

Nina Lendner

**Teaching Netflix Series in the Foreign
English Classroom. House of Cards as a
Mirror of the U.S. Political System**

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Universität Passau
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Teaching Netflix Series in the Foreign English Classroom - House of Cards as a Mirror of the U.S. Political System

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Teaching Netflix Series in the Foreign English Classroom - *House of Cards* as a Mirror of the U.S. Political System

1. Introduction	2
2. Film Education in Teaching English as a Foreign Language	3
2.1 The History of Film Based Language Learning in the TEFL Classroom	
2.2 Film Based Language Learning with its Didactic Value in the TEFL Classroom	
2.2.1 Development of Communicative Competences	
2.2.2 Intercultural Learning	
2.3 The Didactic Value of Audio-Visual Media in the TEFL Classroom	
2.4 Practical Facets in Teaching Audio-Visual Media - Criteria for Film Selection	
3. The Impact of Film Literacy in Teaching English as a Foreign Language	8
3.1 Lütge's Four Dimensions of Approaches on Film Education	
3.1.1 Motivational Affective Dimension	
3.1.2 Language Learning and Competence Development Dimension	
3.1.3 Aesthetic and Formal Dimension	
3.1.4 Intercultural Dimension of Language Learning	
3.1.5 Cognitive Approach by Wharton and Grant	
3.2 The Consideration of Different Didactic Approaches on Film Based Language Learning	
4. The Didactic Value of the Netflix Series House of Cards - Using House of Cards as a Case Study in the ELT Classroom	11
4.1 Students' and Instruction Setting	
4.2 Lesson One - What Do We Really Know About Politics in the U.S.? An Introduction	
4.3 Lesson Two and Three - The Political System of the United States	
4.4 Lesson Four - The Road to the White House	
4.5 Lesson Five - America's Gun Culture	
4.6 Lesson Six - Film Analysis and Introduction of the Case Study - <i>House of Cards</i> as a Mirror of the U.S. political system	
4.7 Lesson Seven to Eleven - Case Study	
4.8 Lesson Twelve and Thirteen - Evaluations and Presentation of the Case Study	
4.9 Lesson Fourteen - Excursus: Bush vs. Kerry - Different Views on the Iraq War	
5. Conclusion	45

1. Introduction

A film is not only the key medium of the 21st century it is also a form of art which possesses its own aesthetics, iconography and language (Krüger 8). Children and teenagers can experience the cultural values of Western societies, which play an important role in identity and social processes during their epitaxy. Popular films and TV series implement the idea of popular culture and operate as a guideline for young people when it comes to role models. Popular culture is always defined in contrast to other conceptual categories, such as folk culture, mass culture as well as dominant culture. This form of culture can generally be said to denote culture that is well-linked by many people and, thus, happens to be popular. Another conception denotes popular culture as opposed to high culture and, thus, popular culture emerged following industrialization and urbanization and has a place in the capitalist market economy (Hebel and Moreth-Hebel 189ff). Further, cultural implemented audio-visual aids show the zeitgeist of a generation and shape views and attitudes towards the world's existence. The way of teaching and learning in a foreign language classroom is constantly changing and the adaption of methods process dynamically due to the different needs of learners. In a modern and learner-centered environment the use of audio-visual aids in a foreign English classroom is almost indispensable according to the importance of films and series. Especially in student's lives it plays a considerable big part to which they relate their dress codes, eating habits, attitudes towards society as well as their way of speaking. Thus, using the adaption of language speaking, audio-visual aids can be a useful as well as successful tool for teaching English as a foreign language. Netflix is one of themes popular distributors on film, television and original content since the last fifteen years, encouraging by former President Barack Obama (Novak 33). He designates Netflix as more than just complex and abstract policies as “[t]oday, high speed broadband is not a luxury, it's a necessity. This isn't just about making it easier to stream Netflix or scroll through your Facebook newsfeed - althorn that's fun, and it's frustrating if your're waiting for a long time before the thing finally comes up“ (Obama). On the one hand, audio-visual entertainment can easily become an “all-you-can-eat buffet“ as Willa Paskin's exhibits in the *Wired Magazine* “[w]hatever our televisual drug of choice [...] we've all put off brands and bedtime to watch just one more, a thrilling, draining, dream-influencing immersion experience that has become the standard way to consume certain TV programs“ (Sidneyeve). As McCormick mentions in his essay that “[w]ith the growing availability of VOD (video-on-demand) and SVOD (subscription video-on-demand) technologies, binge-viewing (aka binge-watching) has quickly become a dominant mode of TV consumption“ (McCormick 101). Technological shifts and the ease access to

streaming platforms conjure panic about a negative impact especially on young people. Moreover, parents fear binge watching of series and films, which can cause health issues for their children. On the one hand, according to medical and psychological reports teenagers and even children are effected negatively by the Netflix effect. Binge watching interferes with sleeping habits, which further can cause depression and anxiety. This also can come along with back problems, lack of oxygen and physical activity as well as overweight (Sidneyeve). But on the other hand, seeing that today's generation of teenagers constantly use SVOD technologies such as Netflix for entertainment, this tool can be very useful and motivating at once when teachers incorporate this form of media in the foreign language classroom. Beau Willimon, director of the *House of Cards* series, posted in an interview shortly before the first release of the series that “[o]ur goal is to shut down a portion of American for a whole day“ (Stelter). The intention of this paper is to show possible applications of the Netflix original series *House of Cards* as a mirror of the U.S. political system, which foster film literacy within teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) and how learners profit from authentic texts as media literacy rather than on literary texts on intercultural topics. It starts off with the didactic value of films as TEFL devices, define film literacy as an aim in learning and a presentation of approaches and methods of teaching film as media literacy. The special focus will be on the first season of *House of Cards*, providing a summary of its plot as well as a complete lesson concept on teaching the political system of the United States of America in a 12th grade A-level standard (gymnasiale Oberstufe) class. This concludes example exercises to bridge the gap between the didactical value and the theoretical methods and their implementation for the use of the Netflix series in the TEFL classroom, and covers a case study with analysis to the first season as well as film language and intertextual and intercultural challenges.

2. Film Education in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

The use of films in the TEFL classroom has many advantages, for both teachers and learners. Films as well as other audio-visual media are highly motivating for teenagers and children as well as watching films and series on VOD or SVOD play a capacious part in the students' free time.

2.1 The History of Film Based Language Learning in the TEFL Classroom

Teaching literature in the English as a foreign language classroom is predominant since the 19th century. By the time of 1943 the major intention was to convey cultural aspects and the so-called literary canon was used as the great opening for new texts and films (Lütge 178). Around the 1960s

audio-visual media became more and more popular among teachers, especially within the United States, and films were used as a medium to get students in touch with authentic foreign language speaking (Haß 23). In fact, teachers focused on visual elements such as dias and films, but foreign language teaching was only done by monolingual instruction in order to convey structure and meaning to an authentic context of communication. During the 20th century two major currents developed in TEFL, the New Criticism and the Reader Response Theory. The New Criticism was a text-centered streaming, which focused on objective literary studies including its formal elements of literary texts. Despite of the New Criticism, the Reader Response Theory focused mainly on the “reading process as a creative act involving the reader and his or her exchange with the literary text which was more received as a process of negotiation and not so much as a kind of decoding of the ‘hidden meaning’ of a text (Lütge 178). Since the interest in mass media and popular culture increased several academics studied the field of foreign language learning according to the concepts of media literacy and intercultural learning (Thaler 17).

2.2 Film Based Language Learning with its Didactic Value in the TEFL Classroom

The signifier of films and series is nearly based in everybody’s life. As already mentioned before mass media and popular culture have both a growing importance, which is being evaluated by several academics according to Thaler (Thaler 17). Further, media literacy and intercultural learning are used to create access to foreign cultures with the aid of cinematic devices (17). Furthermore to follow on Thaler’s argumentation on film based language learning (FBLL) films as well as other audio-visual media resemble a Cinderella existence in classrooms films in a foreign language classroom are rarely to never used, but there are several criteria in favor of using FBLL as a successful method for teaching English as well as conflicts, which try to object the implementation of it (17). Thaler illustrates the most common five conflicts in FBLL: the conflict in time, language, reception, goal, and technology. First of all in comparison to a ninety minute lesson a film or a whole series can be very long. Hence, it cannot be shown as a whole, which means teachers have to sidestep to time-saving formats of presentation and only concentrate on cutouts or focus on independent film study. The second conflict with language results from the complexity of linguistic style as well as the students’ level of language competence. Distractions like fast talking colloquialism or dialogues, noises and special film sound effects, a specific use of vocabulary, and characters talking in certain dialects inherited in the native language handicap the understanding for learners. First teachers have to make clear that rather the understanding depends on the whole

context than understanding every single word. Further, the selection of a film must be adapted to the learners level, ideally with proper plots, repeated viewings, as well as pre-, while- and post-viewing activities (Thaler 28). The circumstances of the conflict with reception of the visual and auditory channel is according to Sherman that “the eye is more powerful than the ear“ (Sherman 2). It often can be very distracting for learners to concentrate on both, listening and viewing, when having subtitles on while showing a film. Therefore, students focus more on the written text than on the viewing and listening comprehension. In order to avoid this effect, teachers should use a reflected combination of audio and subtitles, but limit subtitles only to the first five minutes. However, teachers have to keep in mind that students watch films and series for an entertaining reason, whereas films and series in the English language teaching (ELT) classroom are used in order to teach language, which can result as a clash of expectation between both parties, teacher and learners. A balanced way of learning and enjoying, the avoidance of over-analysis and a careful use of grammar and vocabulary exercises can be a fair compromise for the expectations of each parties. To avoid a conflict with technology teachers must be familiar with hardware and software requirements or should use a private computer (Thaler 28f.). Teachers have to be aware of those five main conflicts in order to the great didactic potential of audiovisual media predominates for film based language learning in a foreign English classroom and “an audio-visual text appeals to cognitive, communicative, personal, and emotional dimensions“ (19). The audiovisual text can appear both as an information text, which contains the speaking and writing about film and as an instrumental text, which is the process of language learning with films (19). Besides teaching with more or less obsolete methods such as instruction or working with questions as well as straight forward answers on texts, the “interactive language use still plays a minor role in language classrooms“ (19). Hereinafter, films have an importance as well as an additional benefit in classrooms. The presentation of a film is clearly motivating in order to get students to learn about a specific topic on the curriculum. Almost every teenager is familiar with the category of films or series and therefore uses those for entertainment and furthermore works as a balancing bridge between school and free time. Agreeing on Sherman’s opinion “video is today’s medium“ and she argues that the student’s “eye is caught, and this excites interest in the meaning of the words“, hence the learners interest in learning English as a foreign language is activated by showing them authentic material (Sherman 2). This leads to the aspect of authenticity, which strengthens the argument of using films in TEFL. Again taking a close look at Sherman “people want access to the world of English-language media“ and use this skill in order to get information from news or advertisements, to watch a film like normal consumers, hence native speakers, do (2).