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Silent Film: A Visual Narrative for Developing Linguistic Competence

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Abstract

Visual narratives in silent films are an effective method for developing linguistic competence in English language education and are equally constructive in developing critical thinking skills across disciplines. “Silent film, more than any other film property, capitalizes on ESL students’ visual literacy, using it as both a foundation and a catalyst for honing the verbal language skills that are key to acquiring and articulating complex knowledge in English” (Kasper and Singer, 2001). Silent films rely on the power of vivid, interactive visual imagery to depict personal struggles, character interactions, and plot development. This medium grabs the attention of ESL students and gives them time to absorb what is happening in the film without being distracted by dialogue. The silent film significantly lowers the affective filter (Krashen, 1986) and is highly conducive to promoting the development of linguistic skills. Krashen (1986) cites motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety in the Affective Filter Hypothesis as three categories of variables that play a role in second language acquisition.

Learning Activity

The following grammar activities use open educational practices to engage students in active and shared learning. This lesson details how an excerpt (“The Lion Cage”) from the silent film, “The Circus,” (Chaplin, 1928) is used to build language and grammar skills in English as a second language (ESL) course. In this lesson (Appendix A), students build their understanding of past and present tenses through several linguistic activities that include all four areas of language development: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Lesson: Part I

After receiving grammar instruction in present and past tense, the students watch the silent film excerpt (“The Lion Cage”). They are directed to watch for pleasure and be prepared to discuss their reaction to the film at the conclusion. Then, the students are directed to watch the excerpt a second time. This time, students are provided with a graphic organizer and instructed to take notes while watching, jotting down present tense verbs to describe the actions of the five characters in the excerpt (Appendix B).

Lesson: Part II

When the short has ended, students are given time to work independently to compose sentences describing the action in present tense. Students are not given a minimum number of sentences to write, but there is a set time. This gives the instructor an estimation of the students’ ability and ease in producing grammatically correct sentences. When the time is up, students submit their sentences electronically to the instructor and select one of their sentences to read aloud to the class.

Lesson: Part III

After each student has read a sentence aloud, they are placed in small groups (Breakout Rooms on Zoom). Each group will collaborate to revise their sentences to communicate action in the past tense. This offers an opportunity for students to engage in additional speaking, listening, reading, and writing practice with peers. Each group’s shared document is inserted in a Google Site that serves as an ePortfolio for all submissions.

Assessment

Grammar instruction diagnostics are used to measure comprehension in all four skills sets of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Specifically, assessment of writing practices in this

lesson are demonstration of sentence formation, grammar, vocabulary, mechanics, and sequential organization.

Creative Student Contributions

Depending on the content being taught, creative student contributions can focus on specific areas of language acquisition or literary analysis. Student contributions will be added to the Google Site ePortfolio for the course after students receive faculty approval. The creative contributions and group work are buildable and can be shared with subsequent classes to create a repository of course materials. While this lesson is specific to ENG1050 Integrative Language Seminar, these practices can be adapted for a variety of disciplines. Student contributions may include:

1. Writing a four-minute screenplay of an original silent film, remake, or sequel.
2. Writing an outline and filmed four-minute silent short using the iMovie, Adobe Spark, YouTube, etc.
3. Conducting research and create an interactive presentation on the silent film genre or specifically on the feature film, “The Circus” (Chaplin, 1928).
4. Analyzing a silent film for a specific language or literary focus.

APPENDIX A

WEEKLY SCHEDULE SILENT FILM / GRAMMAR FOCUS

Assignment	Task	Due Date	Course Competencies and Methodology
LECTURE: Grammar – Present / Past Tense	Faculty Tasks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define Present Indefinite and Present Continuous Identify / model present tense verbs in writing samples Provide graphic organizer for film observations 	In Class –	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrate command of the conventions of English grammar and usage when writing and speaking using present and past tense.
Class Activity	Silent Film – Charlie Chaplin, “ <i>The Lion Cage</i> ” (length: 3:38) https://youtu.be/_0a998z_G4g <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Watch the first time for enjoyment to appreciate the genre and comedy. Watch a second time to focus on and note present tense verbs related to the actions of the five characters – use graphic organizer. 	In Class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply knowledge of Present Indefinite (Simple) and Present Continuous (Progressive) Tenses to describe the actions of five characters in the silent film.
Independent Activity (15 minutes)	Write present tense sentences to describe the action of all five characters using the verbs you noted. Describe plot action in sequential order (first, next, then, in the end...) Submit via email to Professor after 15 minutes.	In Class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compose grammatically correct responses in the target language using present tense before presenting orally.
Speaking / Listening Activity	Select ONE of your sentences to read aloud – listen closely to avoid repeating a sentence about a character/action someone has already shared.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the primary language to engage in meaningful communication while emphasizing the importance of listening to peers so as to contribute unique ideas related to the film.
Small Group Collaboration	Work your assigned group to revise the verbs to past tense to write sentences that described what happened in film. Describe plot action in sequential order (first, next, then, in the end...) List group names and share document with Professor.	In Class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize and write verbs using the past tense -ed. Collaborate with peers to receive support and engage in meaningful language interactions necessary for learning.
Creative Student Contributions Student Choice: Independent, Paired Partners, or Small Group Collaboration	Student Choices: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Write an original four-minute silent film screenplay, remake, or sequel. Write an outline and film a four-minute silent short using iMovie, Adobe Spark, YouTube, etc. Create a survey that asks peers to identify your focus. Conduct research on the silent film genre and present your project using film clips, images, and historical relevance. 	TBD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on identifying <u>three additional areas</u> of language acquisition: Adjectives to describe Characterization. Imperative, indicative, and subjunctive grammatical verbs to determine Mood. Future tense to Predict. Pronouns to describe Setting. Time signal words and phrases to describe Plot. Inference to describe Theme.

APPENDIX B

Characters in the Film	Actions of the Characters
Charlie Chaplin (the man in the cage)	
The Lion	
The Tiger	
The Dog	
The Woman	

Works Cited:

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Kasper, L. F. & Singer, R. (2001). Unspoken content: Silent film in the ESL classroom. TYCA. Retrieved from <https://lkasper.tripod.com/unspoken.pdf>.

Krashen, S. D. (1981). Second language acquisition and second language learning. New York: Prentice Hall.