Exploring Controversy and Increasing Communication Skills: Film in the L2 Classroom

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Abstract

This paper considers how the incorporation of film into the second language classroom can be a powerful resource in helping students develop communication skills in their second language, while also guiding them in the critical analysis of their stances on controversial topics. The specific examples provided in this paper are based on an intermediate level, Spanish-language Conversation and Composition course. However, the general observations and suggestions are applicable to conversation courses in other modern languages as well. The specific films discussed deal with issues of identity, social unrest, and personal beliefs in different ways. This paper argues that rather than shy away from uncomfortable topics in the classroom, second language educators are in a unique position to make use of students’ relative unfamiliarity with Spanish-speaking cultures to provide them with a new way to reflect on their own beliefs and place in society. Indeed, evidence from psycholinguistics research suggests that when speakers consider moral and social issues through the lens of their second language (L2), they tend to approach ethical conundrums with greater objectivity and psychological distance than when they use their first language (L1). Finally, film offers other opportunities for learning beyond the realm of controversy, too. The rich linguistic content, combined with authentic social contexts, provides students with input that is both comprehensible and thought provoking. In this paper, concrete examples of discussion topics and class activities are provided for each of the films considered as a way to facilitate student engagement and active learning in the L2 classroom.

Keywords: Spanish, film, communication
Introduction

The use of film to guide and foster classroom discussion presents unique learning opportunities for students and instructors alike (Levey, 2015). As Kaiser and Shibahara (2014) explain, “With its authentic language, rich cultural content, ... and language situated in a visual context, film presents a window into the world of the target language and culture” (p. 1). The depictions of socioeconomic and political issues, as well as the authentic human interactions that film provides, are crucial for developing students’ linguistic skills and for developing their awareness and understanding of complex social issues. In this sense, film helps to develop the type of “educated speakers” advocated for by the Modern Language Association: speakers who “have deep translilingual and transcultural competence” and who are “trained to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture” (MLA, 2007, pp. 3–4). Indeed, research on student motivation indicates that students themselves similarly value language learning for more than the ability to communicate in multiple languages. In a survey by Price and Gascoigne (2006), undergraduate students overwhelmingly indicated that “gaining cultural understanding, broadening their personal horizons, and improving communication skills” (p. 391) were important motivations for learning a second language, as were considerations like personal growth and the promotion of understanding between cultures. Just as a growing awareness of global citizenship has evolved over recent decades, so has technology advanced in recent years to make connecting to other cultures easier than ever. It is now effortless for students to view films both in and out of the classroom (Kaiser, 2011). Language instructors can seamlessly incorporate short clips into their daily lessons, while students can access full-length films at home or on campus at times that are convenient for their schedules.

Controversial topics in the L2 classroom

Classroom discussions of challenging or controversial issues offer the opportunity for intellectual growth for any student, but it turns out that those who find themselves debating ethics in the L2 classroom may be especially impacted by these exchanges. Research suggests that individuals’ judgments of morality are, surprisingly, influenced by which of their languages they are using to communicate and comprehend information. Speakers tend to make more utilitarian decisions (for instance, sacrificing one life to save five) when they are faced with moral dilemmas in their L2 instead of their L1 (Chan, Gu, Ng, & Tse, 2016; Costa, Foucart, Arnon, Aparici, & Apesteguia, 2014); they are less confident in their judgments of morality (Costa, et al., 2014, 2015; Geipel, Hadjichristidis, & Surian, 2015a); and they are more likely to be permissive of violations of social norms that do not actively harm others (Geipel et al., 2015a).

These findings are explained in part by the increased challenge of speaking one’s L2, with greater effort at the linguistic level being linked to increased deliberation at the cognitive level (Geipel, Hadjichristidis, & Surian, 2016). In addition to taking greater psychological distance from moral quandaries when
assessing them in their L2 (Hayakawa, Costa, Foucart, & Keysar, 2017), speakers also display communicative behaviors in the L2 that suggest they do not always adhere to social or ethical norms when in a new linguistic environment or when using their second language. The most robust evidence for this finding comes from research on the use of taboo words. In a study of Polish-English bilinguals, for instance, speakers were asked to translate texts “brimming with expletives” from their L1 (Polish) into their L2 (English), and vice versa (Gawinkowska, Paradowski, & Bilewicz, 2013, p. 1). In the translations that the speakers produced, they chose to use less offensive or “weaker” swear words in the translations into their L1, while in their L2 translations, the same speakers chose more offensive or “stronger” swear words than the original texts called for. This apparent exemption from the social constraints and the feeling of having more freedom to express oneself bluntly also results in more frequent use of taboo words and insults by speakers in the L2 during regular conversation (Dewaele, 2004, 2010). Researchers suggest that this finding is due to the fact that adherence to these norms is learned in social contexts and encoded in personal memories, which are mediated through the native language (Marian & Neisser, 2000; Schrauf & Rubin, 2000).

In a separate study on speaker judgments of social norm violations, Geipel, Hadjichristidis, and Surian (2015a) discovered that bilingual speakers were more likely to tolerate moral transgressions when they read about and discussed them in their L2. Participants were presented with written descriptions – either in their L1 or L2 – of unethical actions, such as cheating on exam without others knowing or favoring a friend for a financial bonus over other deserving employees in the workplace. The researchers argued that because most standards of judgment are learned “directly or indirectly through social interactions involving the native language” (Geipel et al., 2015a, p. 15), the use of the L2 would reduce the activation of those prior experiences in the minds of the speakers, allowing them to consider ethically complex situations with more psychological distance and to be more accepting of norm violations. Indeed, speakers in the above study were less willing to condemn so-called unethical or non-normative actions, and they showed less confidence in their judgments when making them in the L2, suggesting that they relied less on the types of ‘gut feelings’ that are rooted in native-language memories and experiences (Costa et al., 2014, 2015). Instead, speakers using their L2 were forced to grapple with whether or not the norm violations were problematic according to more objective standards (Cipolletti, McFarlane, & Weissglass, 2016; Hayakawa et al., 2017).

In the Geipel et al. (2015a) study, this was especially true in cases in which participants were presented with social norm transgressions that did not actively harm uninvolved individuals, such as consensual incest, flag desecration, and academic cheating. For a film like Todo sobre mi madre (Almodóvar, 1999), which explores transgender identity and non-hetero-normative romantic relationships, the research findings suggest that students may be more permissive of such situations, or at least, that they will demonstrate less surety in condemning them, even if they might normally be uncomfortable with them in their L1 environment. Similarly, the film Mar adentro (Amenábar, 2004) offers the opportunity for
students to challenge deeply-held beliefs on life and death. The film portrays the story of quadriplegic man determined to end his own life through assisted suicide, despite laws that prevent such an action. From a utilitarian perspective, students must contemplate whether there is more harm in insisting that the man continue to live or in allowing him to take his own life. That is, is it more consistent to recognize the practical burden of the round-the-clock care the man requires, his complete lack of privacy and independence, and his own wish to die – or should the emotional impact of his death on his loved ones and the societal implications of condoning suicide in any form outweigh the wishes of the individual? The very act of grappling with these questions and of considering how other cultures handle them provides students with the opportunity to reflect more thoughtfully on their own stances on these issues. And while their perspectives may remain superficially unchanged, their ability to critically analyze and successfully defend their viewpoints will improve.

Language instructors might expect that some students could find it difficult to connect emotionally with films set in a different language and culture, given their apparent detachment from deep-seated morals. Yet in the literature on moral judgments, researchers argue that emotions themselves are not necessarily dampened in the L2 (Geipel et al., 2015b). Even though there is some suggestion that affective feelings such as pleasure in reading (Hsu, Jacobs, & Conrad, 2015) and brain responses to negative stimuli (Jończyk, Boutonnet, Musiał, Hoemann, & Thierry, 2016) can be attenuated when perceived through the L2, these findings are generally not found to be significant at the behavioral level. In fact, based on the research on affective filters and anxiety in language learning, strong emotions are often the norm in the L2 classroom (Imai, 2010; MacIntyre, 2002; Méndez López, 2011). Thus, it may not be unexpected that the introduction of morally ambiguous or questionable material into classroom discussions will elicit impassioned arguments from students as they connect to the films and examine their beliefs.

The value of film for communication and language learning

When students are given the opportunity to use the L2 to engage with others on topics that they care about, there is an impetus for them to work together to express their opinions, clarify their intentions, and negotiate disagreements to arrive at a mutual understanding (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This focus on completing meaningful tasks to develop linguistic skills allows students to focus on achieving communicative goals without becoming crippled by the fear of committing (inevitable) grammatical inaccuracies (Ellis, 2003, 2009; Nunan, 2004; Prabhu, 1987). When communication is emphasized as the major goal of a course, students can approach language acquisition in a more natural way (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In this context, film provides students with reliable, grammatically accurate, and more easily comprehensible input (Krashen & Terrell, 1988), which is critical for developing their listening comprehension skills in the L2 (Krashen, 1982) and for providing them with models of native speech (Bueno, 2009). Film can also be useful in that subtitles are available, which supports comprehension of the L2 (Garza, 1991; Lunin & Minaeva, 2015; Winke, Gass, & Sydorenko, 2010). And though watching films subtitled with L1 instead of the target
language can be less effective overall for language learning (Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011), in the case of less-proficient students, it can act as a critical learning aid, offering a way to keep them engaged and interested in the film’s content, especially when complex grammatical constructions might still be in the process of being learned (Guillory, 1988; Neuman & Koskinen, 1992). Thus, given the varied proficiency levels that individual students exhibit even within a single classroom, the instructor can strike a balance by providing subtitles as an option while still emphasizing to students the benefits of viewing the films without them.

Film also offers students exposure to new vocabulary in their L2. The frequency with which students use novel words predicts how well they will recognize and recall them. The more an individual word is “seen, heard, and understood” by L2 students, the more easily they will learn it (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 62). For this reason, incorporating and repeating vocabulary words in a range of class activities, both prior to and after students view each film, is crucial. But frequency alone is not enough; the nature of the activities matters, too. When it comes to learning vocabulary in the classroom, students are commonly accustomed to learning via rote memorization (Sagarra & Alba, 2006) or the use of semantic maps (Khoii & Sharififar, 2013). They have limited options for learning and using words in real-life contexts and discussions, which offer the best opportunity for long-term vocabulary retention (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). In terms of input, film exposes students to authentic uses of the words they are studying, and it situates new vocabulary within a rich cultural context (Kaiser & Shibahara, 2014). Students gain insights into how native speakers pronounce and use these words, reinforcing their learning in the classroom. As for output, when communicative and task-based learning are front and center (Nunan, 1991), students have the opportunity to use new words frequently and accurately as they discuss their perspectives and reflect on what they’ve seen.

The development of relevant vocabulary plays an important role in engaging students throughout the semester as they view and discuss each film. While circumlocution and gesture are to be encouraged when students lack the specific words they need to express their ideas, “the importance of vocabulary [for communication] can hardly be overestimated” (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 60), and this is especially true when students discuss challenging moral and social issues, where preparation and precision is key (Rifkin, 2000). As Lonergan (1984), an early advocate of using film to support L2 learning, explains, “an unprepared discussion can be disappointing. Learners are frustrated if they have not got the vocabulary available to express their ideas, and they are dispirited if the discussions leads nowhere” (p. 66). In order to avoid such frustration, frequent vocabulary activities can be incorporated into class time and included in regular assessments. Suggestions for such activities are described in detail for each film that is discussed in this paper.

Putting theory into practice with a Conversation and Composition course

The SP 301 Conversation and Composition course offered at Ball State University is a fifth-semester course that aims to increase oral proficiency and communicative authenticity through interactive activities and class discussion. Students enrolled in the course must have completed four semesters of college-
level Spanish in order to enroll, or have demonstrated the equivalent level of language knowledge based on their performance on a placement exam (either a nationally-recognized exam, such as the Spanish Advanced Placement (AP) Exam, or a departmental-internal assessment). The textbook utilized in a given section of the Conversation and Composition course is dependent on the preferences of each instructor.

For the course described here, the textbook *Cinema for Spanish Conversation* (McVey Gill, Smalley, & Haro, 2014) was used. The textbook includes a total of 16 films, of which six were selected for inclusion in the Conversation and Composition course (see Table 1 below and Appendix A). For each one, there are 15-20 pages of activities available in the textbook, ranging from exercises to prepare students for viewing the films, vocabulary assignments that can be completed in class or as homework, conversation and composition prompts, and readings of various difficulty levels to deepen students’ understanding of specific scenes (these include poems, diary entries, and interviews from the directors, actors, and – in the case of historical dramas – real-life protagonists from each film).

Table 1. Films Selected from Cinema for Spanish Conversation Textbook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish title</th>
<th>English title</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Release Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>También la lluvia</td>
<td>Even the Rain</td>
<td>Icíar Bollaín</td>
<td>(2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Pablo Larraín</td>
<td>(2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diarios de motocicleta</td>
<td>The Motorcycle Diaries</td>
<td>Walter Salles</td>
<td>(2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volver</td>
<td>Volver</td>
<td>Pedro Almodóvar</td>
<td>(2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todo sobre mi madre</td>
<td>All About My Mother</td>
<td>Pedro Almodóvar</td>
<td>(1999)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These six films can be researched, viewed, and discussed by students over the course of 16 weeks (keeping in mind a week of vacation from classes in the fall and spring semesters). While additional films could certainly be included in a course of this length, the inclusion of only six allows for two to three weeks of focused exploration of each one, and gives instructors the option to dedicate class time to written quizzes and one-on-one oral assessments as necessary.

The first half of the semester is dedicated to three films: *También la lluvia* (Bollaín, 2010), *No* (Larraín, 2012), and *Diarios de motocicleta* (Salles, 2004). These three are thematically linked in that they all focus on social inequalities, the role of government, and the strategies that protagonists use to rectify the injustice they witness. Additionally, all three are historical fiction dramas that are situated in Latin America. Because of the challenges of providing students with sufficient historical and cultural contextualization for these films, it is suggested that three weeks be dedicated to each one. The first week and a half can serve to introduce students to key historical dates and figures, as well as to strengthen their vocabulary in preparation for viewing the film. The second week and a half can be
dedicated to discussing the film itself, exploring students’ reactions and opinions about specific characters and key moments, and reviewing material in preparation for quizzes or other major assignments.

During the second half of the semester, another set of three films is explored: *Mar adentro* (Amenábar, 2004), *Volver* (Almodóvar, 2006), and *Todo sobre mi madre* (Almodóvar, 1999). These films are linked in part by the fact that they all take place in Spain, which allows students to compare and contrast regional accents and terminology with the previous set of films. More importantly, all three focus not on major historical and social movements, but on the struggles of the individual with identity, interpersonal relationships, and life and death. Given that students will be comfortable discussing L2 cinema at this point in the semester, it is suggested that each film be allotted two weeks of class discussion. The first week can serve to familiarize students with key vocabulary and concepts, while the second week can once more be dedicated to discussion, reactions, and reflection on the films, once students have watched them at home.

**Practical aspects of incorporating film into a class**

In the interest of conserving precious classroom time for conversation and engagement, all films should be viewed by students outside of class. Most universities offer online video viewing through third-party platforms such as Ensemble Video or SonicFoundry’s Mediasite, where films can be uploaded following Fair Use guidelines (Lehman, 1998). This avoids the need for students to procure DVD players to watch the course’s films, allowing them to watch each one easily (and legally) from a home or library computer.

There are a variety of methods for ensuring that students actually complete the assigned viewings. For instance, given that a two-hour film cannot be fully discussed in the span of a single class, it is reasonable to assign students to view shorter segments for a given class meeting – for instance, splitting viewing into two separate assignments. This makes the task of viewing the film less time-consuming on a given night (e.g., when viewing one hour as compared to two), and also allows students to focus in on more details while at home and during the class discussions, instead of having to process the entire film in one sitting. Of course, some students may prefer to watch a given film in its entirety during a single viewing. In these cases, a quick reminder to students that they should avoid “spoiling” the second half for others can be helpful in maintaining a positive classroom environment. In fact, when students get some foreshadowing of major events in the film from their fellow classmates (but without major spoilers), it can make them eager to see what happens next.

A simplistic “first half” then “second half” division of viewing does not always jibe with the flow or major story arcs of a film. Therefore, the table below offers suggestions for how to divide viewing for each of the six films discussed in this paper, with hour and minute markers to separate the first and second parts. Once students have completed the first part of each film, their next viewing assignment should be to watch the rest of the film to its end.
Table 2. Viewing Time Suggestions for First and Second Parts of Each Film

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish title</th>
<th>English title</th>
<th>Cutoff time between viewings</th>
<th>Total runtime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>También la lluvia</td>
<td>Even the Rain</td>
<td>0:58:06</td>
<td>103 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1:00:30</td>
<td>118 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diarios de motocicleta</td>
<td>The Motorcycle Diaries</td>
<td>1:00:55</td>
<td>128 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar adentro</td>
<td>The Sea Inside</td>
<td>1:01:05</td>
<td>125 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volver</td>
<td>Volver</td>
<td>0:59:36</td>
<td>121 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todo sobre mi madre</td>
<td>All About My Mother</td>
<td>0:50:27</td>
<td>102 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, even if watching a film in its entirety during class time is not feasible or pedagogically useful, viewing short clips during class can be an excellent way to initiate deeper conversations. Replaying clips jogs students’ memories of key moments and interactions, and it facilitates discussion of characters’ motivations and emotions when it comes to specific events in the films (Kaiser & Shibahara, 2014). Students can recall their initial reaction (or lack thereof) to each clip, and they can then compare their perspectives with those of their classmates. Viewing the clips together in the class also allows students to engage in a visual “close reading” of different scenes. They can analyze gestures, facial expressions, and word choice in depth (Kaiser, 2011; Lonergan, 1984), and even discuss meta-cinematic aspects of the clip, like the director’s decisions with respect to lighting, camera angles, and character dialogue. And of course, individual scenes can be replayed to spark discussions about characters’ decisions in the heat of the moment as compared to their behaviors during the rest of the film.

Classroom applications and suggested activities for each film

Students’ already-existing background knowledge on a subject is a strong predictor of how much new information they will be able to learn (Marzano, 2004), and films serve as a touchstone that students can refer back to when learning new vocabulary and grammatical constructions. Even prior to watching a film, students’ background knowledge can be bolstered, allowing them to more easily identify key cultural and plot-related details. In the case of films based on historical events, as is the case for the first three films of the semester (También la lluvia, No, and Diarios de motocicleta), activities can be developed to help students understand the time period during which the film takes place, the historical events leading up to the plot of the film, and connections to modern-day issues. In films in which modern social issues are the focus, which is the case for the second three films of the semester (Todo sobre mi madre, Volver, and Mar adentro), students can learn about the cultural customs that characters take part in and can be asked to reflect on their own personal experience with death, secrets, gossip, and love (all of which are relevant to these films, as is explored in the next section).
In the following section, three of the six films have been selected to discuss in detail: También la lluvia, Mar adentro, and Volver. First, an explanation of the premise of each film is offered, following by a discussion of how instructors can strengthen students’ background knowledge of the major issues in each film. Activities that focus on vocabulary building, cultural comparisons, recollection of key events, and self-reflection on the connection between action and motivation are also discussed in detail. Finally, suggestions for visual close readings for each film are discussed. The replaying of short scenes is a powerful tool for fostering discussion amongst students. Therefore, full descriptions of specific scenes and suggestions for questions are included for each film.

In addition to in-class discussion activities, one-on-one oral interviews, as well as written assignments like cinematic critiques (essays), cultural contributions, and regularly scheduled quizzes can offer a way to assess students’ content comprehension and linguistic development. Appendix A provides a sample semester schedule of major assignments, while Appendices B, C, and D include sample rubrics for several assignment types. As for scheduled quizzes, the following sections can be helpful to include on a quiz to support communicative goals and to reflect the content of class discussions:

- Multiple choice section focused on content and concept comprehension
- Matching section with for characters with descriptions and/or film quotes
- Vocabulary section requiring students to define key terms and describe their connection to the film
- Essay section with two prompts focused on analysis of the film and use of grammatical structures

With a consistent format for all quizzes, students can study efficiently in the days prior to each one. And during the rest of the semester, they can focus on developing their understanding of each film through class assignments and discussions, as the next section explores.

Exploring controversy and culture in También la lluvia, Mar Adentro, and Volver

También la lluvia

The first film of the semester, También la lluvia (Bollain, 2010) exposes students to a new perspective on the history of Europeans’ arrival to the New World, while simultaneously introducing them to issues of access and government control through Bolivia’s water crisis and the Water War that occurred in Cochabamba in 2000. At the beginning of the film, a Mexican director, Sebastián, and a Spanish producer, Costa, arrive in Bolivia to shoot a historically-based film about Christopher Columbus’ arrival to Hispaniola. This film-within-a-film focuses on the Europeans’ mistreatment of the indigenous communities of the New World, the moral condemnation of their actions by two prominent Dominican friars, and the resistance movement led by the local Taíno cacique, Hatuey.

Suggestions for building background knowledge. Before discussing the specific conflicts within the film, there are several historical and real-life modern issues
that students need to explore prior to viewing También la lluvia. Below are several questions that instructors can use to guide students during in-class lessons or out-of-class assignments (see Appendix B for an example of a “cultural contribution” assignment that encourages students to explore these issues more in depth on their own). To understand the film’s complexities, students first need to know basic information about the following historical issues and figures:

- Who was Christopher Columbus, and how did he view and treat the natives of the New World?
- Who were Bartolomé de las Casas and Antonio de Montesinos, and how did they respond to Columbus?
- Who was the Cacique Hatuey, and why is he important to modern indigenous resistance movements?

To a certain extent, such questions can be answered via brief but informative lectures in class. The instructor can begin by eliciting the knowledge that students should (hopefully) already possess, and then move on to share new information with the class. For example, after an introduction of the film, and an explanation that there is actually a film within the film focused on Europeans’ arrival to the New World, students can be asked an open-ended question to jump start the discussion: “What do you know about Christopher Columbus and his arrival to the New World?”

Students can be allowed to discuss what they know (and don’t know) in small groups for three to four minutes. It should also be pointed out to students that in Spanish, Christopher Columbus is referred to as Cristóbal Colón, and that they can feel free to simply use Colón to reference him (but that they should avoid the English version of his name, so as to stick to the target language). During the short discussion, the instructor can circulate around the classroom, asking more pointed questions of groups such as: “Do you know where Columbus was from? What year did he arrive in the New World? What were the names of his three ships? Where did he first land? Where did he think he was initially, and what did he want to do once he realized he was in an entirely different place?”

Once the initial small-group discussion has wrapped up, the instructor can lead the class in a summary of their collective knowledge – as well as a correction of key details. There are often moments of self-conscious giggling in the class when students realize that the Mayflower has no connection to Columbus’ voyage, and that it is separated by more than a century from la Niña, la Pinta, and la Santa María. So long as their mistakes with historical details are met with quick corrections and gentle (if any) teasing, the activity serves to educate students rather than embarrass them. It is also worthwhile to remind students of this historical information in subsequent classes, be it through references in the next day’s presentation or as part of a short pop quiz.

There are also several important primary sources that students can access to learn more about the major events and conflicts that occurred within the first few decades of Europeans’ arrival to the New World. Columbus’ personal diaries as well as his letters to the king and queen of Spain, for instance, are
easily accessible online and can be printed out or shared digitally with students. Similarly, students can also read the famous 1511 sermon of the Dominican friar Antonio de Montesinos, in which he roundly condemns the treatment of the indigenous by the Europeans. Montesinos’ condemnation stands in stark contrast to Columbus’ recommendation of the indigenous as slaves, and his is a voice that is generally unknown to students prior to exploring the film También la lluvia. While questioning celebrated historical figures like Christopher Columbus may make some students uncomfortable, primary sources like these can help them understand the controversy that surrounded his actions even 500 years ago. Getting a first-hand look at the debates that arose during the time of Columbus can serve to foment discussion and reflection about his role in modern culture, both in the United States and throughout Latin America.

Suggestions for vocabulary activities and in-class conversation. One major conflict that arises in the modern-day plot of También la lluvia is connected to the indigenous actors that are hired to act in the film-within-the-film. As the modern plot progresses, it becomes clear that the indigenous communities of Bolivia are suffering their own form of injustice: they lack access to clean drinking water, and tensions are running high between indigenous protestors, the water company, and the national government. These tensions did, in fact, come to a head in real-life Bolivia in 2000, leading to the Guerra del agua or “Water War” that serves as the major background event for the film. This plot point can be used to begin exploring the following questions with students:

- What are the causes of the water crisis in modern-day Bolivia?
- Do parts of the United States have issues with access to safe drinking water?
- Are there groups in the United States that protest the government?
- How do they express their frustrations?

For the first of these questions, students are unlikely to know the precise reasons for Bolivia’s ongoing water crisis. In class, it can be helpful to explain that rural areas are far more impacted than urban areas of the country, and that this in turn means that indigenous Bolivians are more likely to be impacted by the crisis because of where they happen to live. As for the underlying causes for the water scarcity issue, this can be a good opportunity to assign a recent news article on the topic for at-home reading in preparation for an in-class discussion (a good example would be Miranda, 2016). Reading such an article can give the students a sense of the immediacy and urgency of the situation, and can supplement the scenes of protest and violence that they see in También la lluvia with facts and statistics.

In response to the second question, most students will immediately reference the lead contamination of Flint, Michigan’s drinking water (Hanna-Attisha, LaChance, Sadler, & Champney Schnepf, 2015). They usually have a general understanding of the situation in Flint, but the instructor, knowing that this example is very likely to come up, can plan ahead and be prepared to provide more detailed facts about the city’s issues in order to facilitate a comparison between Flint and Bolivia. Students may, of course, contribute examples of other, less well-


known water crises in the United States. In most cases, a detailed exploration of each situation is not necessary – simply recognizing that water access can affect communities in both countries can be eye opening for students.

Finally, for the third question, a wide variety of answers will be generated by the class, but the key purpose in posing the question is to transition into a discussion of how people can express their frustration with the government, and to provide students with new terms that they can use to discuss civic engagement. To transition to the vocabulary activity, the instructor can reiterate that in the case of the Guerra del agua, indigenous Bolivians engaged in both peaceful and violent protests. As a starting question for small-group discussion, students can respond to the following questions:

• In the United States, how do we tend to resolve social conflict and unrest?
• How can citizens express frustration with their government? What tactics do you think are effective?
• Do you think the public tends to support violence or pacifism more as a protest tactic? Why is this?

Groups can then be asked to discuss recent examples of the use of different types of tactics in the United States, with the list below focusing their conversation. On a side note, if the terminological distinction has not already been made, it can be pointed out now that while “protest” can translate as either protesta or manifestación, “protester” does not share the same cognate equivalent and translates to manifestante.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>boicots</th>
<th>boycotts</th>
<th>protestas</th>
<th>protests</th>
<th>referendums</th>
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<td>referendums</td>
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<tr>
<td>arrodillarse</td>
<td>to kneel</td>
<td>cartas al editor</td>
<td>letters to the editor</td>
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</table>

Discussions of specific examples of each of the above terms invite comparisons with one of the film’s protagonists, Daniel, an indigenous man who actively participates in and sometimes leads the protests against both the international water company and the national government, all while starring in the conquest film directed by Costa and Sebastian. Students tend to see Daniel as the hero of the film, but his unwaveringly direct and sometimes violent responses to injustice can also give them pause and prompt discussion of whether his actions are justified. Once students have considered the acceptability of the choices of a character like Daniel, the instructor can introduce a personality description activity, in which students have to use known and unknown adjectives to describe different protagonists. Students can begin by being prompted to answer basic questions in response to the display of photos of the characters: “What is the name of this person? What are some of his / her concerns during the film? What kind of person is he / she?”.

The conversation can then switch to a simple forced-choice round of questioning with the class. For instance, if a photo of Daniel were on the screen, the class could be asked to choose the word in each pair that best describes this character:
This type of list allows students to consider both the “negative” and “positive”
traits of the main characters, and to understand the complexity of their personalities
and their backgrounds.

Suggestions for visual close readings. One of the first sticking points of the film
_También la lluvia_ is the fact that Costa and Sebastian have chosen to shoot in
Bolivia rather than in the Caribbean, where Columbus originally landed. In other
words, the two characters are employing local Quechua actors to portray Taíno
resistance fighters. They even go so far as to ask the actors to speak in Quechua
during key scenes in the conquest film (as if it were the Taíno language) because
in their words, “Son todos iguales”/“They’re all the same”). These are curious
decisions for the two men to make, given that their aim with producing the film
is purportedly in part to educate their audience and provide historically accurate
portrayals of those involved in the events related to the conquest. After students
watch the scene in which Costa and Sebastian discuss their reasons for filming in
Bolivia instead of the Caribbean, they can consider questions like:

- Why do Costa and Sebastian decide to film in Bolivia? What considerations
  influence them?
- Do you think this decision will impact the audience’s engagement with the
  conquest film in any way?
- Do you think this scene would have been different if one of the film crew
  were indigenous?

Another scene that can be incorporated into class time involves Daniel, the
local Bolivian man who plays the rebellious cacique Hatuey (incidentally, he is
generally students’ favorite protagonist in the film). Daniel is the main character
that is most impacted by the issues with access to clean drinking water, given his
status as a poor indigenous man in Bolivia, and he is the one who is most willing to
point out inequity. At the beginning of _También la lluvia_, Daniel’s outspokenness
catches the attention of the director and producer when he demands that they
interview each and every person who turned up for the casting call of their film.

Once Daniel has been hired, however, he continues to be outspoken, and in a
key scene that the instructor can play in class, he is seen leading street protestors
in the chant, “Fusil, metralla, el pueblo no se calla”/“Rifle, shrapnel, the people
won’t stay quiet”. Costa and Sebastián look on with worry at the scene – not for
Daniel’s safety nor for the success of his quest to secure drinking water for himself
and the poor indigenous residents of Cochabamba – rather, for how his actions
will impact their shoot. The issue of hypocrisy thus arises for students to discuss,
as Costa and Sebastián must wrestle with the fact that while they value Daniel’s passion on set in his portrayal of a historical champion of indigenous rights, they would rather that he not actively fight for similar rights in the modern world of También la lluvia. While it may seem easy to criticize the two men for not standing up for a seemingly righteous cause, students can be asked to consider:

- Do you think Costa and Sebastian recognize the importance of water for Daniel and his community?
- What are the considerations that hold Costa and Sebastian back from supporting Daniel?
- What considerations might drive Daniel, but not Sebastian or Costa, to participate in the protests?
- If you were in Daniel’s position, do you think you would take the same actions? Are there alternatives?

All of these questions invite students to take a step back from their initial assessments of the situation, to consider how practicality can interfere with righteousness, and to reflect on how they might react in the same situation. It also offers the opportunity for the class to discuss whether the types of alternative methods of protest explored in the earlier conversation activities would work in the context of Bolivia and the indigenous communities.

*Mar adentro*

The fourth film of the semester, *Mar adentro* (Amenábar, 2004), elicits very serious discussion amongst students, especially those for whom religious belief is a central part of their lives. The film focuses on the real-life story of Ramón Sampedro, a man left quadriplegic by a diving accident at the age of 25, who wishes to end his life through assisted suicide. Ramón has remained resolute in his wish to die for nearly 30 years at the time the film begins, but because euthanasia is illegal in Spain, he remains alive, cared for by his family. Several individuals outside of his family appear in his life and support him in the legal battle for his ‘right to die with dignity’. In the end, Ramón loses in the courts, but several individuals outside of his family decide to assist him in his suicide by potassium cyanide poisoning.

**Suggestions for building background knowledge.** One aspect of *Mar Adentro* that is surprising for some students is that not all of the characters are monolingual, native Spanish speakers, despite the film being set in Spain. In fact, several of the main characters speak Spanish with a marked Galician accent, while one in particular switches over completely to Galician during moments of high emotion. To start, the instructor can mention to the class that Spain actually has several co-official languages in different areas of the country, and that for Spaniards, the Spanish language is referred to not as español but as castellano, a designation that more clearly references the local region where the language arose, rather than the country as a whole. Students can then be asked if they know the names of any other languages spoken in Spain. This is a good opportunity to provide the Spanish variants for languages like “Catalan” (catalán), “Galician” (galego), or “Basque” (vasco or euskera), among others, and also to point out to students that in Spanish, language names are not capitalized as they are in English. The inclusion
of a language map of the country can be helpful in orienting students and showing them where the film *Mar adentro* takes place, as well as in pointing out the various autonomous regions of the country. At this point, students can break into smaller groups to discuss some reflection and comparison questions:

- Do you speak multiple languages at home? Do you think a lot of people in the United States do?
- What are some of the benefits of being a multilingual person? What are some of the challenges?
- What are some of the benefits of having a multilingual country? And the challenges?
- If you were really upset, which language do you think you would use to express your emotions? Why?
- Which language do you think some of the characters will use when they have strong emotions?

At this point, it would be up to the instructor to decide if delving into an explanation of Francisco Franco’s language policies in Spain would be relevant for students. Though not directly related to the film, the lingering divisions between the various autonomous regions of Spain have clear ties to citizens’ linguistic and cultural heritages, and some of the more subtle references to government power and individual choice in *Mar adentro* might be better understood in light of this historical context. Finally, students could potentially use Spain’s ongoing issues with language and culture as a model to start a discussion exploring similar issues in the United States as well. To reiterate, developing this line of inquiry in the classroom would depend on the instructor’s preferences, as well as the overarching goals of the course and the time restrictions based on the academic calendar.

In addition to discussing the linguistic heritage of Spain, the following topics are also relevant for developing students’ background knowledge prior to viewing *Mar Adentro*:

- Terminology related to the ocean
- Review of family relation words (especially those most relevant to *Mar Adentro*’s characters)
- The role of autonomous communities in Spain, compared to that of states in the United States
- How physical illness can impact quality of life
- The connection between religion, life, and death
- Differences in the separation of church and state in the United States and Spain
- The legality of euthanasia in different countries and different situations

**Suggestions for vocabulary activities and in-class conversation.** For this film, there are a number of terms that may be new for students in both Spanish and English. For instance, while they might have heard the term *eutanasia* (euthanasia) before, they may not have understood in detail what it referred to. Other terms such as *laico* (lay, or secular), *demogogia* (demagoguery), *resaca* (undertow), and
degenerativa (degenerative) are also often recognized only superficially by students, but their meaning is not understood with real depth. And finally, differences between terms like tetrapléjico (quadriplegic) and parapléjico (paraplegic), which in casual speech are sometimes used interchangeably, also merit discussion in the context of Mar adentro. Thus, the film serves to develop students’ vocabulary in both their L1 and their L2, a fact that many students comment on positively and which leads them to value the class for its conceptual content as much as its linguistic content.

To start out the vocabulary activities for such a complex and controversial film, the instructor might opt to take a lighter approach and focus on ocean-related terms first. The ocean figures prominently in the main character’s internal world because it is where he felt most free as a young man and where he ultimately became quadriplegic after an infelicitous dive into the water. The ocean is also important for the film because of its central role in the Galician economy and culture, given how much of the region’s borders are made up of ocean coastline. After explaining the relevance of the ocean to the class and also showing them a map of Galicia once more to illustrate how geographically important water is, the instructor can ask students if they’ve ever visited the ocean and what they thought of it. Were they scared, or did they feel free? Do they prefer to swim in pools?

Then, after this short class discussion, students can be asked to draw or physically mimic the following ocean-dwelling animals:

- pulpo (octopus)
- langosta (lobster)
- tiburón (shark)
- ballena (whale)
- camarón (shrimp)
- delfín (dolphin)

The curiosity of students is often piqued during this activity by the terms pulpo (octopus) and langosta (lobster), which some of them mistake conceptually for medusa (jellyfish) or calamar (squid) and cangrejo (crab) respectively. It is therefore an opportunity for the instructor and other students in the class to come up with specific examples and more detailed drawings to help explain the differences between the animals to the class as a whole. As the students work in groups to represent each of these animals, the instructor can also introduce a few discussion questions to get students talking after they finish drawing and miming:

- For each animal, explain if you would like to eat it or not. Why do you feel this way?
- Are any of these animals portrayed in famous films or television shows? What are some examples?

The first of these questions frequently gets students debating differences in animal intelligence, as well as considering whether certain types of animals are endangered or not (and students inevitably have to talk their way around the word “endangered” in order to elicit the term en peligro de extinción from the instructor). The second question gets students giving examples like Jaws (Spielberg, 1975) or the animated film Finding Nemo (Stanton, 2003). The latter allows for a comic aside in the class, too, during which the instructor can include a Spanish-language scene from Finding Nemo in which one of the characters, Dory, speaks “whale”
(balleno) by elongating the syllables all of the words she uses. Students enjoy the chance for a brief respite from so much target language production, and they are often delighted to discover that they can decipher Dory’s speech even in “stretched-out” Spanish, given their familiarity with this particular scene. For the instructor, the clip is also very easily found online, with the Spain version (as opposed to the Latin American version) providing an additional opportunity for authentic language input that connects to one of the film’s regional dialects.

Once this light-hearted introduction to the ocean has concluded, students can delve into more difficult terminology that directly relates to the plot of Mar adentro and will allow them to describe the scene during which Ramón becomes injured. The instructor can start by playing a clip from the film that shows the moment when Ramón dives into the sea and hits his head on a rock, resulting in paralysis from the neck down. Afterwards, the instructor can provide screenshots or stills from the scene (either on the projector screen or printed out on handouts), and then draw arrows on each image indicating different objects that students should identify in the target language. A word bank can be provided for the following terms used in this activity:

- piedra (rock)
- playa (beach)
- arena (sand)
- ola (wave)
- resaca (undertow)
- cuello (neck)

When working in groups, students generally manage to sort out which terms refer to which objects, even if some of the vocabulary is new to them. Once they have finished the identification part, verbs like tirarse de cabeza al agua (to dive), romperse (to break), and rescatar (to rescue) can be introduced and explained, and students can then be asked to conjugate the verbs in the appropriate tense to fully describe what happened in the scene. This sequence of vocabulary activities engages the class in a wide range of production and identification tasks, and it allows for the exploration of film-related topics that are not as emotionally loaded as the upcoming debates about death and illness. Of course, these examples are not exhaustive, and many other vocabulary activities can (and should) be woven into daily class interactions to help support student learning. Happily, this basic approach of grounding vocabulary activities in students’ experiences and in concrete examples from the film can successfully translate to use with many different types of new terms.

For Mar adentro as with the other films, students should complete at least one cultural contribution (described in Appendix B), for which they find and describe an example of authentic material that relates to the film in some way, explain clearly how it connects to the film or class discussions, and finally reflect on how this particular authentic item relates to their lives or strengthens their understanding of the film. This assignment can serve as an excellent starting point for a in-class conversation, too. Students can be asked to share what type of material they found with other members of their small group, using the following questions to guide their explanations:

- What did you find this week? Was it an article, song, cartoon, or something else?
• How do you think it connects to *Mar adentro*?
• Do you think other students would benefit from seeing or hearing your contribution? In what way?

A follow-up set of questions can then appear, prompting students to reflect on the process of completing this assignment. This kind of question helps students compare their experiences with those of their classmates, and potentially find ways in which they can become more efficient in completing the task:

• How much time do you typically spend searching for something to write about?
• How do you figure out which search terms to use initially? Are some terms better than others?
• How long do you spend writing up the cultural contribution?
• What are some ways you or other students have found to use your time more efficiently?
• Do you think it might be preferable to record a short video for this task instead of writing about it?

This type of small-group discussion is a good one to then summarize with the class. It allows students to get a better sense of how others manage their time and to learn what they think about this assignment, and it also provides the opportunity for the instructor to suggest strategies for finding and writing about interesting topics. The discussion can then segue into one of the topics that students mention having researched. Many choose to look up information regarding laws on assisted suicide in either Spain or the United States, while others contribute interviews and articles about the real Ramón Sampedro and how his case impacted popular opinion about euthanasia in Spain.

During class, when students discuss assisted suicide directly, it is advisable to put most of the focus on small group discussion rather than a discussion with the class as a whole. At this point in the semester (following the schedule in Appendix A, it would be about halfway through), students will have most likely found a group they trust and feel comfortable with, but they may feel more reluctant to share their personal perspectives on euthanasia with the larger class. In this case, it is up to the instructor to assess how productive a full-class discussion would be for students. Given that the instructor will be circulating throughout the classroom and participating or listening in to each group’s discussion, even the small-groups-only approach can be very successful in generating thoughtful debate. Thus, in small groups or (perhaps) with the class as a whole, students can consider questions such as:

• What kind of illnesses (if any) do you think should be eligible for doctor-mediated euthanasia?
• Are only physical illnesses relevant, or should chronic and debilitating mental illness be considered?
• What considerations influence your personal beliefs on this subject?
• What differences exist in societal views towards animal euthanasia and human euthanasia?
• Why do you think these differences exist, and do you think they are justifiable? How so?

Once more, these questions are not aimed specifically to change students’ view by force. Rather, the aim is for each student to seriously explore their perspective on the issue, determine why they hold the views they do, and reflect on whether and how their personal views can have an impact on the lives of those around them. Explicitly reminding students to be respectful of their classmates as people, even if they disagree with their opinions on euthanasia, can be very helpful in this regard. Similarly, asking students to put themselves in the place of those they disagree can help them to identify potential blind spots in their view of the issue. For instance, once students have expressed their personal views in small-group discussion, they can be asked to take a few minutes to write responses to the following questions:

- What reasons do you think people who disagree with you have to support (or not support) euthanasia?
- Do you think people who disagree with you have good or bad motivations to do so? In what way?
- What common ground is there between you and others you disagree with? What do you agree on?
- How do you think society should handle disagreement on such an important subject?

Suggestions for visual close readings. Unsurprisingly, one of the major sources of tension in the film Mar adentro is the resistance of many of those close to the protagonist to accept his decision to end his life. In the case of his brother, José, Ramón’s wish to die represents an insult to his family for the many years they have dedicated to caring for him since the accident. In a powerful scene towards the end of the film, the two brothers have an explosive argument about this issue, with José claiming that he, his wife, and son have been made slaves to Ramón for years. For many students, this is an eye-opening moment, as until this fight, José had simply refused to accept Ramón’s decision as morally tolerable without offering much in the way of his personal reasoning. In this scene, however, students can see the complexity of his brother’s feelings. After viewing this scene as a class, they contemplate challenging questions like:

- If Ramón wants to die, have his brother and sister-in-law wasted years of their lives tending to him?
- When Ramón asserts that his life “isn’t dignified”, do you think his family should feel insult?
- Do you think José has an obligation to support Ramón’s decision? Can he express his disagreement?
- Would it be appropriate to require José to assist Ramón in his suicide? Why or why not?

The debate about Ramón’s choice to die resurfaces in a different way when another quadriplegic man, who also happens to be a Catholic priest, visits Ramón in his home to debate the merits of life and death. The priest makes not only
religious arguments against suicide, but in televised remarks prior to his visit, he questions how well-loved Ramón must actually feel, suggesting that his family members have somehow let him down emotionally if he is contemplating suicide. This leads to a confrontation between Ramón’s normally mild-mannered sister-in-law, Manuela, and the priest, which is a scene most students enjoy because of the surprising tone she takes defending her love for and caretaking of Ramón for so many years. Following this clip, a few simple comprehension questions can be asked, such as:

- What does Manuela mean when she says the priest has a big mouth?
- How does the priest react to her outburst? Does he apologize?

With respect to the argument between the priest and Ramón, some of the historical and ecclesiastical references the two make may push the limits of students’ knowledge, but the basic arguments are clear: Ramón believes the Catholic Church is hypocritical in its condemnation of suicide, given the inevitability of death and the Church’s history of using death as a punishment for heretics, while the priest argues that Ramón’s life is not his own to end, but in fact belongs to God Himself. Reviewing these scenes carefully with students can be a good opportunity to check students’ comprehension of the major arguments for and against euthanasia, as presented by the characters. It is also an opportunity to explain the difficult vocabulary referenced at the beginning of this section: *demogogia* (demagoguery) and *laico* (lay, or secular), for instance. There is also a rare moment of humor in this part of the film, too, that can be pointed out and discussed with students as a way to lighten the mood: because Ramón refuses to leave his upstairs bedroom to meet with the priest downstairs, the priest’s poor assistant must run up and down the stairs and nervously relay each man’s arguments and insults to the other through hurried whispers.

*Volver*

*Volver*, the fifth film of the semester, is actually the first of the Conversation and Composition course that focuses almost exclusively on female protagonists, and it marks a shift in cinematic tone for the semester, introducing melodrama and dark comedic elements to a storyline rife with violence and loss. In the film, Raimunda and Sole are two sisters whose mother, Irene passed away in a house fire several years before. When she turns up suddenly in Sole’s car trunk after a family funeral, her daughter assumes her to be a ghost, tied to the world of the living by some type of “unfinished business”. The second storyline focuses on Raimunda and her teenage daughter, Paula, who defends herself against the sexual advances of her father, Paco. After Paula stabs Paco during an attempted rape, Raimunda realizes she must find a way to protect her daughter, both from the consequences of Paco’s death and from the truth about her real father.

The complexity of the film’s plot makes for lively discussions in the classroom, and offers opportunities for students to explore myriad topics, including ones that most agree on (e.g., that sexual assault is a negative thing) and also those on which they tend to have a rage of opinions (e.g., whether ghosts exist or not, or whether it is ethical for Raimunda to cover up Paco’s death).
Suggestions for building background knowledge. Given the largely melodramatic treatment of death in *Volver*, it is important to provide students with accurate information about Spanish customs in this regard. Students can start out discussion by watching the trailer for the film, and then speculate as to what the main plot will be and what the protagonists will focus their energy on (Lonergan, 1984). Once they learn from their instructor that one of the driving stories of *Volver* is Sole’s mistaken assumption that her mother is a ghost, a conversation about whether ghosts exist, how students have developed their belief (or lack thereof) in ghosts, and why they think other people might disagree with them can take place. Interestingly, *Volver* portrays not only superstitious belief, but also very concrete, grounded examples of how the living remember and respect the dead. To explore this aspect of death, students can be shown the opening sequence of the film, during which several of the protagonists clean and adorn the tombstones of their deceased loved ones, as well as a short clip later on in the film of Sole being embraced by dozens of black-clad women during a wake for her aunt. These scenes offer the opportunity to compare and contrast Spanish and American customs, making students aware of the subtle differences between the two countries when it comes to remembering the dead.

Several other topics can be discussed in preparation for watching *Volver*:

- Customs related to death, including funerals, wakes, burials, and cemeteries
- The existence (or not) of ghosts, spirits, and the afterlife
- How society views illness and those who suffer it
- The difference between small-town and big-city life
- The role that secrets and gossip play in people's lives
- The lengths that mothers will go to in order to protect their children

Suggestions for vocabulary activities and in-class conversation. As with the other films discussed in this paper, a variety of strategies can be used to engage students both prior to and after viewing *Volver*. A particularly effective sequence of activities in the SP 301 Conversation and Composition course consisted of the following components: vocabulary familiarization; comparison of cultural norms in students’ lives with those portrayed in the film; discussion of characters’ motivations; and exploration of students’ personal experiences and opinions of social issues. For instance, as a starter activity during the week prior to viewing the film *Volver*, the instructor can present students with a set of vocabulary items related to secrets and gossip (see list below). The words can first be presented visually (either on a projector display, written on the board, or distributed to students on a piece of paper), with the instructor saying each word aloud to model accurate pronunciation. Students can then be asked to form small groups of three to four members in which they must explain the terms in their own words in the target language. Students should be encouraged to write down their explanations, too, so that they can refer to them in future discussions and during at-home study. In this vocabulary activity, it can also be effective to allow students to depict some of the words using drawings if they feel more comfortable doing so. While drawing is not per se a language production activity, it still promotes the formation of more
direct connections between the target language and the concepts themselves, which reduces reliance on the L1 to access meaning. Moreover, since students will still be expected to use the target language in their interactions throughout the task, it remains a communicative, language-immersive activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>secreto (secret)</th>
<th>privacidad (privacy)</th>
<th>compartir (to share)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>chisme (gossip)</td>
<td>enterarse (to find out)</td>
<td>programas del corazón (gossip shows)</td>
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In the particular list of vocabulary items listed above, several of the terms have clear cognates in English (e.g. secreto/secret), while others have translations that are not easily deciphered at first glance (e.g. chisme/gossip). How then can an instructor communicate the meaning of an unknown, non-cognate word to a group of students without inadvertently completing the vocabulary activity for them? One option is to go ahead and do exactly that: explain the term in the target language, but then require students to depict the term themselves using drawing or miming as a form of visual communication – or vice versa: the instructor can use gesture or drawing to communicate the meaning behind the term, requiring students to produce the verbal explanation on their own. As an additional option, once a specific term has been explained to one group, subsequent groups that are in need of help with the same word can be instructed to consult the first group of students for an explanation. This helps to establish the students themselves as sources of reliable knowledge, and fosters further communication and reinforcement of the vocabulary that students need in subsequent discussions.

Once this particular vocabulary base has been established, students are ready to engage in a comparison of cultural norms, as well as reflect on their own experience and connections to the film. In Volver, secrets and gossip play a central role in how the film unfolds, and the way in which information propagates behind closed doors can differ depending on whether the events take place in a small town or a big city. To get students connecting these ideas, the instructor can first start with a discussion topic that directly relates to the vocabulary that students just learned. For instance, students can discuss the following questions in small groups:

- Do you sometimes gossip about other people? Does it depend on the situation?
- When you need share a secret, who do you talk to? Why do you trust this person more than others?
- In your family, is personal privacy generally respected? Is there a lot of gossip in your family?
- Do you think it's sometimes important to share information about other people’s private lives?
- Can revealing a secret sometimes be a positive thing? Is it always a form of gossip to do so?

These questions frequently elicit animated responses from students, as they describe nosy relatives, or recount times when they decided to share a juicy story.
with their closest friend. Students can also reflect on more serious moments in their lives, when they were entrusted with a secret that could have potentially harmed other people, forcing them to balance the importance of maintaining someone’s confidence and the necessity of revealing truth for the benefit of that person or others – for instance, when a friend expresses an intent to self-harm or describes an interaction during which someone else has already harmed them.

This conversation on gossip and secrets can then pivot to one about the differences between small towns and big cities. The instructor can preface the new conversation by explaining that some of the events of _Volver_ take place within the city of Madrid, while others take place in a small village in the La Mancha region. Incorporating photos, maps, and basic population data at this point in the class can provide students with a better awareness of the geographic and cultural settings of the film, and the instructor can also take the opportunity to encourage students to explore one or both of these places as part of their at-home cultural contribution assignment (see Appendix B). To start the conversation activity, a quick survey can first be taken of the class, asking by a show of hands how many students come from very small towns, how many come from big cities, and how many come from a place that’s somewhere in between. There are many options for conversation that can follow up this initial question. For instance, students can brainstorm responses to the following questions in their groups:

- What are some of the pros and cons of living in a big city? How about a small town?
- In which place do you think there is more danger? More tolerance? More gossip? More privacy?
- Is your response based on personal experience? News articles? Research studies?

After asking for students to share their responses with the class as a whole, they can then contemplate the following questions, which relate more directly to their personal goals and preferences:

- When you graduate, would you like to live in a big city or not?
- If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you live and why?
- Would you live in a place where you could speak your second language every day?
- Would miss your friends and family if you moved far away? Would it be easy to keep in touch?

Conversations like these allow students to alternate between linking their own lives to the major themes of a film like _Volver_ (which may initially seem too exaggerated or far-fetched to offer points of connection) and focusing in on the details of the film itself, to understand the finer points of the plot. The visual close reading described below develops this latter aspect in more detail.

**Suggestions for visual close readings.** In addition to lighter topics like ghosts, gossip, and places to live, sexual violence is also at the center of _Volver_ in many different ways, and there are several scenes that warrant deeper analysis in the
classroom. Of course, different instructors and institutions generally decide their own policies as to whether or not something like a trigger warning is warranted prior to viewing the film, but a discussion of the issues surrounding sexual violence and of its impact on all of the characters is something make clearer why the director chose to so prominently feature this theme in his film. Below, an activity that focuses on both comprehension and analysis of an emotionally charged scene is described. Key terminology is also listed in this section, and it is left up to the instructor whether these terms should be incorporated into a separate in-class or at-home task, or simply listed on the board as reminders during the conversation activity.

- cuchillo (knife)
- apuñalar (to stab)
- cocina (kitchen)
- violar (to rape)
- esperar (to wait)
- parada de autobús (bus stop)

In the clip that is featured in this visual close reading activity, Paula describes her father’s attempted sexual assault of her, and we see her mother, Raimunda’s reaction. The scene begins at night, as Paula awaits Raimunda’s return at a bus stop. After repeated questioning from her mother during the ascent of the stairs to their apartment, Paula coolly tells her that Paco (her father) is in the kitchen, without mentioning that he is dead. After Raimunda screams at the sight of his body, Paula explains what happened, alternating between moments of calm, fear, and anger. Raimunda is determined to protect her daughter, telling her, “Recuerda, que fui yo que lo mató, y que tú no lo viste porque estabas en la calle. Es muy importante que recuerdes eso.”/“Remember, I killed him, and you saw nothing because you were out of the house. It’s very important that you remember that,” before she returns to the kitchen to clean up the crime scene. She then hides her husband’s body in the freezer of a nearby restaurant, and later enlists a female neighbor to help her remove and bury the appliance and its contents in a ditch near the river – no questions asked.

To integrate this close reading into the classroom environment, the instructor might preface the clip (which students should have already viewed while watching the film at home) with a simple comprehension/recollection activity, asking students to write down answers to the following questions individually in their notebooks or laptops, before then allowing them to consult one another to check the accuracy of their memories:

• What weapon did Paula use to defend herself from Paco? Where did his death occur?
• Where did Paula wait for her mother after Paco’s death?
• Was it day or night when her mother, Raimunda, arrived? What was the weather like?

These questions are simple, straightforward, and have a single correct response. They are primarily a method to get students to recall the scene itself, rather than to analyze it deeply. Once the class has established the basic circumstances of
Paco’s death, the instructor can play the clip, asking students to keep the following questions in mind for discussion:

- What type of emotions does Paula display when she explains to her mother what has happened?
- How does Raimunda react? Is her emotional reaction similar or different to Paula’s? How?
- What does Raimunda say or do during the scene that shows her love for her daughter?
- Does Raimunda contact the authorities or not? What do you think influences her decision?

After the clip is complete, these same questions can be again displayed visually for students, allowing them to immediately begin conversing with their classmates with limited additional instruction. As students wrap up their responses in small groups, the instructor can make additional questions appear on the projector screen, or alternately, pass around small pieces of paper with the questions. This final set of questions is aimed at helping students to understand Raimunda’s unconventional (and likely illegal) actions following Paco’s death, and to explain how they might react in similar situations. For instance, the questions can start out with scenarios that are less serious than sexual assault and homicide:

- What would you do if someone hit your best friend? What if your friend retaliated and hit them back?
- What would you do if this same friend committed a crime? Would it matter if the crime were intentional or not? Would it change your perspective if your friend showed remorse or fear?
- What if the crime was committed in self-defense, or in reaction to someone else’s unethical actions towards your friend? Would you feel torn between protecting your friend and reporting the crime?

In these cases, students can reflect on how their own personal connection to the perpetrator or survivor of a crime might influence their viewpoint, helping them to understand Raimunda’s decision not to report Paco’s death and to do what she saw as necessary protect her daughter. Even if the students ultimately disagree with her decisions, they will have the opportunity to put themselves in her position to a certain extent, and to articulate how and why they would do things differently if given the chance.

**Conclusion**

For students in the language classroom, the novel cultural settings of the films they watch, combined with their use of the L2 to understand the films and to express their reactions, can provide fertile ground for exploring individual perspectives and societal norms. A film-based conversation course like the one described here can provide students with an exceptionally rich L2 learning environment, in which a shared knowledge base and communicative approach to teaching can lead to the development of both communication abilities and the exploration of
cross-cultural issues. The complexity of these films offers copious opportunities for critical self-reflection. Students in such a course consider a wide range of social issues, and they have the opportunity draw connections between their culture and the cultures portrayed on screen. When the incorporation of film in the classroom is complemented by opportunities for language learning, self-expression, and an openness to learning about others, it becomes a truly powerful educational tool.

References


The Power of Language, The Power of People: Celebrating 50 Years


## Appendix A

### Suggested Calendar of Films and Major Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semana</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Sunday</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>También la lluvia</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Cultural contribution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>También la lluvia</td>
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<td>Cultural contribution</td>
</tr>
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<td>Week 3</td>
<td>También la lluvia</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>Movie poster + video explanation</td>
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<td>Week 5</td>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>Diarios de motocicleta</td>
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<td>Week 8</td>
<td>Diarios de motocicleta</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Oral interviews</td>
<td>Cultural contribution</td>
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<td>Week 9</td>
<td>Break</td>
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<td>Week 10</td>
<td>Diarios de motocicleta</td>
<td>Cinematic critique</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Quiz (Testing Lab)</td>
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<td>Week 11</td>
<td>Mar adentro</td>
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<td>Cultural contribution</td>
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<td>Week 12</td>
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<td>Week 13</td>
<td>Volver</td>
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<td>Volver</td>
<td>Creative group scenes</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>Quiz (Testing Lab)</td>
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<td>Week 15</td>
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<td>Cultural contribution</td>
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<td>Week 16</td>
<td>Todo sobre mi madre</td>
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<td>Cinematic critique</td>
<td>Quiz (Testing Lab)</td>
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<td>Week 17</td>
<td>Finals week</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>Final oral exam</td>
<td>---</td>
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</table>
Appendix B
Sample Assignment Instructions for Cultural Contributions

Instructions

Upload a document with the following components:

1. A cultural contribution that has to do with the theme of the film, our conversations, or the readings for the class during the past week. This component can be an article, a video, a movie, a song, a comic strip, etc. If you don't include this component (with a link, for instance), I will not grade the contribution and you will receive 0 out of 10 points.

2. An explanation of 200 words about:
   a. the content of your cultural contribution
   b. its relevance to the themes of the movie
   c. a personal reflection about the contribution

This activity is worth 10 points (1% of the final grade)

Rubric

___ / 1 point – Orthography and grammar
___ / 2 points – Explanation of the relevance of the contribution to the film and our activities
___ / 5 points – Detailed explain of the contribution (What is it? What is it about? What is the focus?)
___ / 2 points – Personal reflection about this contribution (How did it affect you? What did you learn?)
Appendix C

Sample Assignment Instructions for One-on-One Oral Interviews

Instructions

During this 15-minute interview, you will be asked questions related to the most recent film that we have viewed and discussed as a class. The specific topics of discussion vary according to each student's responses, but we will likely touch on an analysis of key scenes from the film that were mentioned in class, social and historical topics that relate to the film, comparisons between different characters' actions and values, your opinion of different aspects of the film, and the meaning and relevance of new terminology that we’ve learned as part of our study of this film.

If at any time during the interview you don't understand a question or need rephrasing, please don’t hesitate to ask for clarification. In any conversation it’s normal to have small misunderstandings, and I’m happy to work with you to make sure you can communicate your ideas to the best of your abilities.

This activity is worth 50 points (5% of the final grade)

Rubric

___ / 10 points – Knowledge of film and related history, philosophy, and social issues
___ / 15 points – Ability to analyze film + related issues in depth; relate analysis to personal views
___ / 10 points – Recognition and incorporation of key vocabulary related to film
___ / 15 points – Ability to communicate thoughts and ideas in an intelligible way in target language
Appendix D

Sample Assignment Instructions for Cinematic Critiques

Instructions

For this assignment, you’ll develop an essay (three pages in length, double-spaced, 12-pt font) that analyzes an aspect of the film Diarios de motocicleta that is of particular interest to you. You may focus on any topic you’d like, so long as it directly connects to the film, class discussions, and reading assignments during the last two weeks.

Please also be sure to consider the rubric guidelines that appear below for guidance as to how to organize and support your essay. I understand that there is lot of freedom in this assignment, so if you have any questions or would like to brainstorm potential ideas with me, please don’t hesitate to get in touch. Based on the excellent class discussions we’ve had throughout the semester, I am confident that you will develop a creative and well-supportive analysis of the film.

This activity is worth 80 points (8% of the final grade)

Rubric

___ / 15 points – Grammar: conjugation, gender/plural agreement
___ / 10 points – Orthography: spelling and accents
___ / 10 points – Vocabulary: accurate use of vocabulary; include of wide range of terms
___ / 10 points – Overall intelligibility of thought and ideas expressed in essay
___ / 5 points – Engaging and helpful introduction
___ / 5 points – Logical conclusion with summary of main points of essay
___ / 15 points – Strong central argument; logical connections and explanations
___ / 10 points – Inclusion of examples from film or other sources to support all claims