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Using films and TV series for ESP teaching: A multimodal perspective[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a project carried out at the Language Centre of the University of Pisa in partnership with the Language Centre of the University of California at Berkeley to collaborate in the development of the Library of Foreign Language Film Clips (LFLFC), which aims to promote the learning of language and culture through films. A selection of clips cut from films and TV series was purposefully chosen as they pertain to different genres and are characterised by the use of English in specialised domains (i.e., law, politics, economics, tourism, and medicine). They are used to show how various semiotic resources work together to construct meaning in ESP and how they can provide useful tools for research and teaching in ESP contexts. In language teaching, a multimodal approach can help students learn to exploit modes beyond verbal language (e.g., visual, gestural, and spatial) to both understand and produce texts in the target language more effectively. This becomes particularly important in situated communicative contexts where domain-specific discursive, pragmatic, and cultural features can create significant obstacles for language learners.

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1. Introduction

The present study aims to illustrate the results of a project carried out at the Language Centre of the University of Pisa for the collection of a multimodal corpus of clips cut from films and TV series representing five specialised domains, i.e., law, politics, economics, medicine and tourism. The corpus was inspired by the Library of Foreign Language Film Clips (LFLFC)¹ developed at the University of California at Berkeley, with whose partnership the project was carried out. The main aim of the project was to promote the learning of language and culture through films and, especially, to create useful material for ESP contexts. In effect, the use of audiovisual products, where different semiotic codes contribute to the construction of meaning, has proved to be a valuable tool in language teaching, especially within the multimodal analysis framework (Jewitt, 2014). This can help students learn to exploit modes beyond verbal language (e.g., visual, gestural, and spatial) to both understand and produce texts in the target language more effectively (O'Halloran, Tan, & Smith, 2016). This becomes particularly important in situated communicative contexts where domain-specific discursive, pragmatic, and cultural features can create significant obstacles for language learners.

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¹ <http://blcvideoclips.berkeley.edu/>.

2. Literature review

Communication is intrinsically multimodal, since various semiotic resources are intertwined and all contribute to the meaning-making process in a given situational context, so that both verbal and non-verbal cues are crucial in order to interpret a message fully. Since the pioneering and seminal work by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) and Lemke (1998), there has been extensive research on multimodality, which has become a significant issue (cf. Jewitt, 2014; Norris, 2004; O'Halloran, 2011; Scollon & Levine, 2004), especially nowadays in relation to the features of the new communication media. Indeed, as pointed out by Kress (2003: 1), there has been “on the one hand, the broad move from the now centuries long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image and, on the other hand, the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen”. In this way, visual and aural elements also play an important role in the representation of reality. This has had a strong impact on educational techniques, so much so that the concept of “multi-literacies” was introduced in 1996 by the New London Group (New London Group, 1996), formulating a pedagogic agenda in response to the changes in the communicative and representational landscape. According to Kalantzis and Cope (2013: 3963):

we need to extend the range of literary pedagogy so that it does not exclusively privilege alphabetical representations. In today's learning environments, we need to supplement traditional reading and writing with these multimodal representations, and particularly those typical of the new, digital media.

The advantages of using audiovisual products in language teaching have been acknowledged in several studies. These show how exposure to visual and aural elements in films helps learners to widen vocabulary (cf. Kaiser, 2011; Sherman, 2003; Webb & Rodgers, 2009), to learn certain pragmatic strategies in conversation, e.g., routines (cf. Lin, 2014; in Internet TV; Bruti, 2015; in films), and to develop oral skills in general (Dikilitas & Duvenci, 2009). But, more importantly, it also gives students the chance to “see the ‘language in use’” (Harmer, 2007: 308). This allows them to see how paralinguistic elements are used in different contexts and cultures, thus also broadening their intercultural communication competence, and to listen to various accents. In addition, it helps them become more aware of non-verbal cues (e.g., gestures, facial expression, gaze direction, physical proximity, as well as the use of pauses and intonation patterns) and of how they contribute to integrating or supporting the verbal message. Indeed, in teaching contexts, film has been described as “an authentic source material (that is, created for native speakers and not learners of the language)” (Kaiser, 2011: 233; Sherman, 2003). Even though some scholars defined it as “written-to-be-spoken-as-if not-written” (Gregory & Carroll, 1978), and “oralidad prefabricada” [Eng. *pre-fabricated orality*] (Chaume, 2004: 168), several recent studies have demonstrated the similarities between film language and spontaneous face-to-face conversation, in terms of authenticity and spontaneity (Bonsignori, 2013; Forchini, 2012; Kozloff, 2000). The same holds for TV dialogue (cf. Quaglio, 2009), which is a subtype of “scripted/constructed dialogue” written to sound natural and believable (Bednarek, 2010: 63). It features specific narrative and semiotic elements that are not totally remote from those characterising films, but which are limited by broadcasting time and modality. Moreover, it is not always easy to find available material retrieved from spontaneous conversation in specialised contexts to be used in the ESP class. Even textbooks may not be enough, as in the case of medical communication textbooks compared to which spoken language shows a great amount of deviation (Nagy, 2010). This is why relying on films, the quintessence of multimodal products (Bateman, 2013), or TV series to teach English in specialised settings can be an effective solution. In other domains, such as law, the language of films and TV shows has proved to share several features with real communication in legal contexts, as shown in the very recent study carried out by Forchini (2017), thus confirming that both genres are suitable for the teaching of legal English (cf. Csomay & Petrović, 2012; Vyushkina, 2016).

3. Material and methods

The advantages of using multimodal corpora have been extensively described in the literature (cf. Ackerley & Coccetta, 2007; Knight, 2011; Querol-Julián, 2010). Unlike monomodal corpora, generally limited to written texts, they allow users to analyse several aspects of oral communication, since they provide audiovisual material. However, multimodal corpora are much more limited in size. This is mainly due to the fact that the compilation process is much more complex, as the addition of aural and visual information means that “aligning and transcribing (if at all) different streams of data is naturally more time consuming and technically difficult than when dealing with a single stream” (Knight, 2011: 397). Moreover, their scope is often limited, because multimodal corpora, as well as ESP corpora, tend to be domain specific (Knight, 2011). Therefore, another crucial issue is that of representativeness. However, as Rizzo (2010: 5) points out, “[i]n spite of the efforts made, the representativeness of a corpus will only be approximate, since it is not possible that a limited compilation of texts fully represents the whole language of a discourse community”.

The multimodal corpus utilized for this study was inspired by the BLC Library of Foreign Language Film Clips (LFLFC) developed at the University of California at Berkeley (Kaiser, 2011), with which the Language Centre of the University of Pisa established a partnership aimed at developing this database. Some films and TV series were selected based on the discourse domain they represent, namely Political Science, Business & Economics, Law, Health & Medicine, and Tourism. They were carefully watched and 94 clips were cut (Table 1), choosing sequences where specialised discourse is at play and where different genres are portrayed (cf. sections 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 for details).

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