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### Title

Film as Source Material in Advanced Foreign Language Classes

### Permalink

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### Journal

L2 Journal, 6(1)

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### Publication Date

2014

### DOI

10.5070/L26119239

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# Film as Source Material in Advanced Foreign Language Classes

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This paper suggests new ways filmic texts might be employed in advanced foreign language classes. Typically, film has been seen as source material for broadening students' vocabulary or for developing communicative competence. This paper considers what a close reading of a filmic text might offer foreign language educators and students by exploring how three semiotic systems—language, image, and music/sound—are employed in film to create meaning. Specifically, drawing on film's employment of language in a rich audiovisual context, we demonstrate various tasks that move beyond the denotative function of language to develop students' understanding of the relationship between utterances and the context in which they are made, as well as foster an understanding of how language is used subtly to obfuscate, evade, or project positions of power. Finally, we demonstrate how film might be used to develop students' potential for using their second language (L2) to create meaning in new ways. The tasks we describe here address the goals of a foreign language curriculum as articulated in the MLA Report (2007) (developing students' translingual and transcultural competence) and in the writings of Claire Kramsch (developing students' symbolic competence; e.g., 2006).

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*For Claire, always inspiring*

## INTRODUCTION

Film has long been recognized as a potential goldmine for foreign language instruction. With its authentic language, rich cultural content, professional actors evoking contemporary life or a historical period, and language situated in a visual context, film presents a window into the world of the target language and culture, with depictions of socio-economic-political issues and a myriad of human relationships.

Recent research on the use of film or film clips in the foreign language classroom has focused on four broad areas of pedagogy: (a) modeling language use and broadening vocabulary (e.g., Kaiser, 2011; Sherman, 2003); (b) developing students' communicative competence (Sherman, 2003); (c) developing students' intercultural communicative competence (Dubreil, 2011; Pegrum, 2008; Zhang, 2011); and (d) analyzing filmic text in terms of the relationship between the language spoken and the filmic devices employed by the director (Kaiser, 2011; Kambara, 2011). The ideas presented in the fourth area are the starting point for this paper, whose focus is to consider how meaning is created in filmic

texts, and to present some ideas for exploiting film in the advanced-level language classroom.

The theoretical foundation for our pedagogical ideas lies in work on symbolic competence (SC) (Kramersch, 2006, 2009; Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008), which is defined as the “ability to play with various linguistic codes and with various spatial and temporal resonances of those codes” (Kramersch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 664). SC takes us beyond the transactional competence that too often is the safe haven of the language classroom. It is worth remembering that Kramersch first wrote about SC in the 2006 *Modern Language Journal* retrospective on communicative competence (CC), where she described CC as having “become reduced to its spoken modality” and meaning little more than “to exchange information speedily and effectively and to solve problems, complete assigned tasks, and produce measurable results” (Kramersch, 2006, p. 250). Instead, Kramersch argues that students need “a much more sophisticated competence in the manipulation of symbolic systems” (p. 251).

We might consider manipulating symbolic systems then to mean using language in something other than its denotative function (the focus of CC as it has come to be practiced). SC is concerned with the phatic and poetic functions of language, but with increased emphasis on the context in which language is used, the subject positions of speakers, and cultural (historical, political, social) undercurrents referenced in the exchange (Kramersch, 2006). In an email exchange (August, 2013) Kramersch suggested an alternative definition of SC, calling it “an apprehension of the affordances of the context.” Apprehension is key: SC is both an interpretive skill (i.e., an ability to interpret utterances of others) *and* an ability to produce language that reframes language in a new context, references cultural undercurrents, and that takes both the speaker’s and the interlocutor’s subject position into account.

We will consider three overlapping pedagogical approaches to film in the advanced language classroom. First, we take up the filmic context (e.g., the setting, shot, camera [angle, distance, focus], montage, juxtaposition, etc.) as it relates to the spoken discourse in the film. Second, we look at how characters in film use language. Third, we explore a classroom activity engaging students’ production of language within the parameters of a particular film and with the goal of developing students’ symbolic competence.

## FILMIC CONTEXT

The context of an utterance is of paramount importance to its meaning. Consider the following dialog, taken from a scene in *The Ice Storm* (Lee, 1997):

Boy: Want some gum?

Girl (takes proffered gum): Devil Dog?

Boy (points to his mouth, refusing the proffered cake): Chewing.

Girl: Did you tell Sandy?

Boy: Tell Sandy what? *Pause.* You didn’t tell him either, did you?

For an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher there are grammar points, vocabulary, and cultural cues to be explored. But the meaning of this exchange can be understood only within the filmic context in which it is situated.

The sequence of shots (20:00-21:25) encompassing the dialog begins with a teenage girl riding her bike through the woods in late fall. She eventually arrives at a swimming pool drained for the winter, where a teenage boy awaits her.



They have the brief interchange noted above, ...



... after which the boy puts his gum behind his ear and they come together and kiss.



As the kiss lingers, the camera swings high above the actors to a bird's eye view.

The director Martin Scorsese famously noted, "Cinema is a matter of what's in the frame and what's out" (as cited in Brody, 2011). Everything in the frame, potentially at least, has been put there for a reason, and as part of the filmic construct, it potentially has meaning. Filmic devices such as setting, camera angle, juxtaposition of scenes, length of shot, etc., as well as the language spoken (or unspoken), the gestures made, and the background music, can all contribute to the construction of meaning.

Considering the scene described above, in an ESL class we might ask students such questions as: What was the girl wearing? Where is she? What season is this and is that

important? Why is the swimming pool empty, and is that important? Does the gesture of putting gum behind the ear tell you anything? What was their exchange like? Why did the director choose to have the camera swing up and above the characters?

One possible interpretation of this scene would have the girl's clothing and the setting in the woods evoking the story of Little Red Riding Hood. The barren trees, empty swimming pool, and minimalist conversation foreshadow the kiss devoid of emotional content (the screenplay notes, "They begin not so much to kiss as to place their tongues in each others' mouths" (Schamus, 1997). The swinging of the camera from a low-angle shot to one from above invites the viewer to play God and to pass judgment on this teenage physical experimentation. And finally, it is worth noting that in the screenplay the girl offers the boy a type of cake called "Twinkie," but during shooting the name was changed to "Devil Dog" (another type of cake), further reinforcing the moral overtones of this scene sequence. On the surface, the verbal exchange between the boy and girl denotes an exchange of gifts and a concern that others might know of their rendezvous (itself evoking feelings of guilt); but, set within the larger scene, their matter-of-fact exchange takes on symbolic meaning, reinforcing the emotional void mirrored in their barren environment. Using this clip only to study grammar and vocabulary would miss its point entirely. It is precisely the spoken language's context that gives the words significance beyond their denotative and connotative meanings.<sup>1</sup>

## THE LANGUAGE OF THE CHARACTERS

A second pedagogical approach is to focus on the language of the characters, in particular, looking at how characters use language in ways other than a denotative function. We can consider the language spoken in a film as representative of natural speech and look for examples in which characters use language to elicit information, to obfuscate or reinforce their position of power, to allude to historical events or cultural norms, and to successfully carry out their agendas. Even though filmic speech is a constructed text, rehearsed and performed, viewers suspend disbelief and hear the actors' words as natural.<sup>2</sup> Such exchanges can serve as fodder for student analysis.

Consider, for example, this scene from the family drama *Arutemo, Arutemo* (Koreeda, 2008). In this scene (1'49" – 2'48") an elderly man exits a medical clinic (Image 1), encounters an elderly woman (Image 2), and a brief exchange follows (Image 3), after which he proceeds on his way (Image 4). The entire scene lasts less than a minute.

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<sup>1</sup> Some may argue that such an analysis is more appropriate to a film studies course rather than a language course, even at the advanced level. However, this argument raises two objections: first, film studies courses rarely look at the foreign language used in film; second, how can students learn about language use without attending to the context in which it is placed? When teachers work with the language used in film, they need to teach filmic devices in order to understand all of the potential meanings of the film.

<sup>2</sup> In a recent study, a comparison of spoken English corpora and filmic dialog found no significant differences (Forchini, 2012).



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4

Their dialog (original Japanese in Appendix A):

1. Woman: Good morning
2. Man: Hi.
3. Woman: Don't you wish it would cool down, doctor?
4. Man: Today again it seems it will exceed 30 degrees.
5. Woman: When it's hot like this, I can barely drink water and all I can eat is cold somen noodles.
6. Man: That's no good. Occasionally have some eel, or you won't have energy.
7. Woman: I have a feeling my time could be up any day now. When it is, I want you to be there to take my final pulse.
8. Man: Ha-ha-ha, well, in that case I have to outlive you, ha-ha-ha, so long.
9. Woman: Enjoy your walk.

On its surface, the scene is a rather banal exchange of greetings, a discussion about the hot weather and what foods to eat when it is hot (itself useful for developing cultural competence) and an expression of concern over the feeling of impending death. Whatever the woman's motivations for talking about her premonition of death and her desire to have him be present, the man's intent is to end the conversation politely and continue on his way. He reframes her earnest appeal into light banter (line 8) and accomplishes what appears to be his goal. From the language it is quite clear to a Japanese viewer (but less so to our students) that the man is a doctor and the woman his patient. But what is left unclear is why he seems to want to cut off the conversation. Asking students to speculate about his motivations based solely on this clip is fraught with potential for misconstruing the character, the plot, or the themes of the work.

Later in this film, the retired doctor is sitting at home and is told the woman's home is calling because she has fallen ill. He takes the call, muttering, "She should be taking her Digitalis." The doctor advises his neighbors to call an ambulance and apologizes for not being able to help her because he is retired. Together with his son he steps outside and

meets the ambulance, but is asked to get out of their way and is made to feel useless. As the ambulance leaves, he passes his adult son and reproaches him for being outside in his pajamas. This second clip must color our interpretation of the previous scene, although the two are separated by 80+ minutes. In the opening scene the doctor gave the woman folksy advice—he recommended eel to keep her strength up—but clearly the doctor knew something of her medicine and medical needs. He knew he could no longer practice medicine and so sought to end the conversation because he could no longer be her doctor. Students who have watched only the first clip will be unlikely to understand why the doctor acted the way he did.

On the other hand, students who have only watched the film as a whole without a close viewing of individual clips are unlikely to connect these two scenes together as distinct, yet important facets of the doctor's psychology. The strength of using clips in the classroom or as homework is that it permits a close reading of a scene, a close analysis of what was said and why other things were not said, and a consideration of how filmic devices, language and music/sound contribute to the creation of meaning.

## PERFORMING SC: A PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITY

The two approaches outlined above focus on developing students' awareness of context and interpretive skills. However, for students to acquire SC, they need to be able to not only interpret, but also they must have the ability to manipulate symbolic systems themselves. In this section we will look at a film clip comprising two scenes and a set of pedagogical activities based on that clip and designed to foster the development of a performative SC.

In two different semesters (Fall 2012 and Fall 2013), students in a fourth-year Japanese class (with all instruction in Japanese) were asked to create a script based on an imagined scenario established by the instructor.<sup>3</sup> Students first read the novella *Orion-za kara no Shotaijo* (Asada, 1998) and then watched the film adaptation (Saegusa 2007), loosely based on the novella. The film focuses on a married couple, Toyo and Matsuzo, the owners of a movie theater in Kyoto of the late 1950s, and their young male assistant, Tomekichi. Matsuzo, the husband and projectionist, dies from lung disease, but Toyo continues to run the theater with the help of the assistant. At the time, the movie industry flourished, but the advent of television put most movie houses out of business. The novella and film trace that history and its impact on Toyo and Tomekichi after Matsuzo's death.

After reading the novella, students discussed the plot, characters, themes and sociological and historical settings through close readings of specific passages. After watching the movie together in class, students were assigned homework that required them to watch clips from the film at home and answer questions that explored their understanding of the scene from linguistic, filmic, and cultural perspectives. For example, consider the following clip (33'23" – 36'12") comprising two scenes. In the first scene the protagonists have decided to have commemorative photos taken. The scene opens with a view of the subjects as if through the photographer's camera (Image 5) and then we transition to the street scene shot naturally (Image 6):

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<sup>3</sup> The class was taught at a large research university where all instruction in all Japanese language classes is done entirely in Japanese. Each class had sixteen students, mostly of Korean or Chinese background.



Image 5



Image 6

After the first photo is taken, Matsuzo gives his hat to Tomekichi (Image 7) and the second photograph is taken. In the second scene of this clip, we see Toyo looking at the two photos (Images 8 and 9), but she considers the second photo to be a bad omen and hides it from her husband, lying to him when he asks about it.



Image 7



Image 8



Image 9 (note the expressions on her face and grouping of the characters)

After admiring the photo (Image 10), Toyo and Matsuzo turn their attention to the garden with the blooming flowers, and the scene ends with a slow movement of the camera away



from the open door, which creates the impression of their moving into the garden (Image 11).



Image 10



Image 11

Their dialog from these two scenes is provided below (see Appendix B for original Japanese text). The setting for the first scene is on the street in front of the theater with the photographer and Takeo, the owner of a nearby noodle shop.

1. Toyo: It's really sudden, isn't it?
2. Matsuzo: It's not so sudden. I have been thinking about it. Isn't it better to have a photo of the three of us?
3. Toyo: I think so. (to Tomekichi) Don't get so nervous.
4. Matsuzo: Yeah. If you get your photo taken, you need to smile.
5. Tomekichi: Yes.
6. Photographer: Thanks for waiting.
7. Takeo: Hey, Matsuzo, you look great! Hey.....
8. Matsuzo: Don't be so nosy.
9. Photographer: Are you ready? Smile! Ready, set, go! Let's take another one. You still look nervous. You have to smile, right?
10. Matsuzo: Of course. It will be a good commemorative photo. You need to smile more. Hey you, you wear this.
11. Tomekichi: Thank you.
12. Photographer: Are you ready?

The setting of the second scene is Matsuzo and Toyo's home.

13. Toyo: It came out nicely.
14. Matsuzo: Yeah. Isn't there another one?
15. Toyo: Yes, but it didn't come out.
16. Matsuzo: I see. We should put it out somewhere.
17. Toyo: Sure. Oh, they are blooming.
18. Matsuzo: Yeah.
19. Toyo: Thanks. (Matsuzo hands Toyo the shaved Bonito flakes.) I love it, the hollyhock.

20. Matsuzo: For hollyhock, when the top flowers bloom, it will come to the end.<sup>4</sup>

Students were asked to watch the two scenes of this clip as a homework assignment and reflect on the following questions (posed and answered in Japanese; the purpose in asking the question is presented in square brackets):

1. Why did Matsuzo (the husband) give his hat to Tomekichi (the young assistant)? Is giving the hat metaphoric? [underlying meanings of gestures]
2. Do you have any expressions using hats in your country? [exploiting the multilingualism in the classroom to explore the ways cultures embody meanings]
3. What was Toyo's (the wife) reaction to the second photograph? Why? [empathy]
4. What is Matsuzo's health condition? How is this conveyed? What was Matsuzo doing in the room? [culturally specific food practices; health]
5. Why are the flowers included in the scene? What do blooming flowers mean to the Japanese? In general, what does nature mean to the Japanese? How does it differ in your culture? [cultural knowledge, cultural values, multiculturalism]

These questions address the representation of culture and a passive understanding of how language, gesture, and filmic devices have been used to create meaning. Since SC is more than just the ability to recognize and interpret, but also requires that students be able to produce meaning and manipulate the linguistic code themselves, how might we get students to *perform* symbolic competence?

We decided to ask students to create scenes not found in the book or film that would require them to take subject position into account to reframe a dialog within a new context. They were also asked to reflect on the extent to which they had manipulated language to portray the inner world of the characters within the new context as well as their own voices as authors of this new scene. The dialog was to include a preface in which the students described what their intentions were in creating the dialog, so that the instructor might understand how they envisioned the character both externally and internally. Such an exercise asks students to imagine ways that others might think and the worldviews they might hold.<sup>5</sup>

With this idea in mind and in an effort to determine whether SC was developing in students, students were asked to write a response to the following prompt:

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<sup>4</sup>The filmic devices employed in these scenes were part of the classroom discussions and influence the reading of the scene. For example, we note that the first scene opens with the upside down characters instilling a sense of discomfort and chaos in viewers as the shot lingers (and the sense of chaos continues while the photographer shoots the photo); the use of sepia in the outdoor scenes imparting a feeling of oldness; the rhythmic sound of Matsuzo shaving the bonito (a very domestic activity), and its gradual muffling by the sound of his coughing; the closing of the scene with the camera fading away from the characters and the garden, bringing the characters into the garden, as it were, linking them to the flowers, and the impending death discussed above.

<sup>5</sup>Taking this activity further, we might ask students to envision how they would film the scene, or ask them to act out the scene before the class, both of which would facilitate the development of SC by involving reframing and interpreting the written word in ways that would add their own voice.

Imagine that Matsuzo happened to find the second photo that Toyo had hidden away. Describe the scene first, and then write a dialog between the two characters, including each character's interior monologs.

Students were told that the imagined dialog should not alter the development of the plot nor contradict the characters' personalities. Since students knew the entire story, their dialog was expected to fit in with the flow of the story.

Although this scene doesn't exist in the film, students were expected to be able to reframe what they learned from homework exercises and classroom discussions into a credible dialog between these two characters. In their essays students needed not only to apply their linguistic and cultural knowledge of Japan in the late 1950s, but also to imagine how the characters would react in this new situation, what the characters' agendas might be, and how the characters might use language to carry out those agendas.

### **The Student Essays**

In 2012, this assignment was given to students as an essay question on an in-class chapter exam. Twelve of sixteen students interpreted the proffered situation as one of confrontation. In their essays, Matsuzo took the lead, questioned Toyo, and for most students the conversation moved from the discovered picture and why it was hidden, to the hat, then the assistant, and then Matsuzo's health. Typically Matsuzo was portrayed as irritated by Toyo's lie. There was more variety in the depiction of Toyo, but all the students portrayed her as submissive, nine students had her lie or obfuscate, or confront Matsuzo about his health and why he gave Tomekichi the hat. The language was direct and heavy with explanation, and tended to be choppy and not flow very well. Two students took a completely different approach. In one student's script, the couple began talking about flowers and Toyo expressed her concern for Matsuzo's health and regretted that the flowers in the garden would not survive until fall. Eventually the photos are mentioned, but only as a way to remember Matsuzo after he is gone. One student never mentions the photos, instead showing us Toyo's anxiety about Matsuzo's health, both characters' high regard for Tomekichi, and their dedication to the theater. Many (but not all) students were unable to capture the essential nature of the characters or the cultural and historical norms of that time, in part because of the exam environment and a lack of preparation.

In 2013 the same exercise was given to another group of sixteen students, but this time prior to the exam students practiced doing a similar exercise with a clip from a different film, and this time the assignment itself was given as a take-home exam essay. The results were quite different. As might be expected, the language (grammar and range of vocabulary) was much improved. More significant, however, was that students were much more sensitive to conveying Japanese values. Although five students still had the same kinds of confrontations we found the previous year, four students had Matsuzo avoid mentioning the second photograph, and seven students had Matsuzo ask about the second photo, but without anger, in either a calm or round-about way. Their portrayal of the characters, the subtle allusions to topics, and the characters' understated affection for each other accorded with the depiction of the characters in the film (a kind and loving Matsuzo, a strong and independent Toyo). The students' use of language to show us the inner world of the characters while still leaving much unsaid and unexplained revealed a linguistic, cultural and artistic competence as well. Moreover, the students often portrayed the scene in a filmic

setting, indicating elements of the setting or what scene should follow the scene they depicted.

## CONCLUSION

We have attempted to demonstrate that film, with its interplay of language and filmic devices, can be used to sensitize students to the importance of context in language use. We have attempted to show that observing how characters in film use language to obfuscate, project power, and advance their agenda can serve as a model of symbolic competence in action. Finally, we have shown that with adequate preparation and adequate opportunity to develop their ideas, students were able to demonstrate the acquisition of an understanding of Japanese culture with sensitivity to that context.

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## Appendix A

Japanese text from *Aruitemo, Aruitemo* (Koreeda, 2008)

1. 女性: おはようございます。
2. 男性: やあ。
3. 女性: なかなかずしくなりませんね え、先生。
4. 男性: ああ。今日も昼前には三十度を超すらしいですな。
5. 女性: これだけ暑いと、お水飲むのもおっくうで、おそうめんぐらいしかのどに通らないで。
6. 男性: それはよくないな。たまにはうなぎでも食べて精つけないと。
7. 女性: もういつお迎えが来てもあれですけど、いざっていうときは先生に脈とってもらわないと。
8. 男性: ハハハ、それじゃ私も負けずに長生きしないと。ハハハハハ。それじゃ。
9. 女性: 行ってらっしゃいませ。

## Appendix B

Japanese text from *Orion-za kara no shotaijo* (Saegusa, 2007)

Setting: On the street with a photographer

1. Toyo:               ほんまに急なんやから。
2. Matsuzo:         急やない。ずっと思っと思ったんや。  
三人の写真残しといた方がええやろ。
3. Toyo:             そうどすな。そない、緊張せんと。
4. Matsuzo:         そやな。どうせならな。笑って写らなあかん。
5. Tomekichi:       はい。
6. Photographer:   はい、おまっとうはん。
7. Takeo:            よっ、まっつあん、ええ男やで！おい、こらこら。
8. Matsuzo:         外野は黙っとけ、おら。
9. Photographer:   ほな、いきまっせ。  
はい、笑って。  
ほーう、はっ！  
もう一枚いきまひよ。  
まだかたおせ。もっと笑顔で写らへんと  なあ？
10. Matsuzo:        そらそうや  なっ  ええ記念になるさかいな。  
もっと笑わなあかん  
おい、お前、これかぶれ。
11. Tomekichi:      おおきに。
12. Photographer:   ほな、いきまっせ。

Scene: In Matsuzo and Toyo's home

13. Toyo:            ええ感じどすえ。
14. Matsuzo:        そやな。  
もう一枚あったやろ？
15. Toyo:            ええ、けど失敗やったって。
16. Matsuzo:        そうか。  
飾っとくか。
17. Toyo:            はい。  
あら、咲きましたねえ。
18. Matsuzo:        ああ。
19. Toyo:            おおきに。  
好きどすなあ。立ち葵。
20. Matsuzo:        立ち葵いうたらーてっぺん咲いて仕舞やさかいな。