

Film: A Motivating and Effective Medium for Teaching English?

Summary of a Master's Thesis on the Use of Films in English Foreign Language Teaching in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany

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With English being by far the most frequently taught foreign language in the German school system, English teachers have a special responsibility for ensuring their pupils' language learning motivation and preparing them for real life communication with native speakers of different linguistic varieties outside school (Diehr 62). Working with films is considered an increasingly appreciated means of achieving these aims: films are motivating and authentic media which are also relevant in the pupils' daily life outside school. In addition, films can be employed to promote different competences as well as the widely demanded film and media literacy that is called for by various institutions and associations in Germany such as the *Kultusministerkonferenz*¹ or the congress *Cinema goes School*²: In its 2012 declaration on media education, *the Kultusministerkonferenz* states that media education is part of the schools' teaching mission and thus has to be firmly established in German schools as an obligatory element of education (3, 9). Moreover, after the congress *Cinema goes School*, a statement on film literacy³ was published that highlights that

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films must find their place in every context of teaching and additionally emphasizes the absolute necessity of integrating film education and film literacy into German school curricula, thus following the example of countries such as France, Sweden or Great Britain where films are firmly established in the school systems (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2).

However, the use of films in foreign language teaching finds itself in an ambivalent position (Henseler et al. 6): the extent to which films are included in lessons still seems to leave room for improvement (Thaler 17), just as their integration in official regulations such as North Rhine-Westphalian syllabus guidelines (Henseler et al. 24; Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen (MSW NRW), "Kernlehrplan 2007"; MSW NRW, "Kernlehrplan 2014").⁴ Furthermore, although there are resources for teachers

to lean on,⁵ much of the practical implementation is left up to them and can be rather demanding due to a variety of challenges such as Engelbert Thaler's five conflicts: time, language, reception, goal and

1 The *Kultusministerkonferenz* ('the conference of ministers of education') is a national political assembly of the ministers of education, research and culture from all German federal states.

2 The congress *Cinema goes School* (*Kino macht Schule*) was organized by the German *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* ('federal centre for political education') and the *Filmförderungsanstalt* ('federal film board') in 2003.

3 The statement on film literacy is originally named *Filmkompetenzklärung*.

4 Syllabus guidelines is used as an equivalent for the German *Kernlehrpläne*.

5 Internet resources (as proposed, for instance, by Donaghy), teaching models for specific topics (that can have "serious shortcomings" (Real 28ff.)) and practical manuals (such as the manual by Solte) provide general or film-specific (methodological) recommendations for the use of films in the English foreign language classroom.

technology (29). In this context, personal interest in working with films during English lessons, the desire to get a deeper insight into this topic as well as the experience that films were a largely marginalized medium during the researcher's time as a pupil determined the decision to conduct a study on the use of films in the English foreign language classroom.

A continuous look at the use of films in foreign language teaching is of special interest for several reasons. Not only do "teaching methods and teaching material change as technology evolves" (Fjällström 2), but it can also take some time before regulations or general changes have visibly entered teaching practice. The practical use of films in English foreign language learning and teaching has been discussed in theoretical academic discourse. Furthermore, diverse studies have been conducted across the globe. Most of these aim at evaluating the effectiveness of films and subtitles for learning English, especially in a university context. In studies on films in English lessons in schools, the primary focus seems to have been on the teachers' perspective, while not taking the pupils' perspective into account. In her study, Virve Ruusunen experienced "that the teachers were not sure about the [pupils'] opinions. Perhaps the teachers have not asked for any feedback for using [films] or they have not had the time to analyse how [films] really work as a teaching tool" (90). Thus, she considers the pupils' point of view interesting for further research (Ruusunen 91).

Learning about the pupils' perception of foreign language lessons and their opinion on the methodology as well as having them judge the effectiveness of teaching for the development of diverse skills and competences can be highly illuminating and very valuable. Knowledge about the pupils' perception and opinion on films can help teachers plan practical work with films in the English foreign language classroom in a more effective and pupil-centred way. Equally, this knowledge might facilitate dealing with or even overcoming the challenges films pose for foreign language lessons. Therefore, this study primarily investigates the practical implementation of the use

of films in the English foreign language classroom from the pupils' perspective. In addition, the teachers' perspective is included in order to allow for a deeper understanding of the issues raised.

As no existing studies for North Rhine-Westphalian secondary schools or the pupils' perspective were found,⁶ the main research question in this study is: **How do pupils in Q1 courses in North Rhine-Westphalian secondary schools experience, perceive and evaluate the use and methodology of working with films in the English foreign language classroom?** This main research question is broken down into the following, more detailed sub-research questions, primarily based on the reviewed literature and taking into account different learning conditions in Q1 English courses:

1. What role do films (in English) play in the pupils' everyday lives?
2. How do the pupils experience the frequency with which films are used in English lessons?
3. Are films in English lessons motivating from the pupil perspective?
4. Are films in English linguistically challenging for the pupils?
5. Are subtitles a helpful support for the pupils and how do the pupils view their use in English lessons?
6. Which approaches for viewing films in English lessons do the pupils prefer?

⁶ In Germany, there are different types of secondary schools: *Gymnasium*, *Gesamtschule*, *Sekundarschule*, *Realschule*, *Hauptschule*. Only *Gymnasien* are relevant in the study. The school years *EF* (*Einführungsphase*, literally introductory phase), *Q1* and *Q2* (*Qualifikationsphase 1 und 2*, literally qualification phase 1 and 2) are the last three years of a German secondary school of the type *Gymnasium* after which the pupils take the German *Abitur* exams (equivalent to A-Levels). These three school years constitute upper secondary school (German *Sekundarstufe II* or *Oberstufe*). Pupils are usually aged 15 to 18. The German abbreviations *EF*, *Q1* and *Q2* are used in this article. For *Q1* and *Q2*, pupils can choose two advanced courses (*Leistungskurse*) in which they are taught considerably more lessons per week and thus get a more in-depth education. All other courses in *Q1* and *Q2* are basic courses (*Grundkurse*). In the *EF*, pupils only have basic courses.

7. How do the pupils experience film analysis and the use of film adaptations in English lessons?
8. How do the pupils evaluate the effectiveness of films in English lessons and in their free time for improving and promoting linguistic and intercultural competences as well as film literacy?
9. Do the pupils' perspectives differ dependent on whether they are enrolled in basic courses, in advanced courses or in bilingual education programmes?
10. Do the teachers' responses correspond to the results of the pupil survey and identify challenges connected with the use of films in English lessons?

METHODOLOGY

In view of the study's motivation and aims, a number of concrete considerations determined the selection of the study population. As the North Rhine-Westphalian syllabus guidelines reveal that it is solely in upper secondary school that not only extracts but also entire films are to be covered (MSW NRW, "Kernlehrplan 2007"; MSW NRW, "Kernlehrplan 2014"), the study was carried out at this level. Moreover, choosing the oldest year group available was considered most beneficial so as to ensure that the pupils had the maximum exposure to films in English lessons. Furthermore, it was assumed that the older the pupils are and the more experience they have with films in English lessons, the better they can consciously reflect upon film teaching practices, or their skills and linguistic capabilities, and the more confident they are in voicing their own opinions. Since it was clear that the Q2 students would have already left school before the study could take place in June 2018, it was conducted with pupils and their teachers in the second oldest year group, the Q1. A study in the Q1 (in contrast to the EF) offered the additional possibility of comparing basic and advanced courses. Moreover, it was considered most

useful to include the teachers of the respective Q1 courses as they might illuminate the pupils' responses, therefore giving a deeper insight into the topic.

Finally, the study was conducted at four North Rhine-Westphalian secondary schools of the type Gymnasium, two rural and two urban area schools. One rural and one urban school offered bilingual education programmes that differed slightly. This, however, should not have distorted the results. The study population consisted of 247 pupils in total from six Q1 basic and seven Q1 advanced courses. In sum, 135 pupils from advanced courses (54.66 percent) and 112 pupils from basic courses (45.34 percent) took part in the study. 18.22 percent of all pupils took part in bilingual education programmes⁷. Altogether, the sample consisted of 152 girls (61.54 percent), 93 boys (37.65 percent) and two pupils who did not specify their gender. The pupils were between 16 and 20 years old, on average 16.89 years old. The teachers sample consisted of eight teachers from the four schools. Five teachers were female, three male. They were between 25 and 60 years old, most of them 40 to 45 years old (n = 3). Four teachers instructed a Q1 basic course, four teachers a Q1 advanced course.

For the study, a cross-sectional design, "the collection of data on a *sample of cases* [...] at a *single point* in time in order to collect a body of *quantitative* or *quantifiable* data" (Bryman 53, emphases in the original) with low "personal involvement of the researcher" (Balnaves and Caputi 65), was most suitable for gaining an authentic and broad account of many pupils' perspectives on the current state of film teaching in English lessons. A quantitative research method, namely a survey in form of questionnaires for pupils and teachers, was chosen for the operationalization of the research question(s) for several reasons (Balnaves and Caputi 76f.; Bryman 149; Schirmer 116, 183): "Questionnaires are particularly useful if you want to know something about the incidence of some behaviour or the opinions,

⁷ All pupils enrolled in bilingual education programmes were advanced course pupils.

beliefs or attitudes of large numbers or groups of people” (Langdridge 67), an aim of the study, and they assure anonymity which can lead to more open and honest responses (Schirmer 182f.).

GENERAL RESULTS, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of the study suggest that films are overall suitable media to draw a connection between pupils’ everyday lives and English lessons. However, the degree to which pupils are used to watching films (or media) in English varies. Although the pupils’ experiences reveal that films are not used frequently in English lessons, which tends to dissatisfy them, films in English are generally perceived as motivating authentic media. They are regarded as being not too linguistically challenging for *Q1* pupils and slightly ‘better’ than working with books. Subtitles are considered both irritating and helpful although pupils mostly do not need them. This corresponds to their view that usually English subtitles are seldom to never used in upper secondary school. Watching a film as a whole without interruptions is the pupils’ preferred approach and, in combination with their slight aversion to accompanying exercises, suggests that they prefer free-time viewing habits for school. Tendencies indicate that films are sometimes used for entertainment purposes only and that working with a film is still neglected compared to working with the corresponding book. The pupils’ responses, however, do not create a clear picture of the extent to which the apparently existing goal conflict between entertainment and learning is an issue. Nevertheless, most pupils perceive films in English as helpful devices for improving linguistic skills, for promoting intercultural competence and, to a slightly lower degree, for furthering film literacy.

In sum, although the pupils’ perspectives

are quite individual, patterns can be detected relating to their enrolment in basic and advanced courses or bilingual education programmes. For instance, advanced course pupils watch a larger share of all media and films in English in their free time than basic course pupils. Additionally, basic course pupils generally agree less than advanced course pupils to having improved or acquired certain skills, competences or knowledge through films. Moreover, subtitles irritate advanced course pupils in bilingual education programmes most and basic course pupils least – a fact which could be connected to their language proficiency. All in all, the study’s findings highlight that the use and the effects of films in English foreign language lessons in *Q1* courses in North Rhine-Westphalian secondary schools are similar to the general situation described in academic discourse and in studies conducted across the globe. The research gap could be illuminated to some extent and the expected differences between the courses and programmes were empirically verified in the course of the study⁸.

For teaching at school, the results suggest that most conflicts and challenges connected to working with films in English lessons can be solved or counteracted when teachers know about their pupils’ perspective and can take their course-specific, programme-specific and maybe even individual needs and wishes into consideration. However, one should not forget that the single aspects investigated in the study regarding work with films are not to be seen in isolation: their interconnection determines how pupils experience, perceive and evaluate film teaching practice. Nevertheless, the teachers’ perspective reveals that one conflict prevails: time. The general prerequisites of teaching, an insufficient representation of films in syllabus guidelines and their apparently low relevance for final exams govern the possibilities

⁸ Due to the scope of this article, the theoretical background as well as the study’s results and their discussion are presented in a very condensed and exemplary form. Additionally, some elements of the original Master’s Thesis such as the study’s methodological discussion are not touched upon.

Watching a film as a whole without interruptions is the pupils’ preferred approach

of working with films. In combination with the pupils' desire to watch films more often and in their entire length, the time factor stays a challenge that is not to be underestimated. In the long run, it remains to be seen how the use of films evolves – whether they gain more importance in official regulations for schools or whether shorter audio-visual media are 'the next generation' due to their length and possibly growing popularity in pupils' everyday lives. This would be an additional starting point for future research on the use of films in the English foreign language classroom.

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Nathalie Naylor was born on 24 December 1993 in Neuss, Germany. After having been brought up bilingually in German and English, she studied English and French at the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster between 2012 and 2018 in order to become a teacher for *Gymnasien* and *Gesamtschulen*. During her studies, she spent a semester studying at the University of Tours, France, followed by a short school internship, and completed two voluntary internships at schools in Montpellier, France and Norwich, England. In August 2018, Nathalie Naylor was awarded the degree of Master of Education (M.Ed.) by the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster.