Hispania Guest Editorial: 
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“Film is the greatest educational medium the world has ever known.”
—Preston Sturges

In the twenty first century, film ought to occupy a central spot in any language department. This should be the case whether one examines graduate studies, programs for undergraduate majors and minors, or basic language programs. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Written text still reigns supreme. It is not my place to argue why this is so, just as it is not my place to argue what an undergraduate or graduate program should look like when its emphasis is literature and culture. I will instead approach the issue of the role of film from the viewpoint of language and language acquisition. And I will begin with the central concept of input.

After four plus decades of research on second language acquisition, it is now fact that the acquisition of language (that is, the acquisition of an abstract and complex mental representation of language) happens as a result of three minimal components: input, internal mental architecture, and the mechanisms that mediate between input and the internal architecture. (For some discussion, see Gass, Behney, and Plonsky 2013; as well as VanPatten and Williams 2015.) That is, language is not acquired because of practice but because of exposure to language in communicative events. Many readers may recognize this statement as another way of saying that exposure to input is necessary for language acquisition. Input is simply language that one hears (or sees) that is part of communication, the latter being defined as the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning in a given context. In other words, input is language that we attend to for its propositional content and intent. There is not a single aspect of language that is not acquired through the interaction of the internal learning architecture with communicative input. (I am purposefully not specifying what the internal architecture is in this essay. It is not necessary to do so in order to make my main point.) Thus, everything from lexicon (words and their properties) to language specific syntactic operations (movement) to morphology (the inflectional properties of words) to phonology (sounds, sound sequences, syllabic structure, intonation), and more gets into our heads because of the interaction of input with internal architecture.

So what does this have to do with film? As one might guess, for students who do not have consistent contact with speakers of another language, film can be a significant source of input. Because learners will watch film and listen to interactions between characters, film is communicative input. But why advocate for the inclusion of film as part of language development? Let us consider for a moment the odds that are stacked against a typical second language learner when it comes to input. To do so, let’s start with child first language (L1) acquisition. We now know that acquisition may actually begin in the womb. We also know that some very important aspects of acquisition happen during the first year after birth (e.g., various aspects of phonological acquisition). We also know that for all intents and purposes, acquisition of the formal
aspects of language is pretty much in place by the age of five (with peripheral and marked parts of language coming in with literacy development and exposure to complex discourse; see, for example, Pinker 2007). So, let's focus on these years of acquisition: one to five years of age, or four years. Assuming an average of eight hours a day multiplied by seven days a week multiplied by 52 weeks a year multiplied by four years, we come up with $8 \times 7 \times 52 \times 4 = 11,648$ hours. A child L1 learner then gets close to 12,000 hours of input and interaction with that input during early childhood. And just to be sure, let me repeat that we are ignoring here the impact of literacy on continued communicative and discursive development including pragmatics, vocabulary, rhetoric/discourse and other non-formal aspects of language.

Now let's consider a typical adult taking Spanish as a college student who begins with Spanish 101 (first semester). That student is in class for four hours per week. That student has homework outside of class but not much of it is focused on communicative language so to be conservative lets say the student might get one more hour of “contact” per week outside of class. Let's also recall that students take a language course for 14 weeks (a typical semester). How much input and interaction does that student get in two calendar years? The multiplication looks like this: $5 \text{ (hours per week)} \times 14 \text{ (weeks per semester)} \times 4 \text{ (semesters)} = 280$ contact hours or “input.” And this is generous considering that a good deal of class time and homework in most programs in this country is not input-oriented but practice oriented and often non-communicative in nature. It should be clear what my point is: the child gets close to 12,000 hours of interaction with input in four years while the adult learner gets close to 300. The adult thus gets about 2.5% of the input and interaction that children get during the same calendar time. We can continue this calculation and work out the same for minor and major contact hours and see that the second language learner gets far less input compared with the typical child (e.g., a major may consist of 32 credit hours beyond basic language, so $32 \times 14 = 448$ hours. Add on homework and occasional other contact and you might get up to 600 hours of input. We are still far below the 12,000 hours the child gets by the age of five years. (I hasten to add here that acquisition of language is not reducible to exposure to input. My intent is to point out that input is a critical ingredient of acquisition; not the ingredient.)

There is no way to work around the fundamental role of input. We can't “teach away” the role that input plays and we can't succumb to the illogical argument that because we don't have the time, we can't afford to worry about input. Instead, it is up to us to figure out ways in which the student-learner can gain increased access to interaction with input when not living in an environment in which the language is the medium of communication. Technology can certainly help, but that is not the focus of the present volume; film is. And what is missing in the papers in this volume is the use of film for language acquisition.

As I said at the outset, film tends to be absent from all levels of the curriculum, so a lack of papers about film for language development is not surprising in this special issue. In looking toward the future, then, I would like to urge the profession to consider the following questions for both curriculum development and research:

1. How can film be integrated into the curriculum at all levels for the purpose of language development?
2. What impact does the inclusion of film have on development?
3. What tasks work best with film and for what levels of proficiency?
4. How do students watch film? What strategies do they engage and are these strategies conducive to language development?
5. What kind of films work well with students? What factors should affect how we choose film for language development?
6. Is it possible to build a course around films (or a single film) instead of text? What would such a course look like and what (dis)advantages would it have compared to a course built around a textbook?
To be sure, there may be other questions. My goal is simply to encourage the profession to think outside the box, to consider all the tools available to promote language learning, and to consider how, at every level of proficiency, we might increase both the quantity and quality of the linguistic input that learners get. As I conclude, I direct the reader to the epigraph at the outset of this essay. Preston Sturges surely was not thinking about second language acquisition when he wrote this line for the movie *Sullivan's Travels*. But the great thing about quotes such as this one is that many years later they can be seen in a new light. Here, the new light is to look seriously at film as a possible central component to our language curricula.

**WORKS CITED**


