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## When teachers talk about films: An investigation into some aspects of English teachers' discursive practices

### **Abstract**

*When teachers say: “you can learn a lot from films”, what does this imply? This article explores interviews with eighteen Norwegian English teachers about the learning value of films in the lower secondary classroom. The films that these teachers talk about are mostly fiction films about conditions in the English-speaking world or film adaptations of literary texts. This article focuses on the teachers' reasoning about fiction films. I use perspectives from critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore how the teachers justify their choices and what notions of films they can be seen to rely on. There appears to be some sort of general agreement in the field of English teaching that films deserve a place in the classroom. Still, notions about the value of classroom film use might represent a blind spot that has escaped scrutiny.*

*Keywords: fiction films, EFL teaching, critical discourse analysis, teachers' discursive practices*

### **Sammendrag**

*Denne artikkelen utforsker hva atten ungdomsskolelærere sier om læringsverdien av film i engelskundervisningen. De filmene lærerne nevner er hovedsakelig fiksjonsfilmer om forhold i den engelskspråklige verden eller filmatiseringer av skjønnlitterære verk. Hvordan begrunner lærerne bruken av disse filmene? Hvilke ytre forhold kan bidra til lærernes meningsskaping omkring filmbruk? Jeg bruker perspektiver fra Norman Faircloughs kritiske diskursanalyse for å utforske trekk ved lærernes refleksjoner i intervju. Jeg inndeler lærernes meningsskaping i fire antakelser om filmens læringsverdi; den referensielle, den kompensatoriske, den emosjonelle og den språklige verdien. Videre skisserer jeg hvordan disse refleksjonene kan knyttes til omliggende diskurser om hva man kan lære av film; i engelskfaget, i media og i lys av mer abstrakte diskurser om deltakelse og demokrati i norsk skole. Det synes å være enighet om at film fortjener en plass i engelskundervisningen. Imidlertid virker det som om forestillinger om filmens læringsverdi representerer en blindsoner som i liten grad har fått kritisk et søkelys. Jeg mener at de perspektivene som*

*belyses i denne artikkelen kan være gjenstand for diskusjon både i engelskfaget og på tvers av fag.*

*Nøkkelord: fiksjonsfilmer, engelskundervisning, kritisk diskursanalyse, læreres diskursive praksiser*

## Introduction

In the current *English Subject Curriculum*, films are mentioned along with other texts in the descriptions of competence aims for the lower secondary level (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013). Their use is often encouraged by textbook authors and sometimes by examination tasks. Although films appear to be acknowledged as an educational resource, research into English teachers' notions of the role of this medium has so far not received much attention by scholars in the field.

This article deals with one of several perspectives that I investigate as part of my PhD-project concerning 18 lower secondary English teachers' reasoning about their choice and use of texts. In this context, the focus is on these eighteen teachers' reflections about the learning value of films. When they explain how and why they use film in the classroom, they tend to express themselves in very similar ways. The aim of this article is to explore some aspects of these discursive practices.

I will address the following research questions:

- What characterises teachers' reasoning about the learning value of films in their teaching?
- What immediate and more distant discourses can be seen to contribute to their reasoning?

In the analysis part, I will present what I consider the most salient features of what teachers say, categorised as four *assumptions about the learning value of films: the referential, the compensatory, the emotional and the language value*. Then I will discuss briefly some examples of how these assumptions appear to merge notions of the value of films both within and outside the field of English teaching – and how they seem to accommodate aspects of Norwegian educational discourses of participation and democracy. The article does not aim to prove these assumptions wrong or true but rather to explore how such discursive practices can be seen to shape and maintain certain commonly shared understandings. The intension is to provide a basis for further discussion and exploration of the learning value of films in the English language classroom.

## Background

English is a compulsory subject from year one in Norwegian schools. This means that when pupils start at the lower secondary school level they have been taught English in school for seven years. The school subject English is not defined as a foreign language such as German or French in educational documents, it is simply called English. In many ways, its position resembles that of ESL (English as a Second Language) as young people are heavily exposed to the language through the media, through music, books and the net. Also, English is likely to work as a lingua franca, when Norwegians interact with other non-native speakers on the Internet or elsewhere (Berns, 2009). Although the language is familiar rather than foreign to most, it does not quite qualify as ESL or as lingua franca in traditional terms (Crystal, 2007; Berns, 2009). For instance, not all Norwegian teenagers are likely to experience or seek the same level of immersion into English through the net, books or travels. In school contexts, Norwegian teenagers are not required to use English except in the English language classroom. In addition, English teachers generally share their pupils' native language and understand their English from that perspective. As others point out, English in Norway appears to be "caught between paradigms", between English as foreign language, second language and lingua franca (Rindal & Piercy, 2013, p. 212). I still choose to use the terms EFL (English as a Foreign Language) because I believe it best reflects the language-learning context.

The current English syllabi are divided into four main subject areas: *language learning*, *oral communication*, *written communication* and *culture, society and literature*. These four main subject areas run through all levels from year one throughout the first year of the upper secondary level. However, they come with different descriptions of competence aims at four different stages: after years 2, 4, 7, 10 and 11. The revised syllabus from 2013 mentions films specifically in the competence aims for culture, society and literature at the lower secondary level (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013).

Films in Norwegian schools are nothing new. A report from a cross-curricular project in 1957 at Ruseløkka School in Oslo mentions different approaches to films in the classroom such as film as a work of art or as a mass medium. The authors recommend films of "artistic quality and positive content" and caution teachers as to possible pitfalls when films fall below that standard (Marcussen, Ness, & Germeten, 1957, p. 3, my translation). Films have long been mentioned also in the context of the subject English. As early as 1939, a ministerial circular announcing a new syllabus in English for lower secondary education promotes the use of films (Ministry of Church and Education, 1939). This and subsequent syllabi focus on how films can encourage pronunciation and listening skills. There is no specification as to genre; yet it seems likely that what curricula authors have in mind are shorter educational films. They explain that films make it possible to expose learners to the target language and enable learners to mimic every-day habits and customs. In the 1987 syllabus, they are

listed along with other media texts that pupils need to learn to critically assess (Ministry of Education, Research, and Church Affairs, 1986). Currently, this critical stance is lost and the purpose of this medium is rather obliquely defined as “inspiration” and “cultural expression” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013, English Subject Curriculum, Purpose).

## Delimiting the field

I have not come across studies that investigate teachers’ reasoning about fiction films in EFL or ESL teaching, nor is the teacher perspective given much attention in native language contexts. Of the relatively few ESL and EFL studies related to classroom film use, most are based on intervention studies that investigate learners’ engagement with films. Some focus on the benefits of films to develop linguistic proficiency (Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011; Wang, 2012). Others apply content and language integrated approaches to teaching topics of history and culture (Chapple & Curtis, 2000; Drew, 2012). A few contributions critically address EFL film use (Lee Zoreda, 2006; Mackie & Norton, 2006; Pegrum, 2008). Ardiss Mackie and Bonny Norton, for instance, problematize essentialist representations of ethnic groups in fiction films. They advocate “resistant reading” of mainstream American films as their EFL college students often tend to rely on such films for their cultural knowledge about the USA (Mackie & Norton, 2006, p. 227).

However, how English language learners receive the fictional films they watch in class is outside the scope of this article. Moreover, my emphasis is not on what teachers *do* with films but on the ways in which they *talk* about their classroom film practices. Still, perspectives from research into text practices in L1 contexts seem relevant to this article as they also address L1 teachers’ emphases in the work with fictional narratives. Sylvie Penne and Dag Skarstein, for instance, find that both lower and secondary L1 pupils in Norway tend to rely on an everyday language of “affinity, intimacy, and feelings” in their encounters with fictional literature that might not be met with much resistance from their teachers (2015, p. 12). Similarly, in Swedish L1 contexts, both Christina Olin-Scheller (2006) and Anette Årheim (2007) describe how students tend to treat fiction as fact and that their teachers do little to challenge such positions.

In addition, lack of critical distance to fictional texts is not only recognisable among adolescents. Årheim makes the point that media discourse conditions both young and grown-up readers’ expectations of realism in fictional narratives (2007). This brings up the issue of *referentiality* in fictional texts; that is their relationship to the real world. In contrast to factual texts, fictional narratives have traditionally been defined as having “no reference” to a physical reality or that they do not make “claims of referential truthfulness” (Schaeffer, 2013, 1

Definition). However, as Årheim's study indicates, the "paratexts" that surround contemporary fictional literature dissolve such divisions between fact and fiction. She adds that "contemporary literature has an essential function to fulfil as long as the reception does not take place privately, which often leads to reproducing prejudices" (Årheim, 2007, *Abstract*).

In terms of film use specifically, Olin-Scheller identifies three functions based on classroom observations and teacher interviews: film "as illustration, "as comparison", and a "filling in" function (Olin-Scheller, 2006, pp. 112-13, my translations). They correspond in several ways to the four assumptions that I develop in my analysis. She also finds that films are sometimes perceived as a possible replacement for literary texts or some content knowledge, particularly in vocational classes (Olin-Scheller, 2006). A study of literature habits among first year Swedish teacher students expresses similar notions about films as possible replacement for literary texts. About half of the male respondents say they feel films and other multimodal texts reduce their need to read literary texts (Ruhnstrøm, 2000).

## Methods and materials

The 18 teachers I interviewed come from six different schools, varying in number from one to six. They were randomly selected from lists supplied by their headmasters in the sense that those who agreed to participate were included in the study. The group is rather heterogeneous in terms of experience, age and educational background but, as male English teachers are in minority in these schools, two thirds of the respondents are women. Their age and teaching experience range from 26 to 63 years and 1 to 30 years, respectively. Two have a Master's degree in English; most of the others have 60 credits in English. The most common subjects that these teachers teach, in addition to English, are Norwegian, Religion and Social Science. Although gender, age, experience, educational background and what other subjects they teach probably have some bearing on their answers, there is no clear pattern.

The teachers were asked to bring textbooks and plans to the interviews. These worked as concrete points of reference throughout. I would typically ask two types of questions. The first type would deal with the teacher's more general notions of the learning value of films; the second type was specifically related to films the teacher had chosen. Interviews were conducted in Norwegian, first, because it is the native language of both teacher and researcher and anything else would feel forced and possibly increase the asymmetry between the two (Kvale, 2007, p. 14). Second, the aim of the interview is to explore how teachers describe aspects of their teaching practices in a Norwegian school context. The quotes from teachers that appear in this article are translated into English and kept as closely to their words as possible.

I chose semi-structured interviews, as they enable a sense of direction while allowing respondents to introduce other and sometimes more valuable perspectives than the ones I had envisioned. This relatively open approach was chosen to give room for diversity and explorations in the teachers' reflections (Kvale, 2007, p. 51). Still, my interpretative framework probably conditioned both the questions I asked and what elements in the teachers' answers I decided to pursue. What I consider salient features in interviews is likely to be coloured by my own experiences and values as teacher educator as well as the discourses that potentially bias my interpretations (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). My background might also have influenced the teachers' assumptions about how they are expected to answer in the context of the interview (Kvale, 2007, p. 8). Despite such self-reflection, there will always be blind spots that escape attention (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 9).

I borrow perspectives from Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) in my approach to the teachers' reasoning (CDA). Each text – in this case the teacher's creation of meaning in interviews – takes part in a certain discursive practice among colleagues at a school or a wider community of English teachers and scholars in the field (2003). Therefore, my analysis started with the individual teacher's reasoning. Then I looked for sameness and difference across interviews both thematically and linguistically to get an impression of common features of their talk. I traced words or expressions with similar meaning potentials. For instance, when teachers say fiction films can provide "information" about conditions elsewhere or make pupils realise "how it was" these expressions seem to draw upon assumptions about *the referential value of films*. Such discursive elements may carry naturalised understandings about "what is, can be or will be the case" or what is "good" or "desirable" in a given discursive practice (Fairclough, 2003, p. 55). Based on such linguistic and semantic features, I generated categories that I believe capture a set of *assumptions about the value of films* in these teachers' reasoning.

A discursive practice brings the individual text into dialogue with other discourses at different levels of abstraction through *intertextual relationships*. In the discussion, I give examples of such relationships between the set of value assumptions that emerged from the analysis and the immediate and more distant discourses that appear to have encouraged them. Such commonly agreed upon notions often linger in the words or expressions of a discursive practice through time while their meaning is reshaped to fit new contexts. An investigation into intertextual relationships can therefore provide insight into developments in a discursive practice and although not directly – changes in the associated social practice (Fairclough, 1992, 2003).

Obviously, the value categories I established imply a homogenization of meaning that can obscure complexity in the teachers' answers. For instance, there are recurrent issues intertwined in the teachers' reasoning that fall outside of the four value assumptions. The ambiguity expressed by some about using

films in the classroom is mostly pushed aside. Also, while a discursive practice offers participants certain repertoires of utterances, it may at the same time restrain both what issues to address and how to talk about them (Fairclough, 2003). However, the set of assumptions that I have construed from their reasoning do not purport to reveal the truth about English teachers' notions of films; they are in one sense exclusive to a specific time and place. This means that other English teachers in other contexts might express different or additional understandings of their learning value. This limitation is balanced against the view that "relatively durable" social structures and practices condition the way people talk (Fairclough, 2003, p. 3). Therefore, it is not unlikely that the notions expressed by these teachers are transferable across classrooms and subjects.

### English teachers' discursive practices – an analysis

Before presenting the analysis I will try to give an impression of the teachers' attitudes to classroom film use based on what they tell me in interviews. It is important to point out that there is a discernible difference between the teachers who seem to see little learning value in films and those who regard them as integrated elements in their teaching. There are certain distinguishing features in this respect but they are by no means consistent. For instance, those who also teach social science and religion seem to pay more attention to films and particularly their cross-curricular value than others do. In addition, several of the teachers express a sense of personal engagement for films that reflects in their reasoning. At one of the schools, for example, the teachers appear to share a particular enthusiasm for films and describe very similar practices. A couple of the teachers, however, seem quite critical of film use and of their colleagues' film practices. Although colleagues tend to mention the same films and talk about them in comparable ways, such discursive similarity is as common across school contexts. Overall, teachers tend to emphasise the importance of showing "good films" that fit the topic and that films should not be used as an emergency measure or as entertainment.

Some teachers explain that they seldom watch films with their classes; others mention one or two films, whereas others again say they might show four or five films in the course of a year.

As previously mentioned, the teachers mainly refer to fiction films and the examples below all relate to this genre. Since quite a few teachers say they rarely read a whole novel with their pupils, perhaps only once in lower secondary, a film may be the one longer fictional narrative that pupils encounter in the course of a school year.

Most of the fiction films that these teachers talk about relate to a topic in the textbook. Examples of such topic-text combinations are *Dancing with Wolves*

and *In the Name of the Father* used with topics dealing with Native Americans and Northern Ireland (Wilson & Kostner, 1990; Byrne & Sheridan, 1993). Some teachers mention films such as *Mississippi Burning* and *Amistad* in connection with chapters about African Americans (Zollo, Colesberry & Parker, 1988; Allen, Spielberg, Wilson & Spielberg, 1997). Similarly, there are several examples of a film adaptation accompanying the whole or parts of a literary text. The most frequently mentioned combination is an excerpt from *Romeo and Juliet* and a film adaptation of the play. Almost all of the teachers explain that they either show the Baz Luhrman adaptation or in some cases, the Franco Zeffereilli version of *Romeo and Juliet* to their tenth graders (Martinelli & Luhrman, 1996; Brabourne, Havelock-Allan, & Zeffereilli, 1968). Films such as *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* are also often mentioned as part of cross-curricular designs (Heyman & Herman, 2008).

### **Assumptions about the learning value of films**

I have construed four categories from the teachers' reasoning in interviews that express assumptions about the learning value of films. These four values are closely related and sometimes difficult to separate, as will be illustrated below.

- *the referential value*
- *the compensatory value*
- *the emotional value*
- *the language value*

The first value is *the referential value*. As mentioned earlier, the term relates to the reoccurring question of referentiality in a fictional narrative i.e. its relationship to an outside reality (Schaeffer, 2013). The *referential value* seems to rest on the assumption that a fiction film can work as a direct reference to social conditions or events of the past. Thus, its purpose is to provide factual knowledge or "documentation" of a topic (Penne, 2013, p. 49). In addition, a film might be seen to refer more loosely to abstract issues. This last dimension is comparable to Olin-Scheller's "film as illustration" when a film is used to exemplify and visualise "ideas and ideals" of literary periods. This function is primarily instrumental, as films are not treated as "autonomous works of art" (2006, p. 113, my translation). Moreover, *the referential value* is closely linked to the *emotional value*. The latter is seen as important if a fictional narrative is going to make pupils grasp some in-depth truth about a topic. In several of the teachers' reasoning, the film narrative and particularly its visual display are perceived to strengthen the pupils' experience of realism in the film encounter.

The *compensatory value* appears to have a wide range of meanings. It seems to build on the assumption that a film can make up for some inadequacy either in the print text, the learner or in the encounter between learner and text. It might be that the print text is considered too difficult or does not offer enough



depth. The pupils might not be sufficiently prepared, motivated or mature. One salient metaphor that recurs across several interviews is that films can “fill in” or “fill out” what appears to be missing. A film is also described as a means to ensure that everybody “gets” the main content or story line of a novel. This understanding seems to indicate that the visual display of the film may replace the whole or parts of the print text. I have not singled out the comparative perspectives in the teachers’ reasoning as Olin-Scheller does with the function “film as a comparison” (Olin-Scheller, 2006, p. 130, my translation). Some of these teachers also mention comparisons between a literary text and a film adaptation. However, what they tend to emphasise are the features of the adaptation they believe make the literary text more accessible to pupils. Therefore, such comparisons are dealt with as dimensions of *the compensatory value* in the analysis.

These features of *the compensatory value* correspond in some measure to Olin-Scheller’s “filling out function”; where teachers use films as complement or as conclusion to the work with a topic or novel (2006, p. 121). What I perceive as an important additional dimension of *the compensatory value*, however, is the notion that a film may compensate pupils’ lack of adequate language skills in English. The *language value of films* relates to instances when the teachers talk about the particular benefits for language learning or as in the case of *the compensatory value* in particular, to the implicit language issues intertwined in the their reasoning.

In the following, I will give examples of how these four *assumptions about the learning value of films* can be detected in the teachers’ meaning-making. These examples are chosen because they seem to illustrate well what I consider the most important findings from the analysis. I refer to the teachers as T1, T2 etc. or *she* or *her* to mask gender identity.

### *The referential value*

When one teacher talks about the film *Mississippi Burning*, the emphasis seems to be on *the referential value* (Zollo, Colesberry & Parker, 1988). The film builds somewhat loosely on the disappearance and murders of four young white civil rights workers in Mississippi. The subsequent FBI investigation reveals how influential figures in high positions subdue and terrorise the African-American population as active and cloaked members of the local Ku Klux Klan branch. She says this about the film:

(...) it deals with race discrimination and I think it is a very good film and at the same time, they work with ethical and moral issues in religion and I think that the pupils have a basis when they argue and discuss at the mock exam. We have to give them background knowledge so that they may, when they see a black hand and a white hand, they have to have some points of reference so that... we do want them to (...) to have an historical overview and understanding. (T3)

The teacher says that the film is a “very good film” that can work as a source of “background knowledge” pupils can apply in later contexts. The image of “a black hand and a white hand” gives “points of reference” that enable learners to make cross-curricular connections about “ethical and moral issues” in religion. Thus, the film provides an “historical overview” of race relations in the American South. At the same time, it seems to be perceived as an illustration of “moral issues” that have relevance in other subjects. The pronoun “we” appears to merge this teacher’s voice with the voices of other teachers, probably across subjects, to justify the use of a fiction film as a source of “background knowledge”.

Another teacher explains why she uses the opening sequence from the film *Amistad* (Allen, Spielberg, Wilson & Spielberg, 1997). The film is based on actual historical events and tells the story of how captured Africans committed mutiny on the Cuban slave ship *Amistad*. However, the mutineers fail to take the ship back to the African shore and end up in New York. In the USA, the captives are tried in court and later set free. The teacher explains that the class has first read a text in the textbook about the slave trade and studied a historic drawing of how slaves were stacked as human cargo below deck. The opening clip that the teacher refers to shows the capture and loading of Africans before the slave ship sets sail. In a long sequence, the camera zooms in on the desperate and crying faces as the captives are chained together and forced into the darkness of the lower deck.

The teacher says that watching these scenes “was useful” and enabled learners to see “how it was”. She does not seem primarily interested in the story line of the film but explains that she has chosen this sequence “only to see how they were treated on board” (T5). The discursive element “to see how it was” indicates that the clip works as reflections of past events. Although the pupils already have studied an illustration and read a factual text in class, the teacher’s reasoning suggests that the film clip provides more convincing evidence of the brutal treatment.

A third teacher also appears to draw upon *the referential value* when she talks about the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Noyce, Olsen, Winter & Noyce, 2002). She says she has used it with a section from the textbook about Australia and Aboriginal history. The film, which is an adaptation of a novel, tells the story of three young Aboriginal girls who manage to escape from the reservation where they were placed in 1931. They walk for nine weeks before two of them are reunited with their Aboriginal community. The teacher says, “it gives you information, which is in a way correct, in terms of the main developments, at least”. Although she appears to have some doubts that the film is historically “correct” in all the details, it still seems to suffice as “information” about Aboriginal history. The teacher adds, “it is also a true story” which apparently makes the film more reliable (T1).

The notion that a fiction film can strengthen the pupil's engagement with a topic is more pronounced when another teacher talks also about *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Noyce, Olsen, Winter & Noyce, 2002). When combined with an excerpt from the novel, the film can "reinforce the impression" of "how they [the Aboriginals] have been treated through the times" (T14). She continues:

(...) one thing is to read but then you get the film, the whole film (...) and then it is based on a true story, I feel that, at least I feel myself that particularly films that are based on true stories do something. (T14)

In addition to strengthening the narrative, the teacher explains that films based on "true stories" add authenticity to the topic they deal with. She also stresses the importance of being able to see "the whole film" which might further "reinforce" the pupils' understanding of a subject matter.

Two dimensions of *the referential value* seem to be present in these teachers' explanations, first the notion that a fiction film can provide "information" about a topic, second that it can work as a reference to more abstract issues. In addition, a film seems to be able to create a sense of realism that is necessary if pupils are to relate to events in history or the lives of people in other parts of the world.

#### *The emotional value*

As we saw in the last excerpt, the teacher says that films based on true stories "do something" which the teacher feels cannot be experienced through reading (T14). This notion is echoed by another teacher who states that "if a pupil is going to get what the text says, it needs something more, some kind of reinforcement". She explains that this is generally the case in all subjects, not only in English. In her Norwegian class, for example, she seldom just "asks pupils to read a paragraph" but tries to find ways so that pupils can engage with the content of a text (T17). This is where films come in, she says. This "reinforcement" appears to correspond to *the emotional value of films*.

This value seems particularly forceful when films include disturbing scenes of violence and abuse towards human beings. In the following example, a teacher describes how scenes from the film *Mississippi Burning* may awaken pupils to the persistent challenges of race and prejudice in the USA (Zollo, Colesberry & Parker, 1988):

*Mississippi Burning* shows really well - and the lynching - it is almost impossible for the learners to understand this. That it in a way was acceptable for some, it was entertainment - and to understand the attitudes to human beings that lie at the core. I think this is so important because I think that in a society as ours - when some claim that racism doesn't exist and then it is not long ago that people were treated so badly. (T4)

To this teacher, the film's explicit visual representation "shows really well" the degradation, violence and pain that these victims suffered in public lynchings. She pauses before and after pronouncing the words "the lynching" and "entertainment". It is as if these interruptions in the flow of speech express the teacher's own sense of repulsion with the display of violence. The teacher explains how the film deals with existential issues of the human psyche; of prejudice and evil. By exposing the pupils to the powerful moving images, they may be able to relate to atrocities that it otherwise would be "impossible for them to understand". The film is seen to bring the challenges of racism closer to the pupils' own lives as they exist even in "a society like ours".

The examples above illustrate how a film is perceived as referring both to actual events and to more abstract human experiences. Some examples also indicate how *the emotional value* is seen to strengthen the *referential value* and the pupil's understanding of a topic. Thus, *the emotional value* appears to have an important compensatory dimension in the sense that what cannot be understood through words, can be understood emotionally.

### *The compensatory value*

The compensatory value suggests that a film can make up for some shortcoming or lack in the pupil, in a text or in the encounter between the reader and text. As one teacher explains, a film can "fill in" for "the proportion of weak readers [...] who do not understand much of the text" (T1). Below, another teacher explains how a film can compensate insufficient language skills:

I think for some young people a film does more because they are not strong enough readers and not strong enough language wise, not in English at least. They can understand certain issues much better because they also lack some terms in Norwegian, which makes it more difficult for them to understand. (T4)

The teacher explains how a film helps pupils who "are not strong enough readers" understand concepts they would struggle to read about even in their native language. Her reasoning suggests that the film helps adapt the acquisition of advanced matters to the abilities and maturity of the reader.

Similar notions of the *compensatory value* occur several times when the teachers explain their use of film adaptations with a literary excerpt. One teacher says, "no matter language difficulties or reading difficulties [...] everybody gets it". When asked what it is that "they get" she responds: "They get the descriptions, the environment and the characters. They know who they are and what they do" (T15). To this teacher, watching the film seems to imply that everybody is given an opportunity to become acquainted with a complete fictional narrative. As another teacher says, "it is a way of evening out a bit" (T1). This and other dimensions of *the compensatory value* are brought up when the teachers talk about film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, which I am going to dwell on for a moment.

Longer or shorter excerpts of the play are printed in the textbooks these teachers use but the amount of time and attention they say they give to the source text may vary. Some explain that they spend quite a lot of time working with it; others say they treat it quite superficially or sometimes rely solely on the adaptation. One teacher says that she would not consider using an excerpt from the play on its own: “it wouldn’t be the same” because pupils are so engaged by the film (T10). Also, not showing the adaptation would imply that the class would need “much more knowledge about the play in advance” through other sources (T15). To the latter then, the film appears to compensate for the time and energy such preparations would entail. In addition, the film visualises “what is actually going on” and “puts it more into place” (T15). In the following example, a third teacher explains why she chooses only to watch a film adaptation of the play:

I think that is very problematic - we have tried to read it, but they only complain about the difficult language, so we may have treated it fairly superficially or watched the film instead. (T11)

Pupils’ unwillingness to read the scenes from the play appears to dissuade the teacher from working with the original text. Since she does not choose to read much of the text, she finds it important to show the older, Zefferelli version, which “follows the book completely” and is “more Shakespeare” (T11). Another teacher seems to agree that the Zefferelli film is more faithful to the original play than the Lurhman version and therefore the better choice (Martinelli & Lurhman, 1996; Brabourne, Havelock-Allan & Zefferelli, 1968). The newer version, which is set in a contemporary environment but with the original language, is too modern and “Americanised” (T2).

Interestingly, several of the teachers explain that they prefer to use the more recent adaptation and to compare it with scenes from the source text. One teacher says that “it gives them the leap from the original text” to the modern setting (T14). In a similar vein, a colleague explains that pupils often feel a distance to “old times” and that this is a way to achieve a “blend between the old and the new” which she says goes down well in her class (T15). In this last respect, the film appears to work as a mediating device between the playwright’s old-fashioned language and form and the pupils’ own text experiences. The adaptation seems to bridge this gap and makes the story “much more recognisable” to young people (T15).

As in the previous examples, the concern with the individual’s abilities and preferences is present in the teachers’ reasoning about the *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations. As one teacher says, watching the film “gives everybody something to relate to, so that they have something to offer on an equal basis” in class (T14). Apparently, most of the teachers seem to agree that some kind of knowledge of this author is required and that an adaptation of the play works as

a useful addition or alternative to the source text. This way, everybody can get a glimpse of Shakespeare's work.

### *The language value*

The *language value* of films rarely comes up as a primary issue. When probed about additional purposes, one teacher says, "Well, they do get some listening practice, too" (T9). She adds that using English subtitles may work as a compromise with the wishes of the weaker readers who would have wanted them in Norwegian. Another teacher says that she generally resists this pressure because she considers watching a film in the original language a useful exercise. As illustrated in the sections above, *the language value* appears to be an essential dimension in the *compensatory value*. When several of the teachers explain that they use no subtitles, as many say they prefer, it seems that the spoken language and particularly the visual representations are thought to compensate potential reading challenges. Sometimes teachers explain that Norwegian subtitles are necessary if both the speech and the English texting are too difficult, as in the *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations. If, in addition, the subject matter is complicated, as one teacher explains is the case with *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, they will need subtitles in Norwegian (Heyman & Herman, 2008). In this last instance, it appears that what matters most is to make pupils understand what the film is about. The joint efforts of the Norwegian subtitles and the film's other semiotic resources seem to be perceived to do just that.

### The teachers' discursive practices and the surrounding discourses

In the analysis, I presented some recurrent features across teacher interviews categorised as *assumptions about the learning value of films*. The *referential* and the *compensatory values* appear to be the most salient of the four, with the *emotional* and the *language values* acting more as inherent properties. Some teachers seem to describe a factual reading of films where "good films" are seen to provide information about social conditions or past events. Others emphasise the sense of deeper understanding and awareness of human experiences that can come about in the spectator-film encounter. In this last instance, films appear to make pupils engage more successfully with topics if "reinforced" emotionally with a film. Not surprisingly, what emerges as important dimensions from my analysis of teacher interviews are issues related to language. However, a film is not very often forefronted as an educational resource to improve language skills but rather as a means to compensate challenges related to language.

What do the teachers draw upon in their reasoning about the learning value of films? In the following, I will place the set of assumptions presented above against the backdrop of both the more or less immediate and the wider context of teachers' reasoning. In the first part of the discussion, I give some examples

of such possible intertextual relationships, specifically related to assumptions about *the referential value*. These assumptions seem to merge discourses within the field of English teaching with the “accumulated text experiences” of what one has heard or read about films (Fairclough, 1992, p. 11). Moreover, the teachers’ justifications for using films in the classroom, and particularly the compensatory features of their reflections, seem to accommodate aspects of more abstract educational discourses of participation and democracy. This is the focus in the last part of the discussion.

### **The immediate and less distant context**

First, these teachers seem to find support for their justifications in the immediate surrounding context of textbooks, the accompanying teachers’ guides and exam tasks and sometimes mention these explicitly. In terms of *the referential value*, the teacher’s books in the series *Crossroads*, *New Flight* and *On the Move* list films in connection with topics in the textbook (Bromseth, 2006, 2008; Heger, 2008). Films like *Mississippi Burning* and *Amistad* are recommended as “good films” that are “thematically tied” to textbook chapters (Zollo, Colesberry, & Parker, 1988; Allen, Spielberg & Wilson & Spielberg, 1997; Heger, 2008, p. 26). These discursive elements may encourage the notion that certain fiction films can provide true accounts of conditions in the English-Speaking world. In addition, as some films are dealt with cross-curricularly, discourses from related subjects possibly contribute to the teachers’ reasoning.

The notion that fiction films provide information about conditions elsewhere seems to incorporate both previous and contemporary discourses of referentiality in films. From the early years of the cinema, the aim of the moving image was to reflect a physical reality by means of an objective “mechanical recording” (Bazin in Grodal, 2002, p. 79). This understanding resonates with early English syllabi where films were recommended to make foreign cultures “come alive” in the classroom (Ministry of Church and Education, 1951, p. 42, my translation). This reliance on images as reflections of reality is in part based on our immediate response to the visual as real and in part on its “history of social work” as with any semiotic mode (Grodal, 2002; Jewitt & Kress, 2008, p. 15). When people trust films and images as evidence of real events, it is to some extent because this has been their job, past and present. As examples from the analysis illustrate, this notion also extends to fiction films in several teachers’ reasoning. In addition, the encounter with a film narrative appears to be perceived as a pathway to a more profound understanding of “how it was” at other times and in other places.

It seems likely that these perceptions of referentiality in fiction films also negotiate with aspects of contemporary media discourse. Arheim refers to a type of “reality language” which confuses traditional distinctions between fact and fiction: novels and films “based on true stories”, the seemingly “genuine” behaviour of reality show participants. In this discursive context the “truth

claims”, such as those printed on paperbacks, shape people’s expectations of realism in contemporary fiction. They seem to encourage new “interpretative strategies” where the sense of realism in a narrative is primarily measured against the reader’s own experiences and presumptions (2007, pp. 9-13). Apparently, the promotional language of film production companies belongs to the same media discourse as such truth claims are repeatedly made on behalf of fiction films. An example of direct relevance in this context is *Amistad*, which was described as “an accurate historical drama” by the producers when released (Allen, Spielberg & Wilson & Spielberg, 1997; Thornton, 1998). The words “accurate” and “historical drama” seem to encourage this ambiguity between fact and fiction. Interestingly, the revised *Crossroads*’ teacher’s guide appears to echo features of such reality language in its recommendations of fiction films. For instance, while the film *12 Years A Slave*, is promoted as being “based on an incredible, true story” on the production company’s web site, the teacher’s guide points out that this film as many of the others listed are “based on a true stories” or “based on true events” (*Film4 Productions*; Heger, 2015, p. 46; Pitt, Gardner, Katagas & McQueen, 2013).

As we have seen, several of the teachers say they choose films they believe touch pupils on a personal and emotional level, and sometimes express a preference for those telling “true stories”. It appears that the discursive practices in which these teachers, curricula and textbook authors take part tend to give little critical attention to issues of truth and reality in fiction films. This might be the case either because they are not aware of them or simply because they do not consider them relevant in EFL contexts. As research suggests, a similar focus on the pupil’s personal identification with fictional narratives rather than a critical stance to such texts is recognisable in L1 contexts (Olin-Scheller, 2006; Penne & Skarstein, 2015; Penne, 2013; Årheim, 2005).

It does not seem unlikely then, that such accumulated notions of referentiality in films, as the ones mentioned above, have been shaped and reshaped by teachers’ discursive practices over time, for instance in response to new curricula demands. The current syllabus does not just ask for “knowledge of” the English-speaking world (Ministry of Education, Research, and Church Affairs, 1987, p. 207, my translation) but also requires “insight into the way people live” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013, English Subject Curriculum, Purpose). To some of these teachers, fiction films seem to be perceived as very apt for the job of providing such insights.

In terms of the assumptions about *the compensatory value of films*, these cannot be explicitly traced to earlier or current curricula or contemporary textbooks. Still, the understanding that for instance an adaption gives pupils a chance to become acquainted with a literary universe seems to be shared by several of these teachers and across subjects (Olin-Scheller, 2006). It is possible that this assumption relies on the generally held view among film critics and film audiences that a film adaption is expected to be as faithful as possible to the



original literary source (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 7). If the film is perceived to be true to the source text, some teachers may see it as a useful substitute.

### **The wider context: educational discourses of democracy and participation**

It is possible to see the *compensatory value of films* in light of the more abstract discourses of participation and democracy that ran alongside school reforms in Norway throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the early 60s onwards such reforms gave everybody equal access to universal secondary education with an aim to even out social inequality (Grunnskoleloven, 1969; Reform 74). When new legislation introduced a common core curriculum for primary and secondary education in the late 90s, democracy and participation meant equal access to a certain shared body of knowledge. One of the cornerstones in the core curriculum was that concrete knowledge would help build common frames of references for everybody no matter social or ethnic background (Opplæringsloven, 1998, Ministry of Education, Research, and Church Affairs, 1996). From then on educational discourses gradually shifted from participation to increased emphasis on the rights and resources of the individual learner promoted by buzzwords such as adapted teaching and learning styles (Jenssen & Lillejord, 2009, Ministry of Education, Research, and Church Affairs, 1998).

These are aspects of educational discourses that appear to have re-contextualised in several of the teachers' reasoning about films. To some, a film helps ensure everybody's participation in classroom discussions about a text or a topic. It is also sometimes described as a means to cater to individual learning styles, abilities and preferences. Several of the teachers say they experience challenges that result from unequally distributed language skills in their classes. A film might be perceived to reconcile such challenges and "even out" mixed abilities. Sometimes texts or topics appear incompatible with the pupils' reading abilities, maturity, motivation or academic potential. In some teachers' reasoning, then, a film seems to allow equal access to a text or some content knowledge, echoing the intentions of the core curriculum. One salient example of the possible democratisation potential in films occurs when the teachers talk about using adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. To some, an adaptation seems to represent an opportunity for every English language learner to experience Shakespeare's famous play.

Lastly, these compensatory features in the teachers' reasoning seem to resonate with early notions of the role of films in society. From its beginning as a mass medium, a film belonged to everybody, and spoke in a language people quickly grew to appreciate. Therefore, it could both serve as a means of reaching out to large audiences and securing new groups in society aesthetic and cultural experiences, which they were denied before (Marcussen, 1953).

## Final remarks

Early on in this article, I asked what it means when teachers say that you can learn a lot from films. Through interviews with eighteen lower secondary English teachers, I have explored their notions of the learning value of films captured in a set of assumptions. For example, films seem to be perceived as useful resources to provide the knowledge and awareness about the world that contemporary curricula require. Very few describe them primarily as tools for language learning. Obviously, the overall improvement of English oral skills among Norwegian pupils over the last decades might give the impression that a specific language emphasis is less relevant (Bonnet, 2002; Hellekjær, 2012a,b). Also, teachers may find support in discourses outside of the subject area, for instance in cross-curricular work. In these contexts, it is likely that a common theme rather than specific EFL perspectives is given priority. In addition, a film might present itself as a welcome opportunity to reconcile opposing concerns in the classroom, such as mixed abilities, varying motivation and maturity among pupils. Finally, there seems to be little critical attention to films as an educational resource in the field of English teaching and possibly across subjects. This might be so since films have been around for a long time and probably escape the scrutiny that otherwise befalls newer media when introduced into school contexts. As a result, their value might have become naturalised by discursive practices, which, if not contended, may allow little room for alternative understandings.

However, if films are considered relevant in the EFL classroom by teachers, textbook and curricula authors, I believe they deserve to be critically explored in terms of their value in EFL contexts. This article investigates merely aspects of teachers' reasoning about the value of films and not the actual classroom practices. Therefore, studies of teachers' classroom film use or pupils' experiences with films in their English classes would be interesting paths to pursue.

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