WRITING CRITICAL REVIEWS IN A CONTENT-BASED LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

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Abstract: Having students write book or film reports is a common pedagogic practice in second language instruction. Christie and Derewianka (2008) characterise the report as a genre involving interpretation, where learners are asked to describe or explain. Many learners are likely to have encountered this kind of text before, and may therefore be able to call upon their pre-existing knowledge. The challenge is much greater when learners are asked to review books or films. Rose and Martin (2012) identify how reviews require that learners respond to a text (or film) and evaluate it through critiquing, something few are equipped to do. Instructors can help their learners through explicit instruction of the response genre. The presenter will describe how a project on European cinema used staged instruction to help students create film reviews. Examples of the stages taught to the learners will be provided. The results are given, focusing on ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. Details of a functional analysis of the texts are highlighted, with reference to examples of students’ work. Those attending will be able to take away materials to help with language curriculum development.

Finding Out what students already know about European cinema and cinematic language

The starting point for the project is to find out what the students are bringing to the class, namely, what they already know about cinema. Questions can be framed to elicit how frequently they go to the cinema (or, at least, watch a film) in their own country, the sorts of films they like or dislike, the best or worst film they have ever seen, what helps them decide which film to go and see, and whether they have ever watched a film at a cinema in another city or country or in a different language.

As students begin to discuss films, gaps in cinematic knowledge appear alongside problems in finding the right way to express cinematic language in English. The differences between a remake and a sequel, a critic and a review (or critique), dubbed and subtitled, performance and role, are all areas where negotiation of meaning helps to clarify what is meant by the terms. Even more challenging are more casual words and expressions, often colloquial, such as hype about a film, especially a cult film, the unambiguous use of trailers versus the uncertainty surrounding when to describe a film as a blockbuster, the difference between the end and the ending, and when not to give a spoiler or reveal a twist in the plot. A big budget film as understood by English speakers might have a strong cast, though some of the acting could come across as being wooden; more than likely, it is beautifully shot and has amazing special effects, though being a little over-the-top; the ending could be heavy, or just too contrived and ultimately a let-down; some films go on a bit too long, and don’t really ring true.

Integrating the learning and practice of new vocabulary into class discussions is a relatively simple question of lesson preparation and class management, but how exactly to go about it within the structure of (the currently fashionable) project-based learning brings its own set of challenges. A problem-based learning approach common to many projects is more likely to result in effective learning only when students have enough expertise in the subject matter to engage critically with the course content. However, in the ESL classroom, students are already labouring under the burden of the target language demands. Learning enough language and content, and being able to express oneself through that language about the new knowledge, is a formidable challenge which requires scaffolded, level-appropriate instruction. Kirschner, Sweller & Clark (2006) suggest it may be a step too far in many undergraduate courses, arguing in favour of, ‘direct, strong instructional guidance rather than constructivist-based minimal guidance during the instruction of novice to intermediate learners.’ Fortunately, providing explicit teaching in the form of film trailers or complete films is at hand in a cinema course, helping to build knowledge of the field of study for students.

Knowledge of Field

Just as a writer uses the pen or keyboard to express meanings which are composed to their audience, the reader, as words on the page, the film director can be said to use the viewfinder and camera angles to frame a world view, seen by the audience through the lens of the camera projected on to the cinema screen. What kind of world is the director from, and what kind of world is he or she creating? Working in groups of four, students choose a European film based on personal recommendations or first language film reviews or teacher recommendations. Student one is assigned the task of finding out as much as they can about the background to the film. When was the film made, when was the action supposed to take place, where was it shot, and where is it supposed to be set? As a general overview, what kinds of people are involved as director and actors, what type of film is it, and what is its basic historical, social, and cultural setting. Meanwhile, student two makes notes
on the storyline and searches online to provide the class with a brief summary of the plot, outlining the key stages while remembering to omit the resolution (the ending or key twists in the plot), which would otherwise ruin the viewer’s enjoyment of the film. Assuming that the film follows a traditional narrative, students will need to know the stages of the narrative genre (i.e. orientation-action-complication-resolution-coda) in order to make sense of the development of the story. The third student will find out about the cast or actors. Even more than for student two, this requires some background research. Helpful sites for a database of film reviews and trivia are IMDb (http://www.imdb.com) and Rotten Tomatoes (www.rottentomatoes.com). In particular, information is required on which actor played what role, an evaluation of their acting, and a description of the main characters to include their physical attributes, psychological make up, age, nationality, and social or personal background. Student four looks at the director in more depth, to explain who they are, their other works, and their accomplishments in this film. This discussion may embrace information about his or her society, their reasons for the choice of theme, and the message which they attempted to convey. An appreciation of social purpose and audience allow us as critics to evaluate later whether the film has succeeded within its own terms.

Modelling and Text Deconstruction

The kind of jigsaw task described above enables students to relate their findings in teams to other groups as experts, and raises awareness about one kind of basic film review. Repeated exposure in class to the framework, including the structure and staging of a review as well as language, builds knowledge about the function of reviewing (how it works and what it sets out to achieve) rather than empty labels about the form of a review (its beginning, middle and end). Having had groups introduce their recommendations and basic knowledge-building to each other, students are helped to deconstruct some simple film reviews as they familiarise themselves with films introduced by the instructor. A case in point is a film description of the French/Japanese film Hiroshima Mon Amour, accessed online (wiki), as is the entire film (YouTube). The class was provided with a genre-based film review structure:

Generic structure of a film review

A film review contains the following obligatory stages.
1. Title
2. Introduction orientation: when, where, who are involved (director, actors), which category or genre of film
3. Plot summary action: events leading to a complication or problem - note that how things are resolved and end up is omitted so as not to spoil viewers’ enjoyment
4. Background of the film production and discussion on director and actors: a factual exposition
5. Evaluation to comment on the quality of the reviewed film
6. Recommendation to readers whether it is worth viewing
Adapted from http://www.xtec.es/~vfeliu/writing/revi3.htm

The framework provides a model for textual analysis. Here I have added the language of the structure in bold type into the review (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hiroshima_mon_amour) to highlight the stages.

1. Title] Hiroshima Mon Amour
2. Introduction] Hiroshima Mon Amour concerns the experiences of [who] a French actress (Emmanuelle Riva), referred to as Elle (she), who performs the role of a nurse in a film being shot [where/when] in post-war Hiroshima. She meets [who] a Japanese architect (Eiji Okada), referred to as Lui (him) and, separated from their spouses, [genre] they become lovers.
3. Plot summary] The early part of the film recounts, in the style of a documentary, but narrated by the so far completely unidentified characters, the effects of the Hiroshima bomb on August 6, 1945… Using flashbacks intercut into the love story set in 1959 - [event] the couple's meetings in hotel rooms and restaurants - [event] the woman relates for the first time her experiences during World War II in Nevers, where she was involved with a young German soldier during the German occupation. [problem] She suffered the discrimination of women who had been friendly with Germans; a severe almost bald haircut, before leaving for Paris, her hair regrown, and her anonymity regained. [resolution] He urges her to stay in Hiroshima, but the situation is untenable.
4. Background] It was one of the first French New Wave films. [director] Among the film's innovations is Resnais' experiments with very brief flashback sequences intercut into scenes to suggest the idea of a brief flash of memory. Resnais later used similar effects in Last Year at Marienbad… [production] …The film was a co-production by companies from both Japan and France. The producers stipulated that one main character must be French and the other be Japanese…
5. Evaluation …Filmmaker Eric Rohmer said, "I think that in a few years, in ten, twenty, or thirty years, we will know whether Hiroshima Mon Amour was the most important film since the war, the first modern film of sound cinema".

6. Recommendation Hiroshima Mon Amour earned an Oscar nomination for screenwriter Marguerite Duras, as well as a special award at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival, where the film was excluded from the official selection because of its sensitive subject matter as well as to avoid upsetting the U.S. government.

Joint construction

Having identified the stages of the review, students collaborate on writing another with the instructor. Ideally, it is composed directly on a large whiteboard that everyone can see, or projected on to the board from a computer or tablet where it can be peer edited and checked by the teacher. One advantage of the projected image is greater involvement, in that while one student team types on the computer, another team checks and adds to it on the board. At this point, students can be introduced to ideas on register variables, or reminded of them. Following Eggins (2004), mode (textual meaning) explores the ways that spoken dialogue in a film and the written script or narration will vary. Choices in spoken language, from polite formal to vulgar casual, create the feeling and stance of the film as it unfolds. Tenor (interpersonal meaning) looks at how relationships of power develop in the film between characters, observing how we speak in different ways to close friends, colleagues, and family members of different ages. How much power does the director seek to exert over us, and which characters come closest to their world view? Field (ideational meaning) helps to explain variations in language use depending on the topic, such as whether we discuss a documentary film, or an action film, or a comedy.

Individual construction

Students begin composing their own reviews of European films they watch, highlighting the stages in their own writing. Besides text structure, they continue to work on language features which exemplify the film review genre. For particular types of films, they may be described (using adjectives) as an action movie, or (using nouns) as a thriller. Associated words would include musical, drama, comedy, sci-fi, and romance. For characterisation, students benefit from terms such as leading role, supporting character, hero, and villain. They need to understand the development of characters through the film. The plot requires language to describe what happened in the past, the places where the story evolved, and developments in time sequence. Given the visual nature of films, emphasis has to be placed on the settings and scenes, and the use of light and dark, a range of colours, and open and closed locations to convey mood. Students are recommended to create their own checklist of items to include, so as not to miss key aspects of the soundtrack, the camerawork, and visual effects.

With practice and feedback, students use their knowledge of the film review genre, cinematic expressions and subject-specific knowledge to pursue this own research project. Examples of student work and text deconstruction of professional reviews, provided in the workshop, trace the development of student progress in reading and writing reviews from the beginning to the end of the project. Prior to submitting the final assignment, a poster presentation highlighting five original reviews on a European cinema theme chosen by the individual student, the following checklist is provided for the more sophisticated reviews that students are now being required to produce, based on quotations from an actual review by a professional film critic, Roger Ebert (http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/diva-2008):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential elements</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Instructor Checklist &amp; Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>title</td>
<td>English title and original</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>orientation</td>
<td>the director, main actors, when &amp; where it was made, the kind of film it is</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>synopsis (outline of the plot)</td>
<td>Events leading up to a complication - do not give the resolution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>background (director, actors, production, trivia)</td>
<td>factual exposition about other films the director &amp; actors have collaborated in, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evaluation (personal critique)</td>
<td>in-depth analysis discussing main themes, character development, &amp; other reviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recommendation</td>
<td>your rating of the film, with reasons why</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
past tense verbs in first & last paragraphs for impact
“Peering into obscure corners of Paris, Jean-Jacques Beineix emerged with…”

present tense action verbs for synopsis & evaluation
“Jules lives in his own way, in his own shadowy industrial space…”

past tense for research
“Diva has been referred to as the first French film in the …cinema du look, defined by Wikipedia as…”

cinematic expressions for music, lighting, effects, cinematography, camera angles…
The special effects were amazing, but the plot was a bit far-fetched!

adjectives
“…a dazzling kaleidoscope of… action and startling images.”

personal reactions to add interest
“[It] still plays as a cult film, primarily, I am convinced, because of its…”

details to add interest
“He has a professional-quality Nagra recorder hidden in his bag.”

the society it was filmed in
“[A]lienated characters…were said to represent the marginalized youth of Francois Mitterand’s France.”

Conclusion
Students began the project on cinema not knowing what films made in Europe tell us about the different cultures that produced them, or how film directors exert an influence on social change while also being influenced by their own milieu. Through selecting, watching, and critiquing postwar European films, and writing their own reviews for sharing with their peers and uploading to film review databases, students were able to reach out to new audiences and go beyond being a mere film observer, empowered by becoming a film critic who builds new knowledge about the films for other viewers and reviewers. Identifying the review as a genre, and teaching its structure and language features explicitly, enables language learners to join the target language community. Far from being a consumer of other people’s reviews, they are an equal, a creator of reviews read by other English users. An awareness of purpose and audience, at the heart of the filmmaker’s pursuit, is embraced by the student critic as central to their pursuit.

References
(i) Printed books

(ii) URLs
Film review framework example:
http://www.xtec.es/~vfeliu/writing/revi3.htm
Accessed on June 10, 2014
Roger Ebert’s film review of Diva:
http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/diva-2008
Accessed on June 10, 2014
Wikipedia article on the film Hiroshima Mon Amour:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hiroshima_mon_amour
Accessed on June 10, 2014