The Power of Story in Film for Language Learning

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How and why to use the power of story in film to harness effective language learning. Research-supported framework and suggestions for how to implement this approach in foreign language classrooms.

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How many times have you met a European who speaks nearly flawless English, and you ask, "How did you get so good in English?" And their answer is something like this, "I watched the show, *Friends*." The reason for this success is because humans learn languages best when we are presented with and challenged by rich/varied/repeated input in the target language. This type of language exposure is indispensable for language learning, and it is easily discoverable through the vehicle of story in film. I will argue that engaging stories are the 'pills in the peanut butter' that optimally facilitate language learning, and that this is pedagogically achievable through repeat viewings of good movies in the target language.

In this article, I provide a framework for how to implement this approach for teaching a foreign language in the United States. In broad strokes, I recommend watching an entire movie in the target language with English subtitles for the first viewing. Then watch it a second time with no subtitles whatsoever. Only during the second viewing will students have a tiny assignment to complete.

The type of language learning that story absorption promotes is peerless. The deep learning that comes from hundreds of hours of engaged story watching/listening is the gold standard for language learning.

This article aims to present the when/what/how/why of deep language learning through the power of story in film. The rest of this article is addressed to teachers (and learners) of Italian as a foreign language, but its principles apply to the learning and teaching of any language.

WHEN

When should you show films in class? As much as possible. As much as you can. As often as you can. As long as you can. Because ten years

from now, how many students will reflect on "I'm so glad you taught us that extra chapter in the textbook." My guess is that none will. On the other hand, if you start to implement the power of story in film for language learning, there's at least a chance that you will get a note like this: "I will never forget watching *Cinema Paradiso* in your Italian class, especially when we watched it for the second time without subtitles…I couldn't believe I was understanding it! Thank you for doing that, it unlocked a confidence in me that I have harnessed to live abroad and…"

WHAT

Choosing the film: There are over 10,000 Italian films out there so how do you filter them all? Here are the guidelines I've developed over the years:

> **Dialogue**: Is it a dialogue-heavy movie? If not…next!
> **Standard Italian**: Do the characters speak mostly in standard Italian? If they mostly speak in a dialect or in too-heavily-accented standard Italian…next!
> **The Art**: Is this memorable art? Is this a story that at least has the potential to generate goosebumps? Does it get under your skin?
> **Age-appropriate**: How many scenes of sex/violence/profanities can you share in your setting?
> **Availability**: Is it available via streaming? I simply google, "Watch [Divorce Italian Style]" and then I can easily see where it's available.

Here is another approach to filtering the plethora of choices:

> **Sort by director**: Search for "The films of [Nanni Moretti]." Then plug in: Alice Rohrwacher, Federico Fellini, Paolo Sorrentino, Roberto Benigni, etc.
> **Sort by actor**: Search for "The films of [Giovanna Mezzogiorno]." Then plug in Stefano Accorsi, Toni Servillo, Margherita Buy, Luca Marinelli, Alba Rohrwacher, etc.
> **Sort by score**: "Italian films scored by [John Williams]." Then plug in Ennio Morricone, Nino Rota, etc.

HOW

First and foremost, give yourself permission to watch the entire film in class, twice. Yes, the entire film, twice. Following is the rationale for

dividing this into two viewings:

Italian cinema is an art form, it is made by Italians for Italians. Therefore, the jokes, the slang, the speed must challenge native Italian speakers. If not, the director would not have a following, he/she would be considered a dud, a has-been, a never-was.

This is a universal truth in art creation: the artist must be saying something new or saying something in a new way…in his/her native language! How could an Italian 101 or Italian 102 student possibly ever understand that? They couldn't, don't fool yourself. But they can with the assistance of subtitles in English. For the first viewing, the teachers' responsibility is simple: enjoy this story with your students with the English subtitles on.

Second viewing: No subtitles, not in Italian, not in English. None: Before you start the second viewing, remember (and trust) that a good story is magic. Throughout your first viewing, savor how the story transports you. After the first viewing, briefly share that sense of your shared journey with the class (in Italian) before you start the second viewing.

Before you start the second viewing: Just think out loud (in Italian) about the journey, the relationships, the contrasts, the poetry, the visuals, the performances, the dynamics, the tension, the dreams of the characters, the friendships they developed, the truth they faced, the transformation of the central character. By doing this out loud, you are providing your students with even more input, related to the very rich input they just processed, and that they are about to process again.

Second viewing assignments for students: Give them something very basic to document so they have some skin in the game. I usually say this part in English (and only this part!). It could be as simple as this, "Write down the names—or at least what you think are the names!—of the five main characters." In a similar vein, "Write down the names of the three cities in which the story takes place." We want them to have enough investment to follow the plot again, but not too much 'homework' so that it gets in the way of their absorption of the story—a story that, by now, they already know and recognize and hopefully feel some affection for.

Teachers' assignment for the second viewing: Quietly transcribe at least five instances of one grammar point. Please remember that you probably

won't know what the 'winning' grammar point will be until you've finished your second viewing. Therefore, you will discreetly be transcribing several grammar points: the present tense, the *passato prossimo*, noun-adjective agreement, the imperative, the interrogative, etc. Don't stress about it, just get enough textual evidence to present one (**and only one**) grammar point after the second viewing.

Teaching tips for after the second viewing: You will eventually guide them through the evidence you've compiled for one grammar point but before you do that, please just think out loud again in Italian. It's not random, it's input. It's not indulgent, it's linguistically responsible. It's not goofy, it's the living language applied to living Italian art that you've just appreciated, together, truly together.

Most importantly, know that these verbalized reflections are providing your students with the most nutritious contact they've perhaps ever had with the target language. For example, after "The Bicycle Thieves," let yourself wax philosophic on something like the following:

"…che bella storia di un'odissea, un'odissea fatta con un papà e un figlio. E poi pensate a come il ruolo cambia, no? Alla fine del film, il figlio diventa papà e il papà diventa figlio, no? Pensate: chi prende la mano di chi alla fine? Il piccolo figlio prende la mando del papà, vero? Perché in quel momento vede che suo padre sta soffrendo e fa ciò che qualsiasi papà farebbe in un momento di dolore del proprio figlio, gli dà affetto, gli dà supporto, gli dà la mano."

To be crystal clear, there are two types of teaching opportunities after the second viewing, and they are both necessary and invaluable:

1) To wax poetic in Italian about how that movie hit you. This is the type of spontaneous speech that students also need to hear because…we never know what they are noticing, we cannot know what aspects of our modeled speech are sinking in. We have no clue, for example, which connectors (*allora, dunque, quindi, ecco,* etc.) they are deeply noticing and privately repeating.

In this vein, you should not edit out any advanced grammar like conditionals or subjunctives, just let them fly—they will need the memories of these utterances (even if their memories are stored unconsciously) if they ever hope to achieve advanced levels of

proficiency.

Perhaps you can adjust your speed of delivery a bit, but not so much that you can't share the real emotions you felt from that awe-inspiring work of art. Simply be an enraptured spectator who just left the 'theater.' Be the passionate student that you used to be (and hopefully still are) in front of them, share your appreciation of powerful story with them, in the target language.

2) Eventually review one grammar point that was present in the story. Don't worry if it's a relatively advanced grammar point like the imperative. It won't be that advanced to them (despite the fact that they may 'only' be enrolled in Italian 101 or 102 with you) because it will be highly contextualized. You will simply be re-writing bits of dialogue on the board for them; bits of dialogue that they've just seen/heard/understood across two viewings of the movie. Share these 'memories' in a grammar-focused way with your class. I strongly recommend doing this type of focus on form only after the second viewing. Do not be tempted to share them after the first viewing, they have not yet processed enough input for the grammar to be absorbed in their burgeoning mental representation of Italian. Don't let grammar get in the way of a good story.

WHY

Like Stephen Krashen famously said, because good stories provide *comprehensible input:* Language learning is an input-based phenomenon. Language learning is not an output-based phenomenon. Without floods and floods of input, there would never be any output. Effective language teaching must confront this scientific truth. Take a deep breath, look in the mirror and have the courage to be honest with yourself—are you exposing your students to hundreds of hours of input across a school year? If the person in the mirror says, "No, you're not," then look back at that person and say, "Okay, let's harness the power of story in film to do it right."

Like Bill Van Patten implies in his book, *From Input to Output*, film provides floods of input. First and foremost, that is our responsibility as language teachers, to provide tons of input, especially when delivered in the package of story. In this teaching module, after the two viewings, students will have processed approximately four hours of input. This input is scaffolded at first by the subtitles in the first viewing, then delivered a

bit by your summary of it (in Italian) before the second viewing. Most powerfully, the input is delivered in the format of target-language truth without the subtitles in the second viewing. Finally, relevant input is repeated and highlighted again by the teacher after the second viewing—both anecdotally on the power of the story and structurally in the form of grammar analysis of one part of speech that occurred many times in the dialogue. Eventually, this type of intense input exposure gives students the opportunity to produce output, i.e., to share a few meaningful reflections on the story they've just been immersed in, all while their Italian is growing, if unconsciously.

CONCLUSION

Today I have made a case for teaching Italian through film. One could make a similar case for teaching Italian through literature or teaching Italian through music. Or another approach that I'm not thinking of here. If the approach floods our students' eyes and ears with the target language, it can be scientifically valid. However, in today's day and age, I put specific emphasis on the power of story in film.

Why film as the vehicle? Because it is more amenable to rich, varied input that can be repeated. Of course, literature would meet these same requirements, but it just takes so long for a class to read a book in Italian (especially if it's as authentic as the movies we've discussed here, i.e., made by Italians, for Italians). To get that type of repeated exposure to a (novella) in Italian, it would probably take a class many months. Cinema can do that in just one week.

Of course, an Italian TV series would meet these requirements, and then some. In fact, it's almost too much to be used effectively in a language class. If a TV series goes on for 40+ episodes, how to decide when to stop it and begin the second viewing of the episodes? A film comes naturally packaged in its 90–120-minute capsule, and that is just the right-sized capsule to deliver the linguistic and reflective nutrients that students need most.

Music, too, can be rich and varied and easily repeated but there's the problem of length and paucity of dialogue. If TV series are too long, and (pop) music analysis is too short, then films are (as Goldilocks once said) just right!

Anecdotally, I have had success using this film-based approach at different levels (novice, intermediate, advanced), and even in 'mixed' classes

that have too many student levels in them. I recommend you try it, and here's the fun part: Your role in a teaching module like this is primarily to show them how much you enjoy this art, this excellence, this beauty.

Sit with them, take out the (virtual) popcorn. We all crave the togetherness of an experience like sitting in a packed movie theater together. Give yourself that gift, share that with your students. And…you're doing it in a linguistically responsible way! There's nothing as nutritious for your students' burgeoning Italian as hours of rich input, there is no other raw material for the final product of fluency. To borrow a metaphor from Lee and VanPatten, input *is* the wood and nails from which the house of fluency can be built, there is no other raw material.

Our students learn best when they are presented with and challenged by rich/varied/repeated input in the target language, and then asked to produce some modest output about that flood of input. This type of language exposure > modest production is the blueprint for language learning, and it is easily traceable and replicable through the vehicle of cinema.

In this article, I have presented a very specific type of framework—watching the film together in class, two times. I know that we have other options: watch at home, review together, etc. However, my respect for the intensity of doing it together is paramount. Also, because if we do it together with our students, there's at least a chance that this will be a fun and memorable experience. I say go for it, *insieme*.

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