The Filmic text in the English Foreign Language classroom:
Contributing to students' language & culture

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Abstract | This article analyses how an approach centred on the filmic text in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom contributes to the learners' linguistic and cultural knowledge, as part of an action-research project carried out during the 2021/2022 school year in Sintra, Portugal. For the 8th and 10th grades, lessons were created to include the use of a film, which dealt with the topic of the unit. Each lesson worked on different skills, with a wide range of activities that aimed at developing students' language and culture. At the end of each course unit, focus groups were conducted and written assignments were submitted. This facilitated the development of further lesson plans which catered for students' needs and promoted language learning. Results show that learners' participation in class increased both in quantity and in quality, as their discussions became more detail-oriented and included film analysis vocabulary and cultural meaning construction, thus revealing a growing cultural awareness when linking or contrasting the different cultures shown on screen with their own. All in all, the use of film in these EFL classrooms contributed to the learners' linguistic and cultural learning process.

Keywords| Filmic text; EFL classroom; languaculture

1 Introduction

Considering Viebrock's (2016) take on the filmic text as the combination of an analytical approach to details and a holistic perspective of the meaning of films in an educational setting, learners' ability "to decode and produce all kinds of visual images and all kinds of combinations of different semiotic systems" (p.13), its potential in the classroom has long been underrated. According to Edgar et al. (2015), film is analysable as text because it integrates written, audio and visual texts, with the further advantage of being an authentic material. In the case of films there is great potential, and whether learners can actively engage with the language and culture from the film is an issue that has been discussed, with studies showing that film may have a place in the classroom as a means to develop knowledge, particularly when considering it as a multimodal text, where more than one mean is needed to fully understand and engage with it.

As part of a Master's in Teaching, I was required to observe two classes for five months and during that period, three main issues arose: 1) the participation rates were very low (both in spoken and in written activities); 2) learners would become excited when shown scenes from films, but no activities were developed afterwards to analyse or discuss them; 3) it was not clear to students what they could gain from interpreting a film. Bringing these three issues centre stage, the research question then was 'How may filmic text contribute to learners' language and cultural acquisition?' The point was to analyse how, after surpassing the issue of getting their attention, film as a multimodal text and its analysis could benefit how students perceived language learning and how it was a source of cultural discussion.

All lessons entailed the analysis of an excerpt from a film, which was specifically chosen to fit the topic of the unit at hand. The analysis focused on different skills, with an attempt to showcase how one teaching resource, (the film), could be the foundation for all skills to be developed. There was a particular emphasis on speaking, considering that the progression of the tasks relied heavily

on students' input. Specific writing structures were revised, as were grammar rules, and then used as the form of a response to the events of the film.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Film as a Multimodal Text

Film and filmic text entail the understanding of film in its narrative form, that is, depicting a story told by the characters (Manchel, 1990), and not videos developed with language and teaching as a *leitmotif*. Wildfeuer (2017) further suggests that the construct "film as text today" is bridging "the gap between general approaches to film interpretation (…) and modern linguistic analysis of how meaning in multimodal texts is created" (p.1). The concept of multimodality refers to texts which combine more than one mode, such as written, spoken and paralanguage, still and moving image, audio and spatial meaning (Steckmest, 2021). Films use more than one mode at a time, thus making them multimodal texts. Moreover, meaning in film derives from an interplay which results "in a narrative text whose comprehension and interpretation requires the spectator's active participation" (Wildfeuer, 2017, p.1).

This concept of active viewing involves "scaffolding, focal attention, critical thinking, and participation" (Steckmest, 2021, p.12). If literacy is based on the learner's ability to effectively communicate because they can speak, read and write, then multiliteracies refer to the ability to communicate effectively in more than one mode. Students can then develop their linguistic and cultural skills so their meaning-making abilities further evolve.

The permeation of screens in learners' lives has led to the EFL classroom becoming a context where students engage with each other and where English is used to build meaning (Porto, 2018), consequently acquiring greater linguistic proficiency whilst developing Byram's concept of critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*) (Byram, 1997), which promotes learners' ability to critically evaluate different cultures, including their own.

2.1.1 Film in the EFL Classroom.

The use of film in the EFL classroom is supported by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Language – Companion Volume (CEFR-CV)* (Council of Europe, 2020) in the category of audio-visual perception. For instance, at B1 level, learners are expected to follow films in which visuals and action carry much of the storyline (Council of Europe, 2020), hence the importance of choosing an adequate film. There is also evidence in the updated CEFR-CV of an increasing awareness of the link between language and culture where useful intercultural descriptors are provided.

Bearing this in mind, films take on a pivotal role in the EFL classroom, as they also have the potential of allowing for a representation of the real world. This authenticity, not only in the cultural representations and setting choices, but also in the dialogues, is discussed by Legutke (2012), who identifies three features that make films authentic texts: they enable learners to explore their own life in a "nonthreatening way" (p.115); this distance between the learners and the characters may help them develop a deeper understanding towards others, and this requires learners to reflect upon and express their perspectives in spoken and written texts, thus articulating their linguistic knowledge to participate.

Kaiser (2011) adds that this knowledge can be developed at three different levels: "films can serve as a model of language use" (p.241), as vehicles of cultural information and as an "exploration of how multiple semiotic systems work together to create an artistic, meaning-full text" (p.241), that is, how spoken, written and paralanguage show meaning, and how learners in turn use language to create and discuss it. These ideas are addressed in the descriptors in the CEFR-CV for intermediate and proficient foreign language learners, such as the ability to "follow films employing a considerable degree of slang and idiomatic usage" (Council of Europe, 2020, p.53), as this requires learners to engage with the cultural cues and to infer non-explicit meaning.

In addition to the different types of approaches which may be implemented to analyse films, preparation and guidance are also necessary. As Viebrock (2016) argues, films should not be brought into class without previous preparation, hence

the need to develop *pre-viewing*, *while-viewing* and *post-viewing* activities with learners. By scaffolding the use of film in the classroom, its learning potential is achieved through the active participation of students at all stages.

2.2. Language and Culture in Film

Language acquisition is the individual lifelong process of experiencing and acquiring new language, including linguistic forms and practices, connotations and discourse practices, deemed as inseparable (Risager, 2006). The use of film in the EFL classroom allows for a dynamic analysis of language in use, as it requires different layers of understanding and interpreting. Moreover, when speaking a language, users embody more than grammar and vocabulary. They are encompassing a culture in words and gestures, a concept coined as 'languaculture' by Michael Agar in 1994.

Sert and Amri (2021) examined the benefits of student interactions in a discussion task based on a film watched in class where students were asked to narrate the scenes. Results suggest that co-narration entails the reorganisation of what is perceived into new meanings and understandings. This collaborative meaning-making process is described by the authors as one of the goals of learning, alongside "unknown vocabulary or grammar items" (p.127). When focusing on grammar, Sert and Amri (2021) concluded that students corrected each other and suggested better wording, revealing a focus on culturally adequate vocabulary. What was first a linguistically focused approach became a cultural one, as students discussed both content and language issues. Thus, films can be culturally stimulating and, as noted by Chao (2013), by watching culture in action, learners confront their own perceptions with those of the cultures being represented, thus allowing them to engage with their own sense of criticality, crucial in an Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) approach. For this reason, the use of films in EFL classes may develop students' critical cultural awareness.

Considering the link between language and culture, Risager (2007) envisions culture as meaning, so that language may never be "languaculturally neutral" (p.171). By using a foreign language, learners begin to understand that they create meaning

in it as well. ICC then, refers to students' ability to communicate effectively with other cultures and establish comparisons and contrasts with their own to critically analyse and understand them. The combination of language skills with knowledge and attitudes helps learners to become intercultural citizens, an aim of Foreign Language (FL) education.

However, according to Byram (1997), for learners to develop their ICC, they have to first look at their own perspectives. Thus, cultural self-awareness is the first step to exploring personal qualities, such as "empathy, open-mindedness and respect for others" (Corbett, 2010, p.2). This process entails evaluating and valuing 'otherness' in view of cultural exploitation and mediation (Finch et al., 2003). Therefore, taking film into consideration, the gradual exposure of learners to other cultures contributes to resistance to the stereotypical concept of the other (Corbett, 2010). One example of a task where learners are exposed to different cultural perspectives whilst considering their own starting point is through subtitling (Borghetti, 2011), since it requires learners not only to understand the verbal message, but also to comprehend and interpret nonverbal and cultural cues. According to the Council of Europe (2020), in tasks such as subtitling, learners will develop their competencies for "using contextual, grammatical and lexical cues to infer attitude, mood and intentions and anticipate what will come next" (p.60).

3 Methodology

Considering Burns' (2019) approach to teaching, action research brings together the action, which involves a planned intervention, and the research, which entails observing students and identifying issues that need to be addressed.

The research question "How may the use of filmic text in the EFL classroom, and students' participation in tasks centred around it contribute to their language and culture?" was built on the notion of a classroom context where, after a period of observation, students would be presented with a different teaching approach that would tackle some of the issues noticed. After observing an 8th and 10th grade

class, some of the issues noted were the different levels of students' engagement, very much dependent on the type of activity developed.

According to the national curriculum, when leaving secondary education in Portugal, learners are expected to be able to recognise symbolic languages and different representations of the real and the imaginary, which are essential to the communicative processes in personal, social, learning and pre-professional situations (Martins et al., 2016), in which the use of linguistic products, such as artistic representations of language and culture are encompassed. When analysing films, both learners' interpretation skills as well their intercultural awareness are necessary to fully engage with the tasks that aimed at developing their linguistic and cultural competencies.

Throughout the practicum, the films chosen took into consideration the linguistic learning potentials and the topics of the school curriculum. For instance, when choosing *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985) to present school cliques or *Dead Poet's Society* (Weir, 1989) to discuss issues such as choosing a future career whilst in school and the pressures of having to do well in one's studies, learners were faced with characters' reactions and choices, with which they may or may not have agreed, and they now had the setting to discuss these topics, while using English (Hofmman, 2018).

When it came to presenting the films, the sandwich approach (where only a few scenes are shown) was chosen because it allowed the selection of pivotal moments for the set learning objectives and provided information about the scenes which were not shown in class (Viebrock, 2016, p.25). When analysing films in a classroom setting, no film should 'be presented without preparation' (p.26). The *pre-viewing* activities provided the context of the film and presented the potential linguistic issues learners might have to deal with, thus focusing on their expectations and associations. For instance, in one activity, specific vocabulary was introduced through the elicitation of idioms related to technology, the objective of which was for learners to use them in context, during the *while-viewing* activities. *Post-viewing* activities allowed for more in-depth interpretation, evaluation and discussion. These ranged from re-writing a moment based on

expected reactions, the change of media in which the story was retold or a change of perspective when describing events.

Throughout the action research, a number of data collection tools were implemented in order to assess language and cultural acquisition of the students after viewing and analysing different scenes from films. These included focus groups, with a subsequent analysis of the recordings and the collection of written assignments as part of post-viewing activities for assessment both by the researcher and learners' peers.

Considering the learners' level of engagement, it was necessary to evaluate whether the use of film and associated tasks served the purpose of being motivational vehicles of linguistic items and cultural nuances. In the classroom, students' different reactions and level of engagement were noted in a Student Teaching Practice (STP) notebook and results are presented here as quotes from the notebook. When a student participated in a group task in English they would get a square (representing a closed space) with an 'E' next to their name; if it happened in Portuguese, they would get a square with a 'P'; if it happened during activities led by the teacher, such as class discussions or asking/answering direct questions, they would get a circle (representing that everyone was part of it) with a letter corresponding to the spoken language. This system allowed for a visual depiction of students' participation rate and for a feasible and quick analysis. A record was kept at the end of each lesson on an Excel file, with each participation equating to number 1 (when in Portuguese) or 2 (when in English).

Outside the classroom, focus group discussions were held. As an example of qualitative research, these involved a "focus on specific issues with a predetermined group of people, participating in an interactive discussion" (Hennik, 2013, p.1). The interaction between the participants, a group of 10 students (5 male and 5 female) per class, each lasting between twenty and forty-five minutes, allowed them to feel comfortable in sharing their views and opinions. Conducting focus groups as the lessons progressed aimed not only at identifying the level of understanding of what the benefits of these lessons might be for the participants, but also at analysing their insights and awareness of their progress in terms of

language and culture. All sessions were recorded and some sections were transcribed, with results being presented as direct quotes.

In addition to the focus groups, some lessons included written assignments and/or homework tasks that were then collected. These were *post-viewing* activities, where students were expected to use revised structures for writing tasks. For instance, after revising the structure of a review, students were asked to write one from a rival restaurant of their choice, referring to a discussion that was sparked in class during the analysis of a scene from *The Hundred Foot Journey* (Hallström, 2014). Students were given the freedom to write derogatory critiques, considering that there is one point in the film where both restaurants are set on attacking each other's business, or eloquent critiques of the service. Students had to abide by the rules of the structure and use at least 10 items from the vocabulary list compiled during the unit, which encompassed both isolated words and idioms. Each text was corrected using the writing grading scheme from Cambridge and then compared to previously written assignments, so as to analyse potential progress in spelling and grammar.

3.1 Context

Taking place in a private school in Sintra, the groups observed and taught were learners in the 3rd cycle and secondary education. The 8th grade class had 26 students between the ages of 12 and 13, mostly at B1 level and the 10th grade had 28 students, between the ages of 14 and 16, mostly at B2 level. All students had Portuguese as their L1.

3.2 Tasks

Any film in English can depict language in action and dialogue, and for instance can be analysed as an example of a grammar rule, or explored in terms of examples of non- standard English. A film can also be examined to identify words related to a particular topic or to predict the following events of a scene. For example, considering that the 8th grade was to learn about the world of work, the film *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985) was selected, as it depicts a school environment and

deals with the consequences of not abiding by certain rules and hierarchies. It also allowed for a discussion about the American school environment, where cliques are very common, and established a comparison with British and Portuguese school contexts.

This unit started by focusing on vocabulary acquisition, namely to do with cliques and character description. In the second lesson, students were given a reading task after analysing the characters' behaviour, as they all represented the stereotypes of their own cliques. For the third lesson, students had to predict what would come next in three different scenes. As they predicted the scenes and future verb tenses were elicited, they were shown the rules of future verb tenses and then used them to write their own predictions. The last lesson addressed the structure of an argumentative essay, as this was the task the characters had to complete in the film, which led to the students having to write their own version of the text, abiding by all the rules, which were revised. This was the first formal written assignment, which served as a term of comparison to those which followed during the practicum. It allowed the identification of the most common errors and assessment of how learners were able to formally use the specific vocabulary and structures that were revised during the unit.

However, using a language is communicating culture in words, and so, when analysing a film, learners can focus on details which indicate something about the characters' culture. Considering its cultural learning potential and the unit topic for the 10th grade, which was food, the film *The Hundred-foot Journey* (Hallström, 2014) was chosen. The depiction of the struggles of an Indian family trying to make a success of their Indian restaurant, situated across the road from a Michelin-starred French restaurant in the French countryside displayed a collection of cultural encounters. Students were asked to discuss the quote "Food is memories", and to relate it to their own culture. The first lesson dealt mostly with their listening skills and vocabulary, focusing on specific scenes where food was described. It was interesting to note that students noticed significant cultural differences in the way the descriptions were made, with the association of vocabulary specific to each culture: 'bland', 'boring' and 'peaceful' for French cooking contrasted with 'colourful',

'lively' and 'messy' for Indian cuisine. These examples also show how films in the EFL classroom can present the dialogue between two or more cultures which can create a learning experience. Roell (2010) describes the filmic text as "a treasure trove" (p. 3) where students can be shown how people who come from contrasting settings deal with different issues.

3.2.1 Subtitling.

At the beginning of the 3rd term, the 10th grade focused on a unit that dealt with how technological advances have changed everyday life. The film *Click* (Coraci, 2006) was selected, where the main character is given a remote control that allows him to pause, fast forward or skip certain events of his life. For their final lesson students completed an exercise which consisted of them re-watching the first scene they were shown and creating the subtitles for it. This required students to "assume the role of experts in that specific languaculture" (Borghetti, 2011, p.10), thus enabling them to explore the responsibility of translating from a language and culture which is not their own, to another. This scene was selected for the inclusion of colloquial expressions, such as 'gonna' and 'they can bite it hard', which cannot be directly translated into Portuguese, as it would lose its non-literal meaning. It was interesting to note that the biggest struggle was with the verb tenses, since in English there are considerably fewer options when compared to Portuguese. The colloquial expressions encouraged students not only to consider the wording of the subtitle, but also what equivalent expression to choose to keep the meaning, and make it clear to the target audience.

4 Results

4.1 Participation

Overall, the level of engagement and participation in all activities was higher than that at the beginning of the school year. Using a marking system that differentiated students' participation in terms of language (English or Portuguese) and context (group or class/teacher interactions), it was possible to create a visual

representation of the increase in their participation and use of English. By adding the squares per student and comparing with the total number of proposed activities, evidence showed that for the majority of students, the 'Ps (that is, the incidences of use of L1) turned mostly into 'Es (representing the use of the FL) by the second unit of work. Figure 1 shows that for learners in the 8th year, the use of Portuguese decreased from 47 to 30 incidents over the period of study, and from 34 to 29 incidents for 10th year learners. Concurrently, the use of English increased from 37 to 64 incidents for 8th year learners and from 69 to 81 for 10th year students. This also allowed me to identify students with particular difficulties in making the transition to using only English in class, which could, in the future, be the starting to cater for these learners' needs. Noteworthy is also the fact that most students who did not participate in the first few lessons became avid speakers in the last ones, with a steady maintenance of participation for those who began the year already taking part in English in the activities.
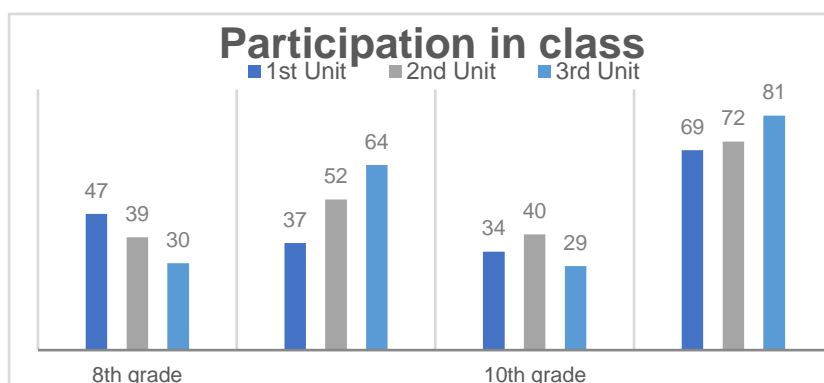

Figure 1 *Comparison of incidence and language of participation for year 8 and year 10 students over the period of study*

The focus groups allowed students to share information about what they saw and what they perceived, and then contrast and compare it with each other. As each unit was completed, the number of volunteers who wanted to participate increased, as some mentioned that the class time was not enough to fully discuss the topics. As stated by one of the students "There are topics that are not directly linked to the questions but that seem to come up. I get that Miss needs the answers

to the questions, but we should have more time to talk about the rest, like what would happen if this was a Portuguese restaurant in Mexico, for example" (STP notebook, 24 January).

In turn, this indicates the growing concern they had with the quality of their participation, as they wanted to make themselves clear so that others would understand their points. Peer correction became prevalent both in speaking and in writing, where students were given the opportunity to correct each other's written assignments.

4.2 Language

Regarding their language acquisition, besides the vocabulary to deal with all tasks, results show that the revision of verb tenses and structures (e.g. reported speech) enabled students to discuss film events clearly, both in speaking and in writing tasks. In the latter, for the 10th grade, there was a general increase in their written assessment, with most students increasing by three marks (out of 20) the grades in their assignments compared to the first assignment (a formal letter written in December) and the last (changing the ending of a story, in April). As Steckmest (2021) discusses, active viewing as a fifth skill in the EFL classroom can only happen because the other four skills are being worked on, as their confluence allows for an immersion of the students in the analysis and discussion of films along with their implications in their own culture.

It is arguably challenging to evaluate their linguistic acquisition without applying a test to assess their development. However, throughout the different sessions, it was clear that learners were growing more aware of each other's mistakes, with several instances of peer correction taking place during their participation in speaking tasks. If at first it mainly happened with one or two participants correcting their peers, by the second focus group there were more instances in which this happened, with a particular emphasis on verb tenses. Students grew more aware of the difference between using the past to describe the events of the film and the present to link it to their own reality, with one student noting that "(...) if you use that past I just assume you are talking about the film, so I

didn't understand that you were actually talking about you" (STP notebook, 2022). The descriptor related to the different levels of understanding conversations between others at B2 level states that students 'Can follow a chronological sequence in extended informal discourse, as in a story or anecdote' (Council of Europe, 2020, p.49) and the aforementioned sentence is proof that they were able to follow in films and understand the sequence and what verb tense to use when describing the events.

4.3 Culture

Considering Sert's (2017) stance on how creating tasks that involve the discussion of a film gives students the opportunity to actively learn a language, the present results demonstrate how these students, as EFL learners, displayed culture in words when they partook in group discussions.

At the beginning of each focus group, students shared their favourite characters and explained their choices. Regarding *Dead Poets Society* (Weir, 1989), the first film analysed in the 10th grade, one student suggested that the film had two main characters, Neil Perry, the student who took his life (his favourite character), and Mr. Keating, the teacher, which led to a discussion about the features of a main character. Furthermore, the links the students established between the several films viewed as the units went on, with seemingly unrelated topics, were a sign of how English is a vehicle for communication with others about a myriad of topics and not just a list of vocabulary to be memorised for a test. During the final focus group with the 8th grade, a student asked his classmates what they thought would have happened if Coach Carter, the main character from *Coach Carter* (Carter, 2005), had to deal with the students from *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985), the second film they worked with. This turned into a conversation about whether Coach Carter's teaching approach would work at a school like theirs. This connection between their culture and how it could clash with outside reality was established by students and discussed within the group. Confronting this with the descriptors of what is expected of students at the B1 level, which state that learners "Can follow many films in which visuals and action carry much of the storyline, and which are

delivered clearly in straightforward language" (Council of Europe, 2020, p.53), it is evident that they were doing more than that, as they interpreted the cultural meaning behind certain behaviours and considered how that would be dealt with in their own culture.

However, one of the most relevant tasks that dealt with students' intercultural awareness and which developed this dimension was a scene where racial slurs were used and a group of students were offended, whilst another said that there was a point in what was being said because the characters had, in fact, tried to bring their Indian culture into the French countryside. This led to a class discussion based on anonymously provided questions, such as 'Why are you so offended by the idea of Indian people bringing their culture with them?', 'Do you think all Indian restaurants in your hometown are imposing their culture on you?' and 'Do you think this would have happened if they had opened a French restaurant? Would it have been better or worse?'. These questions point towards an awareness of a clash between two cultures and the possible link between these depicted in the film and the students' own. The question regarding their own hometown is an example of Byram's (1997) *s'engager* skill, because students showed that they were wondering and questioning how their own culture would react if put in the same position. The ability to put themselves in the other's shoes – with both cultures, in this case – is the cultural self-awareness that Corbett (2010) and Finch et. al (2011) refer to.

Besides actively engaging with language and culture when completing the tasks, students also faced their own preconceived notions regarding other cultures and how that contrasted with their own. Their participation in the subtitling task showed a growing awareness of how vocabulary plays a role in understanding others. When choosing how to translate idiomatic expressions, students struggled with finding equivalents, as the direct translation would only reflect the word and not its meaning, according to one of the groups. Linguistically, this confirms Borghetti (2011) and Kanellopoulou et. al's (2019) conclusions of how subtitling gives students the opportunity to combine the verbal and the non-verbal system of a language.

Culturally, Byram's (1997) call to challenge students to confront their reality and to question how to communicate on different levels of sensitivity was also present, for example, when a discussion centred around racism started after watching a scene from *The Hundred-Foot Journey* (Hallström, 2014). Students' cultural awareness developed in two ways: they decoded the literal and the historical meaning behind the messages and they encoded them into their own reality. This confrontation of beliefs and attitudes was only possible because they perceived how different cultures could communicate, thus increasing their knowledge of how others see the same issues in different ways.

5. Conclusion

Including film analysis in the EFL classroom entailed designing new materials, using the national guidelines as the basis for the unit plans, which may be challenging and freeing as the sole focus becomes the learning needs of the students, and how each lesson can actively engage them with English and encourage them to take a step further in their linguistic and cultural acquisition. This allows the exploration of an area that seems to be underdeveloped and full of learning potential that could benefit students, as the need to focus on visual literacy is growing exponentially. If their screen time is increasing, bringing the filmic reality into the classroom is breaking down walls and using it to their advantage.

It is important to consider the challenges and the foreseeable adaptations when attempting to implement similar unit plans in other environments. Firstly, since using film in the classroom relies heavily on the use of technology, this could be overcome by reworking the structure of the lessons into a flipped classroom scheme, where students engage with the scenes at home, and follow some of the activities independently, thus saving group work and all speaking activities for the class. This could be interesting to examine two different areas in which the learning process could be developed. Firstly, how learners would work on their autonomy and secondly, how it would influence the role of the teacher.

In conclusion, the linguistic and intercultural potentials in the analysis of a film and the communicative competence when decoding its meaning, and

analysing it in a context where more than one culture is present are skills that I wish to work on with all my future students. Considering the importance that films had during the practicum, I believe that exploring film in the classroom is highly advantageous for students because its multimodality ensures the development of all skills required to proficiently communicate in a foreign language.

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