

From Cultural Observation to Critical Reflection: Designing Reflective Tasks for English Film-Based Intercultural Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract: English-language films are often selected for the intercultural course in higher education to present cultural practices, identity negotiation and social problems. However, the traditional way is often only to identify and compare cultural differences, treat films as open-book records of culture, and thus reinforce fixed national categories. By means of combining intercultural education, critical thinking and the theory of film representation, this conceptual paper puts forward five levels of interpretive position: observation, contextualisation, perspective-taking, representation critique and self-reflective repositioning. In fact, the above components are a series of tasks and not a hierarchical list; these can help students learn how to think about who “others” are in movies and how to evaluate these representations from various perspectives, such as their own life experiences and culture. The proposed framework aims to transform films from sources of cultural information into sites for critical thinking and intercultural reflection.

Keywords: intercultural learning; English-language films; critical reflection; reflective tasks; film pedagogy; higher education

1. Introduction

English-language films serve as the linguistic input and cultural texts in the higher-education courses. Through various modes such as sight, sound and story, relationships and identities, the negotiation of norms, and cultural conflicts can be conveyed to create interesting and rich cultural encounters [1]. These affordances are the reason they have been used to some extent in the English and other interdisciplinary curricula [2]. Film Pedagogy often assumes that through exposure to different cultures, people can develop cross-cultural awareness. Students who are aware of the customs or communication style may be in a position of observing and will view individual characters as representative figures of that culture; therefore, an “us versus them” mentality will be formed between our culture and theirs. They are often asked to analyse the cultural “other” but rarely their own assumptions. Therefore, film-based intercultural learning is not to transmit cultural knowledge directly but rather to interpret and think in response to the teaching task.

Although research has shown that films can foster people’s cultural awareness and cross-cultural literacy [2], it has rarely identified observation, contextual interpretation, representation critique, self-reflection, etc., as tasks for study. Therefore, this study identifies the limitations of observation-based pedagogy, distinguishes critical reflection from cultural comparison, proposes an interpretive-positioning framework based on representation and reflexivity, and offers practical guidelines for task design.

2. Limits of Observation-Oriented Film Pedagogy

Films are not passive observations of the world’s changes but have been shaped by the director’s intent, plot structure, marketing demands and so on. Camera Angles, Editing, Music and Characterisation all guide the audience’s understanding [1]. Therefore, teachers cannot directly quote films to show how a country or culture is, but the typical tasks require students to recognise cultural differences, compare life abroad with their own country, and evaluate behaviour. Such questions have created fixed cultural boundaries, focus more on classification rather than interpretation, do not take into account the identity and social circumstances of characters, and have reduced cultural studies to the memorisation of facts by losing deep meaning.

Observation-oriented tasks can promote cultural essentialism by labelling culture with national tags and attributing individual behaviour to fixed national traits, ignoring class, gender, region, generation, personal history, etc. They establish a “we/they” division, and learners’ own culture becomes the standard for judging the “other” [3]. Although cultural comparison is not inherently bad, it can become essentialised when separated from its context and critical analysis. This pedagogy also has students be in a state of neutrality and seldom considers how their own experiences shape what they observe and evaluate. Without self-positioning, intercultural learning will only focus on judging the “other” and fail to consider oneself.

Therefore, the main problem is whether the framing of film tasks is about identifying facts in cultural understanding or reflexive interpretation.

3. Conceptualization of Critical Intercultural Reflection

Intercultural learning is not the accumulation of facts but engagement with ambiguity, difference and uncertainty [4]. To understand the reasons for behaviour, we need to know who the person is and who they know. Because behaviour can have many meanings, intercultural competence refers to being able to identify possible interpretations instead of choosing one correct answer. Reflection is about reconsidering one's experience and gaining understanding [5, 6]; critical reflection is to question the presuppositions, norms and power relations of judgment. It examines the origins of interpretation, whose interests it serves, and what is left out [7]. Critical cultural awareness also needs to judge the values and power structures of cultural activities, but should not be biased by one's own or the target culture [8, 9]. Reflexivity is also learning how history, media and culture affect our own interpretation of it among learners [10]. Its aim is not consensus but open-ended and revisable understanding.

Therefore, this paper puts forward the interpretive position of the learner's change in mind from to critical evaluation and self-aware repositioning. The five linked components are: Cultural observation is to describe observable behaviour and its changes; Contextual interpretation links this behaviour with identity, relationships and the social environment; Perspective-taking is to have many different ways of looking at things; Representation critique is about what kind of cultural reality films create; Self-reflexive repositioning is to review one's own judgments, adjust interpretations and acknowledge uncertainty. These dimensions are neither in a hierarchy nor a line; learners can move among them. They can show us how to interpret and reflect, which is not possible through observation alone.

4. A Framework for the Design of Reflective Film Tasks

The five dimensions of interpretive positioning in the framework can be used flexibly as the directions for the design of activities, and do not have to be followed sequentially. The first is to distinguish observation from interpretation and values. They are things that can be observed directly, such as claims that are not explicit, evidence supporting such claims, and missing information. This way, cultural-relative evaluations are not considered facts and it can be seen that interpretation is constructed, not given.

The second dimension is behavioural and does not attribute behaviour directly to national culture. Tasks are guided by factors such as identity, generation, gender, social class, relationships, personal history and communication goals. Students may consider which contextual factors explain the character's behaviour, whether there are other reasons, and whether all members of the represented culture would behave the same way. Therefore, it is no longer a matter of monocausal cultural explanations.

The third dimension is to have many viewpoints on multiple characters through role rewriting, multi-character journals, stance-switching discussions, alternative readings, etc. Students consider how different people would have perceived the same event, whose perspective is favoured by the film, and which voices have been omitted or ignored. Each explanation needs to be based on story facts and reasons for that story. Therefore, perspective-taking is not only about presenting one's own views but also includes disclosing various ways to interpret and choosing which views to reveal in a film.

The fourth dimension is that films can be forms of cultural expression rather than origins of cultural facts. Study of characterisation and stereotyping; the influence of camera work, music and editing; narrative authority and silence; the framing of cultural conflict; and the effects of genre conventions and commercial interests [1]. Students may be able to question how the film enables us to judge a character, what cultural biases are contained in a certain scene, what would be visible from another's perspective, and what kind of other depictions could challenge this narrative. Therefore, the main problem is no longer "what kind of culture is it?" but rather "why has this culture been presented this way?"

Finally, attention is drawn to how culture is presented in the minds of learners. Compare the original and revised answers, keep self-positioning diaries, or observe how you feel about some scenes. They are aware of the premises that guide their reading, know why they like some characters more than others, understand how their opinions have changed, and are conscious of the lack of certainty. Critical reflection is not about finding the right cultural answer; rather, it is to recognize and present one's own interpretation of that answer.

These are not a line but a cycle of observation, interpretation, comparison, criticism and reconsideration. Contextual interpretation and perspective-taking may not be suitable for the first impression of students, so representation critique can be used to open up the film for analysis and self-reflection may help them construct their own views. Therefore, the back-and-forth of interpretation and revision is a kind of reflection.

5. Pedagogical Application and Implications

Film selections should be from many different angles, conflicts of identity and open-ended interpretations, rather than those that claim to be authentic national symbols. Short clips can be repeated many times and studied closely, and cross-film comparisons show different ways of presenting the same problems. Tasks should be in the form of reflection: Before watching, identify your own assumptions; during the viewing, take notes on evidence, feelings and initial thoughts; after watching, put the behaviour in context, consider all sides, challenge the representation, and examine your own position. Revise and modify the initial response to complete the reflective cycle.

Teachers should provide supporting evidence, correct the error of overgeneralization, add other viewpoints that may have been omitted, moderate the power of the critique through politeness rather than judgment, and acknowledge that some problems do not have definitive solutions. In terms of assessment, we should assess students' ability to use evidence, be mindful of context, offer counter-interpretations, scrutinize representation and power structures, consider underlying assumptions, change one's own opinions based on these factors, and express doubt. A framework can also promote learners' interest in various forms of media, such as television, documentaries and short films, etc., so they can begin to observe and analyse independently.

6. Challenges and Limitations

The five-dimensional framework is an analytical tool rather than a fixed learning sequence. Criticality may take different forms across different cultures and educational contexts, and written reflection does not necessarily lead to intercultural competence in real-life situations. Students may also provide responses that they believe match teachers' expectations. Too much attention to representation may turn film viewing into a checklist of critical points, while sensitive topics may make students feel uncomfortable or unwilling to discuss them openly. Teachers' own assumptions may also favour certain interpretations, and overly demanding tasks may reduce students' engagement with the film. Future research should examine the framework in different courses, cultural contexts, and language-proficiency levels. It would also be valuable to explore how learners move across the five dimensions and whether film-based reflection can be transferred to intercultural communication beyond the classroom.

7. Conclusion

Films can show cultural differences, but this does not necessarily lead to cultural understanding. Observation-oriented pedagogy is limited because it often treats films as transparent records of culture, leaving learners as passive observers. This paper proposes five interconnected dimensions of interpretive positioning: observation, contextualisation, perspective-taking, representation critique, and self-reflexive repositioning. As learners revisit and revise their interpretations, they gradually move beyond surface observation towards critical reflection. The value of film in intercultural learning lies not only in showing cultural differences but also in encouraging students to think critically about how culture is represented, interpreted, and understood.

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