Bringing Culture to Life : How to work the film 500 Days Of Summer in class Part1


The feature directed by Mark Webb is a very interesting tool that can make our classes more enjoyable and more fulfilling because we are teaching English in a more practical context that what is explained in books. It will help us to introduce new vocabulary; to study the mechanism of the narrative; to discover interesting cultural topics such as fine arts, music, cinema and sports and to also enhance our students' skills. Moreover, final questions will awaken their critical thinking.

The necessary material for a B1 level class will be a DVD of the movie with subtitles in English for the deaf and hearing impaired (all the noises and actions are reflected on the screen, so more vocabulary is involved by direct association), and a copy of twelve pages in a pdf format created personally with the Quark Express editing program in order to get both pictures and text together for fill-in-gaps and speech bubbles tasks. This project came to be after many hours of hard and painstaking work. Nothing has been copied or reproduced from any other resources.

The procedure is split into six main points:

1. Introduction: Speaking and Vocabulary
2. Film viewing
3. The non-linear narrative: Tom and Summer relationship
4. Culture: 4.1. Fine Arts: Magritte and Hopper
   4.2. Music: artists and songs from the soundtrack
   4.3. Location: Los Angeles
   4.4. Cinema: The Graduate
   4.5. Sports: Women's soccer in the US
5. Listening: dialogue about a film review dialogue
6. Further thinking

Five to six sessions of fifty minutes each would be necessary (depending on the level and the ratio of students per class) to achieve the whole project. It might look too long but it fits the curriculum very well and experience has taught me that learners get more and more autonomous through sessions.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Speaking

First of all, the teacher introduces the topic of love and relationships: flirting, dating, and how something casual gets serious or not. What kind of problems would arise? Students usually answer the question by describing their own experiences which are pretty interesting and surprising to listen to! The break-up lines are often mentioned: “it’s not you, it’s me”, “I am not looking for anything serious at the moment”, etc. Another very stimulating topic appears at that point, that is to say, the gender issue concerning romance. For instance, women are generally more sentimental and twisted and men are more practical and basic.

The moment has come to introduce the film by showing the first scene which consists in a screen completely in black and a few lines written in bright while praying the standard legal disclaimer: “Any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental”. But then it adds: “Especially you, Jenny Beckman. Bitch” After this quite shocking statement, the teacher must stop the film and ask questions about how they think the author feels and what are the possible predictions for the forthcoming plot. In fact, this introduction tells about how the filmmaker felt when she ended their relationship. Furthermore, this speaking activity also encourages the learners to use the conditional structure and modal verbs.

1.2 Vocabulary

For this part, I have carefully chosen one hundred words from the movie taking into account false friends, idioms, phrasal verbs and key words that might be useful for a more efficient comprehension of the story.

For example:

1. false friends: “to race”, “eventually”, “disposable” or “intoxicated”

2. idioms: “there is plenty of fish in the sea” or “call it a day”

3. phrasal verbs: “to get back to”, “to get over somebody”, “to look back” or “to stand by somebody”

4. key words: “casual”, “to worth”, “fate” or “miserable” (also in the false friend list)

The words are listed in chronological order of appearance and the students are free to define them in English or to translate them into Catalan, Spanish or French. It’s very important that they write the different meaning before watching the film and while watching they will underline the adequate one according to the context of the scene.

2. THE FILM VIEWING

This step is quite simple, you only have to stop every twenty minutes and make sure they have understood everything by summarising orally what they have just seen. Remind your pupils to take notes about what happens every day and to scan the words studied during the previous step.
3. THE NON-LINEAR NARRATIVE

The film jumps from various days within the five hundred days of Tom and Summer's relationship, indicated by an animation that includes the day's number. Students must re-order the days and describe briefly what happens. On the cover of the file, I have transcribe what the narrator says after introducing the characters of Tom and Summer. Before going any further, leave the film on pause and project the transcription on the board and study it with your students in detail:

“This is a story of boy meets girl.

The boy, Tom Hansen of Margate, New Jersey, grew up believing that he'd never truly be happy until the day he met the one. This belief stemmed from early exposure to sad British pop music and a total mis-reading of the movie 'The Graduate'.

The girl, Summer Finn of Shinnecock, Michigan, did not share this belief. Since the disintegration of her parent's marriage she’d only love two things. The first was her long dark hair. The second was how easily she could cut it off and not feel a thing. Tom meets Summer on January 8th. He knows almost immediately she is who he has been searching for.

This is a story of boy meets girl, but you should know upfront, this is not a love story.”

The last sentence is in bold due to its importance for the plot.

This activity will enhance their capacity of summarising and get the whole picture of what a narrative really is: the purpose of narration is to tell a story of an initial situation, a problem which changes it all and the final situation. But why did the filmmaker use this technique of going backwards and forwards all the time?

In fact, the reason for this is mentioned in one of Tom’s lines: “Did you ever do this, you think back on all the times you’ve had with someone and just replay it in your head over and over and you look for those first sign of trouble?”. These hops in the temporal line are the processes that the main character does remembering the relationship after the break-up. However, you know that now but your students don't. Yet. You should mention the question to the class and give them time to develop their answers. This question will be asked at the end of the project, eventually :(page12, question 4)“Comment this quote (the one specified above) and link it to the fact that the film is told jumping from one day to another. In this part, there isn't right or wrong answer. This exercise is about developing your critical thinking skills but don’t forget to justify your answer with facts that you have noticed in the film. You may need to do some extra research.”

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