

## Short Films in English Language Teaching

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»I hate it when my house is so big I need two wireless routers« – this is what a poor black man, standing in front of a tiny, decrepit wooden hut, is complaining about in the short film *First World Problems* ([www.viralvideoaward.com/first-world-problems](http://www.viralvideoaward.com/first-world-problems)). This viral video, directed by the American Alec Helm (2012), is a tongue-in-cheek jab at complaints that are only voiced by privileged individuals in wealthy countries. Although it lasts only 1:01 minutes, it can be exploited for all the competences asked for in the educational standards (KMK 2012, Fig. 1).

Competences	First World Problems
Functional communicative competences:	
• Listening-viewing	• Recognizing the satirical clash between words and visuals
• Speaking	• Discussing trivial inconveniences
• Reading	• Reading the subtitles
• Writing	• Adding a comment on YouTube
• Mediating	• Transferring statements into L1
• Lexical competence	• Explaining unknown words, e.g. »mint gums«
• Grammatical competence	• Revising passive voice, e.g. »... my leather seats aren't heated ...«
• Pronunciation	• Repeating the statements in RP
• Spelling	• Distinguishing between BE and AE, e.g. »neighbours« / »neighbors«
Text and media competence	Investigating the make-up and impact of viral videos

Competences	First World Problems
Intercultural communicative competence	Exploring the chasm between First and Third World
Language awareness	Bringing multilingualism, ESL and lingua franca to mind
Language learning competence	Making students aware of the language learning potential of short film platforms

Fig. 1: *First World Problems* video & educational standards

The following paper attempts to answer what is meant by short films, why they should be used in the TEFL classroom, where teachers can find suitable material, what subgenres can be distinguished, what criteria of selection may be applied, what objectives can be determined, and how short films can actually be exploited in language classes. The theoretical argumentation will be supported by the description and analysis of several film examples, which are described with the help of six criteria: title, type, source, synopsis, features, and learning potential.

## 1 Term

According to length, films can be divided into long formats, medium formats, and short formats (Thaler 2014, Fig. 2).

Types	Length	Examples
Short formats	1 sec – 20 min	see below
Medium formats	20–45 min	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• drama series</li> <li>• sitcoms</li> <li>• soap operas</li> <li>• talk shows</li> <li>• game shows</li> <li>• documentaries</li> <li>• educational films</li> </ul>
Long formats	45+ minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• feature films</li> <li>• live coverage of (inter)national events</li> </ul>

Fig. 2: Film formats

## 2 Justification

Why should we employ short films in our classrooms? A circular and tautological answer would be because they are short and audiovisual.

Apart from the general benefits of using films in TEFL such as popularity, motivation audio-visual appeal, authenticity, personal relevance and teachers' preferences (Stempleski/Tomalin 2001, Thaler 2007a), short formats exhibit additional didactic assets:

- Time: Compared to long audiovisual formats, e.g. movies, and medium formats, e.g. sitcoms, short films can be comfortably dealt with in a 45-minute lesson including viewing and working phases.
- Repetition: Due to their brevity, double or even triple viewing is possible.
- Focus: Certain details like camera perspective, character development, leitmotif or central message can be studied in detail within a manageable context.
- Flexibility: The three time-saving approaches to presenting films, i.e. segment, sandwich, and appetizer approach, are dispensable as the very short format allows for a simple straight-through mode (cf. Thaler 2014). The working phases may be structured according to the PWP (pre – while – post), GTD (global to detail), TBLL (task-based language learning), 10-step listening-viewing approach, or MVC (7-code music video clip) patterns (Thaler 2012).

All these benefits are not hard to be detected in the famous 40-second Berlitz commercial called *The German Coast Guard* (Fig. 3, also see Thaler 2014).

Title	The German Coast Guard
Type	Commercial
Source	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yR0lWICH3rY">www.youtube.com/watch?v=yR0lWICH3rY</a>
Synopsis	In this hilarious Berlitz commercial, a young German coastguard is being given instructions in his new job by an elderly man. As soon as the experienced man leaves, the trainee receives a distress call from an English boat: »We are sinking!« After a pause the coastguard asks: »What are you sinking (thinking) about?«
Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brevity (40 sec)</li> <li>• Humour</li> <li>• Polyvalence</li> </ul>

Learning potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pronunciation: problems with /th/</li> <li>• Linguistics: minimal pairs »thinking / sinking«</li> <li>• Grammar: present progressive</li> <li>• Mediation: L1-L2 (first part)</li> <li>• Speaking: sources of humour</li> <li>• Lingua franca: sea travel</li> <li>• Intercultural learning: <i>critical incidents</i></li> <li>• Advertising: form, function and impact of a commercial</li> </ul>
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Fig. 3: *The German Coast Guard*

Moreover, not only media literacy / film literacy, but basically all competence domains and individual sub-competences that are postulated in the educational standards (KMK 2003, KMK 2012) can be fostered with the help of short films:

- Functional communicative competences ► particularly listening-viewing
- Intercultural communicative competence ► culture-specific references
- Text and media competence ► cinematic devices
- Language awareness ► sociolects, regiolects
- Language learning competence ► Extramural English with online platforms

### 3 Resources

Where can teachers – and learners – find suitable material when they want to make use of short films? The following table provides a few suggestions (Fig. 4).

Film guides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://www.filmsite.org">http://www.filmsite.org</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://www.imdb.com">http://www.imdb.com</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://www.filmclub.org">http://www.filmclub.org</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://filmeducation.org">http://filmeducation.org</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://www.eslnotes.com/synopses.html">http://www.eslnotes.com/synopses.html</a></li> </ul>
Learner film sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://www.english-attack.com">www.english-attack.com</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org/uk-now/film-uk">http://learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org/uk-now/film-uk</a></li> </ul>
Lesson plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://lessonstream.org">http://lessonstream.org</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://viralelt.wordpress.com">http://viralelt.wordpress.com</a></li> </ul>

Film scripts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://www.dailyscript.com">http://www.dailyscript.com</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://www.script-o-rama.com">http://www.script-o-rama.com</a></li> </ul>
Animated movie makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://goanimate.com">http://goanimate.com</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://www.zimmertwins.com">http://www.zimmertwins.com</a></li> </ul>
Subtitling and revoicing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://www.grapheine.com/bombaytv">http://www.grapheine.com/bombaytv</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://clipflair.net">http://clipflair.net</a></li> </ul>
Kieran Donaghy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://filminaction.com">http://filminaction.com</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://film-english.com">http://film-english.com</a></li> </ul>

Fig. 4: TEFL resources

## 4 Types

Short films may be classified according to length (one-second films, one-minute films, short shorts, etc.), genre (comedy, drama, documentary, horror, romance, sci-fi, thriller, etc.), topic (animals, coming-of-age, dance, superhero, etc.), or artistic claim (Heinrich 1997, Monaco 2009, Keddie 2014). Although in the era of post-modern hybridity, the boundaries between ad and art, or trash and treasure, are blurred, short films with rather aesthetic ambitions can be detected. These art shorts are also awarded prizes at international short film festivals such as the Tampere International Short Film Festival or the New York Short Film Festival. An example well worth seeing is *Father and Daughter* (2000), a multi-award winning 8-minute animated film directed by Michael Dudok de Wit, which completely forgoes any dialogues (see Pessozki in this volume).

Apart from art shorts, one can find several traditional types whose artistic ambitions are limited (Keddie 2014, Thaler 2014, 2000):

- music videos
- sketches / skits
- trailers
- TV news
- weather forecasts
- interviews
- commercials

Brave new digital world has recently given birth to further innovative short film genres (Donaghy 2015: 25 ff., Fig. 5).

## **New types of short films**

### **1. Branded Shorts**

short films created for a company / brand ► fusion between advertising and entertainment, innovative narratives, high production standards

### **2. Social Shorts**

dealing with social themes such as poverty, homelessness, discrimination ► social awareness, emotional involvement, dramatic appeal

### **3. Literal Music Videos**

music videos in which the original lyrics have been replaced by lines that depict the content of the visuals ► parody, wit, musical appeal, cinematic analysis (!), working with lyrics (vocabulary)

### **4. Infographic Films**

animated representations of information, data, knowledge ► full of facts, appealing to visual learners

### **5. Viral Shorts**

short films that become very popular through being shared rapidly and widely on the Internet ► funny, strange, powerful, discussing the impact

### **6. Animated Lectures**

lectures created by pairing leading experts in a field with talented animators ► intellectual challenge, reduction of complexity by combining audio, text and attractive animation, presenting world-renowned experts (example: RSA ANIMATE: Changing Education Paradigms, talk given at the RSA by Sir Ken Robinson, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U))

### **7. Split-screen Shorts**

films with a visible division of the screen into two halves, with different moving images in each half ► discussing similarities and differences between the two screens

### **8. Response Films**

shorts which criticise or parody the content and message of another film (viral or branded shorts), often in a humorous or hard-hitting manner ► criticism of

the original, promoting critical thinking, learners producing their own film as a reaction to a manipulative clip

#### 9. New Silent Short Films

shorts without any dialogue, produced recently ► lack of text, suitable for various proficiency levels

#### 10. Mash-ups

montages or combinations of two or more already existing films ► promoting genre competence, producing one's own mash-ups

Fig. 5: New short film genres

An example of a viral short, which treats a current problem in an illuminating yet non-obtrusive manner, is delineated in Fig. 6.

Title	<i>I Forgot My Phone</i>
Type	Viral short
Source	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OINa46HeWg8">www.youtube.com/watch?v=OINa46HeWg8</a>
Synopsis	<p>The two-minute film, a hyper-real vision of everyday life, shows various social situations, in which groups of people are utterly engrossed by their phones instead of the world around them. Whether it is taking in a spectacular view, holding a conversation with friends, innocently enjoying a swing, or lying in bed with a partner, the phone takes precedence over real life.</p> <p>This satirical jab at society's obsession with their mobile phones highlights our inability to enjoy the here and now (mindfulness).</p>
Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Huge popularity</li> <li>• Current social problem</li> <li>• Language (words) not relevant</li> </ul>
Learning potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First viewing: vision off approach</li> <li>• Discussing excessive mobile use</li> <li>• Reading / responding to YouTube comments</li> </ul>

Fig. 6: *I Forgot My Phone*

## 5 Selection

The preference for a certain film genre may be one guideline when having to choose an appropriate film for one's class. Further criteria of selection are the following (Thaler 2017a):

- linguistic complexity
- audio-visual comprehensibility
- language quantity
- didactic exploitability
- pedagogic concerns
- topical relevance
- length
- sound-vision relation
- aesthetic quality

An example that fulfils quite a lot of these criteria is outlined in Fig. 7.

Title	<i>Splitscreen: A Love Story</i>
Type	Split-screen story
Source	<a href="https://vimeo.com/25451551">https://vimeo.com/25451551</a>
Synopsis	Two lovebirds wake up on opposite sides of the world (New York, Paris), and start parallel journeys to meet each other. The story is told simultaneously through the eyes of the two characters, and each shot is meticulously matched to its trans-atlantic counterpart, e.g. a truck in Paris seamlessly becomes a New York City taxi.
Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Split screen</li> <li>• Paris and New York</li> <li>• No text / dialogues</li> <li>• Winner of Nokia shorts competition 2011</li> <li>• Completely shot on Nokia N8 mobile phone</li> </ul>
Learning potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usable in various languages</li> <li>• Analysis of cinematic devices</li> <li>• Description, retelling, discussion</li> </ul>

Fig. 7: *Splitscreen: A Love Story*



## 6 Objectives

In analogy to the model of film literacy (Thaler 2014), one can postulate three domains and three skills for short films as well (Fig. 8).

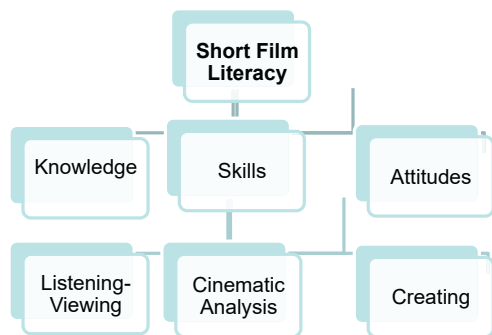


Fig. 8: Short Film Literacy

Short films are predestined for cinematic analysis, so Fig. 9 outlines a literal music video which abounds in film devices.

Title	<i>Total Eclipse of the Heart</i>
Type	Literal music video
Source	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsfWUq0fdKk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsfWUq0fdKk</a>
Synopsis	A literal music video is a parody of an official music video clip in which the lyrics have been replaced with lyrics that describe the visuals in the video – so you really hear what you see in this spoof on Bonnie Tyler’s classic music video of the 80s, e.g. <i>(Pan the room) Random use of candles, empty bottles, and cloth, and can you see me through this fan? (Slo-mo dove) Creepy doll, a window, and what looks like a bathrobe. Then, a dim-lit shot of dangling balls. (Metaphor?) ...</i>
Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parody and humour</li> <li>• Deconstructing a cult song / video</li> <li>• Cinematographic techniques</li> </ul>
Learning potential	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparing original and parody</li> <li>• Film analysis (cinematic devices)</li> <li>• Lexical work and ICC</li> <li>• Creative production of one’s own literal music video</li> </ul>

Fig. 9: *Total Eclipse of the Heart*

## 7 Methodology

When structuring a teaching unit on short films, one can resort to the well-known lesson planning patterns (Thaler 2012, 2007b):

- PPP (presentation, practice, production)
- PWP (pre-while-post)
- GtD (global-to-detail)
- TBLL (Task-based Language Learning)
- Music Video Approach (3 codes, 7 combinations)

In order to focus on listening-viewing or / and cinematic analysis, the 10-step approach can be recommended (Thaler 2014, Fig. 10).

Step	Phase	Content / Functions
1	Lead-in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introducing the situation: who, what ...</li> <li>• Justifying the need to watch</li> </ul>
2	Prep work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key phrases</li> <li>• Intercultural background</li> </ul>
3	1st purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intention (global understanding)</li> <li>• Tasks</li> </ul>
4	1st viewing	Whole film
5	Global comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' answers</li> </ul>
6	2nd purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intention (detailed understanding)</li> <li>• Tasks</li> </ul>
7	2nd viewing	Film
8	Detailed comprehension	Students' answers
9	(optional: 3rd viewing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focusing task</li> <li>• Part of film</li> <li>• Discussion</li> </ul>
10	Wrap-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow-up activities</li> <li>• Analysis</li> <li>• Discussion</li> <li>• Transfer</li> </ul>

Fig. 10: 10-step approach to listening-viewing

This 10-step approach can be exemplified with the hilarious black humour skit *Fatal Beatings* ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZMoB6ms2mE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZMoB6ms2mE)), in which a meeting between a strict headmaster (Rowan Atkinson) and a worried student's father rapidly goes downhill after the headmaster mentions casually that he has beaten his son to death (Fig. 11).

Step	Phase	Content
1	Lead-in	T activates background information on Rowan Atkinson / Mr Bean.
2	Prep work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The communicative situation of the clip is introduced: who, where, what.</li> <li>• A few key phrases may be pre-taught.</li> </ul>
3	1st purpose	T announces that the presentation of the film will be stopped three times in order to elicit feedback from the S.
4	1st viewing	<p>The whole film is shown, the pause button is pressed at the following points, and S have to guess:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 0:29 (»Tommy is in trouble«): what trouble?</li> <li>• 0:52 (»If he wasn't dead, I'd have him expelled«): why dead?</li> <li>• 3:46 (»I've been pulling your leg«): what punchline?</li> </ul>
5	Global comprehension	With each freeze frame, answers from the S are collected.
6	2nd purpose	S are asked to focus on the different sources of humour during the second viewing of this skit.
7	2nd viewing	The video is presented straight through.
8	Detailed comprehension	S answers on humour are discussed.
9	3rd viewing	A subtitled version of the video with several spelling and lexical mistakes is shown, and S are asked to shout »Stop!« whenever they identify a mistake. The correct versions are written on the board.
10	Wrap-up	The appropriateness of this video concerning its content and the role of black humour are discussed.

Fig. 11: *Fatal Beatings*