



Using silent films to teach language

One of the most intriguing developments in the renaissance of the short film is the increasing number of silent films which are being produced. There are two reasons why today's film-makers are choosing to create silent films. Firstly, they want their films to be seen by a worldwide audience and don't want language to get in the way of communication; as a result, they tell their stories using only the global language of moving images. Secondly, people are increasingly watching short films not at home or at work on television or computer screens, but on mobile devices such as phones or tablets while they are on the move. As these devices have very small speakers, and there is often a lot of background noise as people watch these films, it is very difficult to hear any dialogue. To get over this problem, many directors are choosing to tell their short stories visually, with minimal dialogue or none at all. Silent short films, therefore, offer our students the freedom to invent their own dialogue (either written or spoken) to fit the story. Many silent short films can be used with students of different ages and language levels. The stories tend to be accessible and easy to understand, making it easy for the students to identify the structure and form. This helps to develop their abilities in creating structured stories or narratives.

In this article, we are going to examine a number of simple activities which require little or no preparation, and which can be used with many silent short films.

Observation questions

Aim: to get the students to write observation questions about a short film.

- Select a silent short film which has rich visual details. There is a suitable example titled *Mixtape* at <http://bit.ly/1kf51Bl>. Tell your students they are going to watch a silent short film. As they watch, their task is to focus on the visual elements – and to try to remember as much as they can.
- Show the film twice.
- Divide the class into groups of three or four and ask them to write ten 'observation questions' about the film. For example:
 - What colour is the shirt the boy is wearing?
 - What clothes is the girl wearing?
 - What posters are on the wall?
- Set a time limit of ten minutes and walk around, providing help with language as necessary.
- Pair each student with a member of another group. They ask each other their observation questions.
- Show the film again. Ask the students to check the answers to their questions.

Order the actions

Aim: to get the students to sequence the events in a short film.

- Select a silent short film which has a lot of different actions. There is an excellent example titled *Soar* at <http://bit.ly/1QsT7lm>. Prepare ten sentences about the actions in the scene, for example, “a little aeroplane lands on the table.” Cut the paper into strips so that each strip has a sentence on it. Jumble the sentences up to ensure they are not in chronological order.
- Put the students into pairs and give each pair a set of paper strips. Tell them they are going to watch a short film in which they will see the ten actions in the sentences. Their task is to put the sentences in chronological order.
- Show the film twice and give the students five minutes to sequence the sentences correctly.
- Show the film again, for the students to check their answers.

Memory game

Aim: to help the students increase their general understanding of a story as a whole, by focusing on visual details.

- Select a silent short film of between two and six minutes. There is an excellent example titled *The Mirror* at <http://bit.ly/1Gbtwel>.
- Put the students into pairs and tell them that their task is:
 - to watch a short film;
 - to write down as many visual details as they can remember;
 - to compare their list with their partner.
- Play the film.
- Each pair makes a list of all the visual details they can remember. Set a time limit of five minutes.
- Invite the pairs to compare their list with another pair.
- Play the film again. Ask your students to tell you to pause when you come to a visual detail they have noted down, and to describe the detail.
- For homework, students write the story the film tells

Reconstruct a story

Aim: to get the students to reconstruct and retell the story from a short film.

- Select a five- to ten-minute silent short film which has a lot of different actions. There is an excellent example titled *Amar* at <http://bit.ly/29cTVvT>.
- Put your students into small groups and tell them that their task is:
 - to watch a short film;
 - to try to remember as much of the story as they can.
- Play the film.
- Each group reconstructs the story in writing, including as many of the actions as they can remember. Set a time limit of ten minutes.
- Invite a spokesperson from each group to read out their story.
- Show the film again, and ask your students to comment on how accurately they reconstructed the story.
- Ask the students to write a composition for homework, describing the story told in the film.

Back to back

Aim: to get the students to describe a dramatic scene, and listen carefully to a description.

- Select a two- to three-minute silent short film which has a lot of different actions. There is an excellent example titled *Taking Pictures* at <http://bit.ly/1xvpmcS>.
- Put your students into pairs, and divide each pair into a 'watcher' and a 'listener'. Tell the watchers that they are going to see a short film and that they should watch what happens very carefully and try to remember as much as they can. Tell the listeners that they should listen to the soundtrack, try to imagine what is happening and think of questions to ask the watchers about what was shown in the film. The listeners should either sit with their backs to the screen or, if this is not possible in your classroom, close their eyes.
- Play the film.
- Both students in a pair now face each other. The listeners ask their questions about what happened. The watchers give as much information as possible about the events in the film.
- When the pairs have completed their interviews, play the short film again. The listeners confirm or correct what they understood of the events, as described by the watchers.

What happens next?

Aim: to make predictions about what is going to happen next in a short film.

- Select a silent short film which has clear discernible actions, such as the one at <http://bit.ly/1dfTngg>.
- Tell your students they are going to watch a short film, and that you are going to pause the film at a key point. They have to predict what is going to happen next, and they have to support their predictions.
- Show the short film, pausing at a suspenseful point.
- Put your students into pairs and ask them to discuss what they think is going to happen next, and why.
- Restart the film, pausing at another suspenseful point. Get the students to say whether their predictions were accurate and what they think is going to happen next, and why.
- Show the rest of the film and, again, get feedback on the accuracy of the students' predictions.
- For homework, ask your students to write the story of the film and to continue the story after the film ends.

Moving music

Aim: to encourage the students to describe emotions.

- Find a short film which has emotive music, but no dialogue. There is an excellent example titled *The Piano* at <https://bit.ly/33Qyplp>.
- Tell your students you are going to play a short piece of music, and that you want them to close their eyes and to think of any emotions that come to mind as they listen.
- Play the film – with sound only.
- Put your students into pairs to discuss the emotions they felt.
- Tell them that the music is used in a short film and ask them to say what images they think accompany the music.
- Play the film with the sound and image on.
- Have a class discussion:
 - Was the film how they imagined?
 - Does the music suit the film?
 - How did the film make them feel?

What does it sound like?

Aim: to encourage the students to use their imagination and write a narrative based on cues they hear.

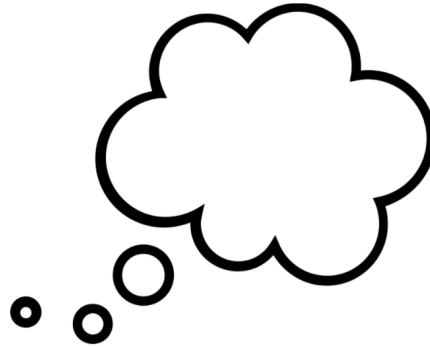
- Select a short film with no dialogue. There is an excellent example titled *Lovefield* at <http://bit.ly/JybLtw>.
- Tell your students they are going to hear, but not see, a short film.
- Write the following questions on the board, and tell the students that they should answer them as they listen to the film:
 - How many people are in the film?
 - Where is the film set?
 - What sounds can you hear?
 - What is happening?
 - What images do you think you are going to see in the film?
- Play the film twice, with no vision.
- Get the students to compare their answers with a partner. Encourage them to use the language of speculation. For example: It might be ..., It must be ..., It can't be
- Go through the questions, and write your students' answers on the board.
- Divide the class into groups of three or four, and ask them to write the narrative of the film, using the present simple. Tell them that their narrative should have a clear beginning, middle and end, and set a time limit of ten minutes.
- Walk around, providing help with the language as necessary.
- Get the students to explain their narrative to a member of another group.
- Now show the film with sound and vision so the students can compare their narratives with that in the film.
- For homework, the students write a composition based on the story told in the film.

Food for thought

Aim: to write a script of what the characters are thinking in a short silent film.

- Select a short film with two main characters, but no dialogue. There is an excellent example titled *Signs* at <http://bit.ly/1ayKVZs> .
- Tell your students that they are going to watch a short film which has no dialogue, and that they have to imagine what the two main characters are thinking at key moments of the film.
- Show the film.

- Put the students into pairs, and assign one of the two main characters to each student in a pair. They should watch the film again, and write a 'thought script' of what their character is thinking at key moments. Show them a thought bubble like the one below.



- They should then draw a thought bubbles for their character at key moments, and complete it with their character's thoughts.
 - Show the film again. Pause at key moments, to give your students time to write down in their thought bubbles what their character is thinking.
 - Show the film a third time. Pause at key moments again, and ask your students to read out and discuss their characters' thoughts.
 - For homework, they can write a letter from their character to the other character in the film.
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