily
- offers opportunities for identification, e.g. through the problem of the inventor being copied by others such as may happen to school kids too
- is narrative in that it tells a story with a clear problem and a resolution.

An important feature of this mini-documentary film and of most others in the Explorers series is that it links the world that the primary school pupils know with aspects of the culture and the economy of the regions in which English is used as a local language or a lingua franca. The inventor, Wim Ouboter, lives on the Lake of Zurich and goes to buy a Bratwurst at Bellevue square. At the same time, his idea to build a vehicle to take him to the sausage stall quickly leads him to China and we see him instructing workers in a factory where labour is cheaper than here. The audiovisual medium aims to tell a story and raise issues as an offer to the young learners to engage with.

The films on the Explorers DVDs have all been tailor-made: they were either shot with trained actors or English-speaking or bilingual children (some from an international school) or they were newly made from existing documentary film material. An off-commentary was added to some films that was written jointly by the Explorers authors and the film-makers; others rely on the original voices. Increasingly through the course, the learners are confronted with authentic passages such as when an Indian development aide talks about her work of promoting silk production and helping local farmers.

It may be argued that such thought-provoking subject matter could overtax the learners' linguistic and cognitive capacities. However, from a constructivist point of view, the subject matter is not presented as factual knowledge to be absorbed, but the viewers need to construct the narrative, jointly and individually, to make sense as a function of their worlds, e.g. as users of mini-scooters or consumers of cheap products. The intention of the course book authors and the film maker is that the pupils pick up what they are ready to deal with. If we use the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 1978) in connection with such mini-documentaries, we could say that the film offers more nodes than any learner can link up with. With suitable scaffolding from the teacher and adequate language support, each learner will adjust to the possibilities of knowing that he or she has. It is the job of the tasks that are associated with the film to make sure that the outcome is an active kind of reception.

Table 1: Narrative of One Kick Ahead *(Explorers 1 Movies DVD)*

Still picture	Plot summary
	Wim Ouboter, a bank employee didn't want to go to his snack bar on foot. He began to experiment in his garage and built his first scooter. His wife said to him: 'You had a good idea, now you should do something about it.'
	Wim wasn't the only one. Edi Duarte and his apprentices at Sulzer had the same idea. Edi Duarte and the apprentices experimented. They used inline skates wheels, brakes and handlebars. But you can't buy a Sulzerboard anywhere today.
	Wim Ouboter's scooters were produced in China at the end of the nineties. The factory works around the clock, seven days a week. It's cheaper to produce the scooters in China because the salaries aren't very high.
	Wim Ouboter's kickboard and scooter were a success. Thousands of his mini-scooters are cruising around Switzerland. Wim is thinking of new products: Scooters with a motor, scooters with sails and scooters with a braking system with ABS
	But there are cheap copies. Wim found more than fifty copies while he was walking through the market in Hong Kong. Quality is the answer to any problem: tests, improvements, new developments, more tests. Keeping ahead of the competition, that's Wim's motto for all problems.

Tasks to exploit mini-documentaries

It was vital, when conceiving the Explorers package, to plan the documentary films alongside the other materials rather than as an afterthought. Four out of six modules in a year-long course contain a film-based scenario (a scenario here is a chain of tasks within a thematic domain, leading to a palpable outcome). From the start, it was clear that each film should be adapted to the overall linguistic and communicative learning objectives of the module. At the same time, given that learners differ in style and cognitive ability, differentiated pathways through activities had to be planned for; they are called multi-level tasks. In the framework of task-based learning (cf. Willis 1996) used by Explorers, the learners accomplish a task outcome by dealing with input material and by solving problems or negotiating an agreement. The outcomes of film-based tasks lie along a spectrum from reception-oriented to production oriented.

An example for a reception-oriented set of tasks is the scenario around the film One Kick Ahead described above. Here is a list of task cycles and learning strategies associated with the film:

- global viewing for gist (main action)
- using strategies (e.g. "Getting information from background noise and voices: Background noise and different voices can often tell you a lot about places and people.")
- ordering the elements of the narrative in sequence
- stopping in the midst and predicting how the story will continue
- making a chain story (the learners perform the story by showing still pictures of the scenes in the correct sequence and saying a commentary with each picture)
- searching the Internet for new developments in mini-scooters.

Listening comprehension abilities tend to develop faster than productive competences. In order to bridge

the potential gap between reception and production, tasks are carefully engineered to allow learners to work with linguistic building blocks. In this example, the commentaries which summarise the plot elements are given to the learners as samples to be cut out from a worksheet (the texts correspond roughly to those in Table 1). In a multi-level activity, more confident learners are asked to produce the chain story with the help of the still picture stimuli only, while the less confident learners can present the story to the class by reading out the sentences after they have put them in the correct order and practised pronouncing them.

As an alternative to receiving, understanding and reproducing documentary film topics, Explorers exploits the many ways in which films can stimulate language production. Here are three examples:

- In the context of a scenario in which the class produces a visitor's guide to the Canton of Ticino, they watch a film which presents aerial views of another part of Switzerland. The film comes with a commentary spoken by children in English who describe the landmarks and sights the helicopter flies over. Subsequently, the pupils write their own commentary to match a sequence of flying over the Gotthard pass, the Valle Leventina, Locarno and Lugano. They finally speak the commentary live (so-called voice-over) in front of their classmates or visitors or might even record it.
- The module entitled "My body, myself" builds vocabulary around the human body and focuses on ways of moving that contribute to a healthy lifestyle. There are six short films which connect to a scenario in which learners put together a file of physical exercises they can do in breaks during and between lessons. The film shows two clown characters who develop and demonstrate the exercises. The learners watch the exercises carefully. Based on text models of other exercises, they then form groups to write instructions and draw illustrations for one exercise per group. The proof of the pudding is in giving the instructions to another group and have them perform the exercise.
- The metamorphosis of butterflies is the object of another short film. The class may study the subject in their science lessons, and the link to the English CLIL course is through a longer documentary about the rearing of exotic butterflies on a farm in Costa Rica to provide pupae for museums like the Papiliorama. In the productive film task, the learners get familiar with the process of metamorphosis with the example of the housefly and then transfer their knowledge to create a commentary for a silent film (with a music soundtrack) which shows the different stages that butterflies go through.

With productive tasks it is even more important than with receptive ones to provide different avenues of approach with differing kinds of support for the various learner types and speeds. The multi-level activity for this film proposes three different ways of achieving the same outcome, a film commentary. Level 1 learners use a worksheet which provides the sentences describing the metamorphosis and in addition, connectors such as *first, then, after x days, finally*. At Level 2, the pupils work with three different sets of sentence elements (connectors, nouns, verb phrases) to combine them into a coherent commentary. At Level 3, finally, the most astute learners can use the housefly model text to create their butterfly text. Before they can graft the commentary onto the film, they will use the Explorers Online Dictionary (see Sprague & Staufer 2006) to listen to new words they may be using to get their pronunciation right. Finally, the texts should be checked by the teacher as they will be performed alongside the silent film.

What is vital in both the receptive and the productive orientations towards film exploitation is that learners understand from the beginning that the documentaries are windows to worlds which can otherwise not be brought to the classroom, and that opening these windows always involves language work and thinking skills, arranged for them in a task cycle with a defined outcome. In this way, they will be less likely to fall back on consumption-oriented viewing habits they may bring along to school.

Ways of working with films for youngsters: variation is key

In the course of the further development of film-based scenarios in Explorers, there is a wealth of options that the authors, in close collaboration with professional film makers and editors, will be developing. As media-experienced teachers know, you can do lots more with movies than simply consume them as a distraction in that famous last lesson before the holidays. Here are some considerations:

- The fact that DVDs can be run on computers means that different groups of learners can watch different film sequences in parallel. Reporting back to the class what they have seen and heard constitutes a productive jigsaw activity.
- Films can be exploited through various senses: Listening to noises and voices without moving pictures challenges learners to guess what the action may be; viewing without sound could entice them to write possible dialogues or commentaries.
- Extracts from the films have been and will be incorporated into an interactive language trainer CD-ROM. This enables learners to review film passages with a focus on detailed understanding and language work where they can choose their own pace.
- The element of humour can be enhanced with visual and dramaturgical means. The Gym Clowns

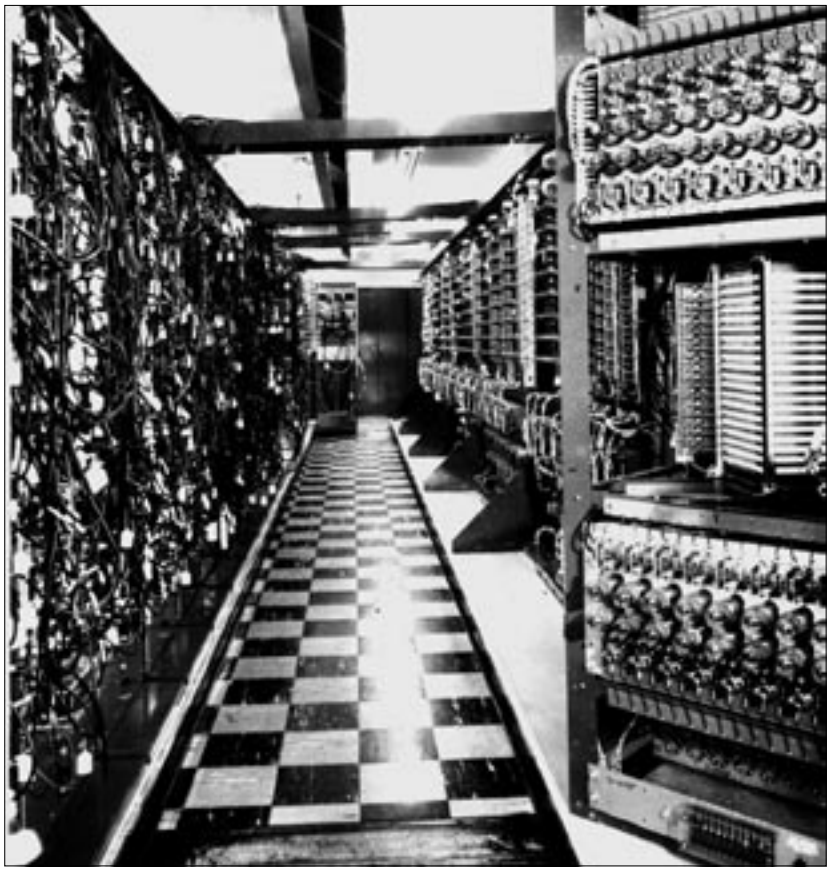
film shows extended versions of the physical exercises as little human comedies, which can serve as stimuli for the pupils to develop their own pantomimes or sketches.

- With digital recording tools more easily available nowadays, teachers and students should feel encouraged to audio-record their own mini-documentaries or even to create their own short video-films.
- The easy portability of DVDs and their omnipresence in many households nowadays means that films may not only be viewed in classrooms only, but may be the basis for homework assignments as well. This can create opportunities for blended learning of a new kind, for example the whole family watching and discussing a documentary on Bruno Manser and his quest for the rainforest in English is no longer such an utopian image.

As not all primary school teachers may be familiar with the whole range of possibilities of using documentaries creatively, the first few films in Explorers are firmly embedded in the task structures with well-defined outcomes. In later film-based scenarios, suggestions are given for alternative ways of using the films.

Conclusions

The challenge for CLIL course authors is to link topics and objectives from the general curriculum and to pack them into manageable steps along the pathway of language development. A task-based approach harnesses the goings-on in the classroom to binding micro-objectives in the form of well-defined abilities and outcomes. So as to enrich the tasks, different forms of input should be offered. Apart from visual material, listening pieces and short texts, documentary films offer many advantages. They can bring aspects of subject content, such as tropical rainforests, into the classroom that would otherwise be remote. They speak to both visual and auditory senses. They provide challenging opportunities for varied reception and production tasks. They are possibly more closely related to the youngsters' media consumption habits than the usual listening comprehension pieces. And finally, they can raise issues that concern the learners in their daily lives. All of these assets probably justify the considerable costs and efforts that went into making the *Explorers* films. However, the real test is in the classrooms as teachers and learners use the documentaries to learn about new worlds and develop communicative language skills.



Whirwind (1950)

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