

The role of history in foreign language teaching

The presentation of history in teaching of German as a foreign language – Use of historical films during the teaching

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Abstract

Foreign language textbooks play a very important role in creating a standardized image of another country. Historical themes are now essential elements in textbooks for German as a foreign language alongside other cultural themes. The densely visualized modern foreign-language textbooks convey historical content through collages, statistics, colorful images and a modern layout. In most foreign language textbooks, a unit or at least a sub-chapter is devoted to historical topics. With the description and explanation of historical events, foreign language lessons offer an opportunity to show learners the connections between the present and the past. The aim of this article is to examine the presentation of history in the teaching of regional studies in some textbooks for German as a foreign language.

Methods of representing history in foreign language teaching History in foreign-language German textbooks is a sub-aspect alongside other cultural topics. It occurs implicitly in the texts and illustrations presenting the present, on the one hand, and explicitly in the units, chapters, and lessons devoted to historical themes, on the other. About the language, the cultural content is the subject of the lesson. They are mostly supported by the media. such as: 1. Texts (textbooks and authentic texts) 2. Samples (original objects such as stamps, coins, catalogues, postcards, calendars, etc.) 3. Representing media such as photos, slides, posters, film, television, murals, etc. 4. Acoustic media (cassettes, records, radio, etc.) 5. Symbolic media (maps, models, diagrams, plans, programs, etc.)

In this article, we concentrate on conveying historical topics using TV feature films. First, the importance of these media in the classroom is presented and at the end concrete examples of films are shown.

Keywords: History, foreign language, teaching, German.

1. Historical films – an instrument for conveying history?

Most people in our society get what they know or think they know about history from television, films or series. It should be clear that this is often viewed critically. In history lessons, too, films are increasingly being used for didactic purposes. For pupils, history is usually a very dry and reading-heavy subject, which makes it rather uninteresting for many. With a film, the teachers try to arouse motivation and fun in the subject. But is there any benefit in showing films in history classes when they are so often unrealistic? If so, how should this best be implemented?

Historical films during teaching

Teachers, who want to work with films in teaching German as a foreign language, face similar didactic problems as when reading long novels; the complexity of the events, the richness of the material, the time required, the difficulties in understanding make the reception difficult for the foreign-language learner or viewer.

The result is that they often only receive films superficially and are not really understood either in terms of language, culture or structure. They use them to fill in gaps in the lesson, to enrich the reading of the book with the cinematic presentation without a conceptual idea, or they simply serve to entertain and loosen up the lesson. In the rarest of cases, the use of films is preceded by didactic considerations as to how the wealth of visual, verbal and auditory information could be prepared for the lesson in such a way that it does not exceed the capacity of the learner or viewer (Borries-Knopp 1993, p. 61)

Bechtold and Gericke-Schönhagen (1991) believe that film is the medium of our time. They think that the use of historical films in foreign language teaching plays a major role; Used correctly, films offer the broadest possible working area - in terms of variety, intensity and effectiveness for teaching German as a foreign language" (ibid. 1991, p. 6).

*"Hardly any other medium spans such a wide range of topics and enables such a wide variety of methods. Language tools and language actions developed by film texts are always integrated in visual contexts and are therefore easier to understand and memorize better. The medium itself is highly attractive and motivating for learners, but above all it opens up completely thanks to its semiotic status new didactic possibilities"*¹

In terms of its semiotic status, the film image is an extremely complex sign structure. Different characters can be represented in it at the same time:

- verbal signs: speech or written text,
- acoustic signals. background music, noise, silence,
- Iconic signs: pictorial representations of people and things in a spatial and temporal environment (ibid. 1991, p. 7).

The world of symbols in the film always transports an abundance of the real outside world and thus refers to a reality that is relevant to the country (ibid. 1991, p. 7);

The outside world is also visually present in the film. This makes film superior to any other medium in its approach to external reality. It is the appropriate medium to develop broad and precise pictorial ideas of the other country.

2. Historical Films in foreign language teaching and learning

In the following, the linguistic goals that can be achieved by teaching a historical literary film adaptation in foreign language lessons, the intercultural aspects, including the film reception of a foreign-cultural viewer and the film-specific exercises that can be practiced through this medium, are considered in more detail.

¹ Bechtold/Gericke-Schönhagen 1991, S. 6.

2.1 Linguistic Objectives

GÜGOLD (1991) thinks that historical literary adaptations offer obvious advantages for language work. You experience the spoken word in its situational context, which language offers in authentic situations. Instead of the teacher's role and the teacher's voice as the medium of language experience for the learner, the film presents constitutive factors of the speech act with a high approximation to reality. As a substitute for the ideal language situation, the stay in the target language country, the actor offers language in a relatively realistic environment. For the learner, this means "listening comprehension under real conditions", models for socially correct and appropriate behavior (ibid. 1991, p. 35).

2.3 Intercultural Aspects

I see a Japanese film from the 1930s that tells a story that is set in 16th-century Japan. The film is poorly subtitled in English. As a foreign-cultural observer of the year 1989, I encounter the unreasonable demands of the foreign on almost every level. The images in the film show me strange, incomprehensible rituals and gestures; I don't succeed in assigning the space images correctly: I don't recognize the space boundaries between inside and outside clearly enough, I can't determine the function and status of the space without a doubt, so the movements and postures of people always seem "inappropriate" to me, etc.

I also have difficulties with the time: I don't always know exactly on which time level the events are taking place. The plot itself is embedded in other contexts. References that remain unclear to me. I'm beginning to wonder if my reading hypothesis about them is even true. I don't know anything about Japanese history of the 16th century: the socio-cultural context of the 1930s in Japan, from which the preoccupation with historical themes could be interpreted, is also largely unknown to me. What I think I understand, I probably misunderstand."²

This is how Grossklaus (1991) describes the experience he had while watching a completely foreign-cultural film. For the recipient (reader, viewer, listener) of a message (text, image) there is a maximum limit of information flow. If this limit is crossed (as with the message that the Japanese film wanted to convey), you go in search of recognizable characters".

If this attempt to structure the plot of the film, to break down information, to understand it, one loses interest at the first attempt. After the influx of information on all levels - verbal and visual language, body language of gestures, facial expressions, movement, spatial and temporal figures, etc. - one gets overwhelmed and reacts with boredom.

In the worst case, the unsuccessful reader/viewer never attempts to communicate again. His (pre)judgment is clear: Japanese films (correspondingly: German, Indian, Arabic, Greek, African films, books, etc.) are boring, uninteresting, monotonous, irrelevant, etc. The foreign; the foreign-cultural message remains as inaccessible as it is incomprehensible.

² Großklaus 1991, p. 23.

This breaking off of communication as the first reaction to the imposition of the stranger is perhaps not all that unusual. Anyone who makes contact with a foreign culture, either indirectly through texts and language or directly through people and their environment, goes through more or less intensive phases of rejection, of rejecting the foreign.

But here it is about the addressee of the foreign symbolic-aesthetic message" or "message" (literature, film). As long as this addressee lives as a student in his home country, his confrontation with the foreign culture is initially limited to this symbolic sector. Thus, the first contacts with the foreign (German) language and literature can be associated with experiences of failure (Grossklaus 1991, p. 23).

2.4 Movie-specific exercises

Movie/ Film-specific exercises must consider the properties of the medium from which they are derived, i.e. they must process the processes of perception, cognition and emotion typical of film reception. A media-specific exercise typology includes comprehension exercises on the lexical level, communicative-situational exercises and exercises on the level of complex comprehension (Schwerdtfeger 1989).

In the following I present the characteristics of film-specific exercises according to Schwerdtfeger:

1. The exercises consider of the insight that film is already a "protocol" of reality and is therefore already reduced reality.
2. Not only the spoken language serves as content for the exercises, but all signs and signals that are necessary for the interaction are used.
3. The exercises consider that the film is a composition of signs in which space and time are dealt with in a specific way.
4. The exercises confront signs of film language with their origin and effect on the viewer. Here, technical knowledge about film language is not acquired in isolation, but the perception of the students and the associated cognitive and emotional processes are directed to the characters of the film that trigger an effect.
5. Film-specific forms of perception are transformed into perception exercises (vgl. ebd. 198, S. 45).³

2.5 Length of the film in class

Since a film is usually at least ninety minutes long, which for various reasons cannot be completed in its entirety during a course, the film is divided into manageable sections. Their length depends on the linguistic and factual complexity, as well as on the described course of action.

A duration of five to a maximum of twenty minutes, which usually includes several sequences of the film, has proven itself in practice. Under certain circumstances, parts that are not relevant to the film's statement and whose absence does not impair understanding can be omitted (Gügold 1991).

³ Schwerdtfeger 1989, Chapter 3: Wahrnehmung, Emotion und Kognition - ein konstruktivistischer Versuch, p. 27-39.

2.6 Social forms of teaching

The first information, seeing and listening to the film section, is provided individually and in writing (giving keywords to the teacher's questions or observation tasks, taking notes, noting abnormalities and difficulties in understanding). The discussion and the exchange of the individual notes takes place in the group and verbally. The group results can be summarized in writing and presented orally in the plenum.

Before the first viewing, the teacher can set specific observation tasks in order to structure the recording of the filmic events. If the pictorial and verbal wealth of information in a scene is too complex, the individual observation tasks can also be divided among groups and the results then collected in the group as a whole (Borries-Knopp 1993).

3. Presentation of the Inter Nationes Program (Filmed Literary TV Feature Films)

3.1 Siegfried Lenz: „Deutschstunde“

Inter Nationes media pack (2 videocassettes)

Due to its length and the abundance of linguistic and cultural information, the film “Deutschstunde” can only be used in lessons for advanced learners. For this reason, the development of linguistic and grammatical text features is largely dispensed with in the didactic teaching of example scenes. Working with this film is also recommended especially in the context of German studies and history, since it constantly refers to the reality of the recent German past (fascist everyday life in the Second World War up to the post-war years).

Borries-Knopp makes the following suggestions for teaching of *Deutschstunde*: Because of its length and variety of topics, the film should be divided into various mock units (the two parts of the television film should be shown in a total of six teaching units). If the teachers don't have enough time to work with just one film, they can also show the parts in longer periods of time if they relieve the students' viewing and understanding process with appropriate specifications and work on certain sequences with the focus depending on the learning goal and lesson interests.

However, the interruption when viewing a film into individual parts is questionable above all if the film forms a closed unit with few possibilities for interruptions. However, the German lesson” contains numerous such interfaces in the broadly narrated chronological course of action: frequent changes of location, changes in time levels and thematic cuts make it easier to form such excerpts. The six teaching units are divided into one lesson (45 minutes) for demonstration and another double lesson for processing. Whether the work with the film extends over fewer or more lessons depends on the teacher's decision as to which learning goals he wants to achieve with the film

Working with the “Deutschstunde” is particularly useful in the area of cultural studies and history. The many references to the everyday reality of a village in Schleswig-Holstein during the Second World War with details shown in pictures offer the foreign-cultural viewer visual opportunities for experience that when reading of the book are left to the imagination shaped by their own culture. This pictorial convey-

ance of reality makes it easier to compare with the viewing and attitude habits in one's own country. The film "Deutschstunde" is therefore particularly suitable for discussions about the intercultural topics from German reality addressed in the film. If it is not possible to show the entire film in class, individual sequences can also be shown from a thematic point of view in a regional and historical context. Scenes that deal with a certain topic in a self-contained manner are particularly suitable for this, e.g. E.g. school, art in the Nazi era, food, festivals and customs (Borries-Knopp 1993).

3.2. History Films

Tränen des Vaterlandes oder Die Literatur des Barock

Inter Nationes media package (videocassette, book)

The film provides general information about literature and society in the Baroque era, describes the Thirty Years' War and describes corporate society and absolutism. The authors Andreas Gryphius, Paul Fleming, Angelus Silesius, Grimmelshausen, Martin Opitz and the language societies are presented

The Baroque is an age of strong antithetical contrasts, determined by the chaos prevailing in the reality of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) and a longing for order that dominated intellectual life. This antithesis is reflected in all documents of the epoch, be they literary, artistic or architectural.

Barth (1992) requires an advanced knowledge of German in order to use the film in the classroom. In addition, baroque texts are often not easy to understand, even for native speakers, due to the unusual choice of words, syntax and imagery. The non-German-speaking reader in particular could feel overwhelmed after just a few minutes. To counteract this, the film deliberately uses varying repetition. The Commentary takes up many of the arguments elsewhere in other words. And what remains misunderstood at first hearing is explained shortly thereafter by seeing it or at a later point from the context.

Conclusions

The film achieves a better understanding by showing and condensing the historical context, an action and the characters, which are based on people in a teaching unit, in a concrete constellation or conflict situation. This works best when the rough context has already been covered in class and students already have an overview of the topic. Using sources, students can work individually, in pairs or in groups to check whether the scene they saw was presented in a source-based manner.

By asking whether what was shown in the film is true, historical thinking is triggered in students and offers challenges in this regard through interpretation and comparison between film and sources. This type of source work also increases the motivational aspect (second aspect). Film scenes offer clarity, drama and excitement that would never be possible in factual texts in history books or lectures by teachers. A film scene arouses empathy and/or antipathy and makes students think. With a good film, the students want to talk about what they have seen and exchange ideas with each other. The film thus offers an opportunity to speak that is often not achieved by sources,

since the reference is often missing. Movie scenes also promote cognitive dissonance, which is the starting point of all problem-based learning.

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