Storyboard as a pre-activity for Brazilian Portuguese films

Denise M. Osborne

University of Arizona

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Abstract

In order to help students to be prepared and motivated to engage with the world of Portuguese language films, a pre-activity on storyboards is suggested. Students familiarize themselves with the Portuguese vocabulary necessary to understand the movie in focus, within the concept of storyboard, exploring possible connections with the myth presented in this film and aspects of the Brazilian culture as they apply the knowledge shared and build the classroom. The students then present their storyboard in class, and the class together creates an e-book. Various aspects of the Portuguese language are, therefore, worked with students (oral presentation, online creation, written narrative, and so forth). This activity also allows students to use their imagination and creativity, helping them gain the right frame of mind before watching the film. Suggestion for extension and forms of assessment are also provided. Students’ feedback on the activity, shown in this article, not only validates the activity, but also contributes to its improvement.
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Introduction

Films are excellent affordances for learners of foreign or second languages since they expose students to cultural, historical and linguistic input through authentic material. They also provide language teachers great opportunities for dialogical interactions in the class (Bakhtin, 1986, 1992), as teachers and students exchange ideas and construct meanings among themselves from the various elements of the film narrative. Nevertheless, films in a foreign/second language might provoke a sense of strangeness on the part of the student (e.g., unfamiliar vocabulary, distinctive language and cultural behavior, different expectations, and so forth), which might affect the way the viewer appreciates a foreign film (Lee, 2008). In this article, I present a pre-activity that I have developed in my Portuguese as a foreign language (PFL) classes, the goal of which is to minimize such possible difficulties, and prepare and motivate students to engage with the world of film. The pre-activity presented involves the creation of storyboards, focusing on the classic myth of Orpheus, as a way to help students gain the right frame of mind before watching the film Orfeu Negro. It also allows students to use their imagination and creativity, as they work with their own interpretation of the myth. Since the myth is a narrative that is heavily embedded with cultural identities, students will explore other ways to understand the myth, leading students to go beyond the plot itself, and setting the stage for them to embrace the Brazilian version of the myth. The new vocabulary will be first explored in isolation, then expanded to sentences and discourses, as the activity is developed in the classroom.

The use of films in a foreign language class has the potential to contribute to each of the five C’s (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) (Sturm, 248), described by the Standards for Foreign Language Learning as the five goals for teaching and
education. Within the Communication goals, students will exchange ideas, write their own perceptions of the myth, and reflect on them, as they apply the new vocabulary learned. Various aspect of the Portuguese verbal and oral language will be explored (online readings, reflexive writing, narratives, oral discussion in groups, and so forth).

Regarding Cultures, students will understand better the classical myth and its possible layers of meaning; students will share insights regarding ways that aspects of the classical myth could be presented in modern days, more specifically, in Brazilian culture, thus going beyond the plot of myth itself. This activity has also Connections goals. Students will connect their knowledge of Portuguese language to the creation of a storyboard (e.g., students will have to summarize the myth, focusing on the main aspects of the story – use concise sentences, apply the vocabulary learned, as they develop their sense of textual cohesion and coherence). Personal connections will also be made through reflections and group discussions.

As a Comparison goal, students will compare the various versions of Orpheus myth and discuss their interpretations. They will also compare their perceptions with that of the other students, which will enrich their understanding of the myth.

Finally, focusing on the Communities, students will have the opportunities to use the Portuguese language beyond the school setting; initially, by researching the myth of Orpheus online, and then by creating an e-book collectively. In addition, through storyboards, students will learn the target language as they engage with the film’s world in an innovative way.

The pre-activity on storyboard is divided into two parts. In the first part, students familiarize themselves with the new vocabulary and the classical myth. Then, students are exposed to the concept of storyboards. In the second part, they create and present their own storyboard, followed by a reflection. Although the film in focus is *Orfeu Negro*, this activity
could be adapted to other films. All the steps for the development of the pre-activity are provided in detail. Student feedback on the storyboard as a pre-activity, collected through an anonymous online survey, is also provided and discussed.

Title: Storyboard as a pre-activity for Brazilian Portuguese films

Purpose: Prepare students for encounters with foreign films, motivate creativity, and oral and written performance, help students feel comfortable with the new vocabulary, and promote engagement, as community is built in the class.

Level: Intermediate (No background on film is necessary.)

Material needed: Handout (template provided in Appendix)

Film in focus: Orfeu Negro

Length of time: 1h:15m

FIRST PART

Before the lesson:

Orfeu Negro (1959), directed by Marcel Camus, is a classic Portuguese-language film based on the Greek myth of Orpheus. Since this film is an adaptation of a myth, it is important that students have an understanding of the myth prior to watching the film, as well as a good understanding of the new vocabulary related to the myth. Ask students to research online about the original myth of Orpheus. Students should bring to class a summary of the myth along with his or her impression of the story.

Activity #1 – Reflecting on the myth
Have a class discussion about the myth of Orpheus. Let the students tell the story and compare the various versions (e.g., what the story is about, the characters involved, the sequence of events, possible interpretations, the differences among various versions and their effects on the story, and so on). As the discussion goes on, write down the new vocabulary or phrases that students have encountered on the board. Make sure they understand their meaning (e.g., ask them to explain the meaning, give an example, and so forth – give them time and let them come up with the responses). The list of new words on the board will help them to focus on important vocabulary, as they see the visual image of the word (e.g., spelling). Do the transition by telling the students, for instance, that now that they know the story, we will think about ways that we could represent this story in a different genre. One way is through the storyboard.

**Activity #2 – Understanding storyboard**

**Step 1**

Ask students if they know what a storyboard is (storyboard, as defined, is a visual representation of the director’s intentions and concepts). Show students an example of a storyboard (suggestion: *Dia dos Pais*. Cliente: Bourbon Shopping. Arte: Fernando Merlo, which is available on his website at http://fernandomerlo.deviantart.com/art/Dia-dos-Pais-Bourbon-Shopping-63597981). Ask the students why they think filmmakers would need storyboards (it helps in the organization of the scenes, to figure out what resources the director will need, and maintains continuity - how scenes and shots can be related to each other- among other things).

**Step 2**

Show students the video or clip that the storyboard created. The commercial for *Dias dos Pais* is available online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rcy6S57cuY. Open a discussion
about the relationship between the storyboard and the video (e.g., *Are they similar? Was the video what you expected?*).

**Step 3**

Storyboard could be defined as “a shot-by-shot (sometimes a scene-by-scene) breakdown that combines sketches or photographs of how each shot is to look” (Barsam and Monahan, 2010, p. 116). A shot (*plano*) is “one uninterrupted run of the camera” (p. 557), whereas a scene (*cena*) is the entire sequence without ellipses within the same space and time (a scene can contain one or many shots). In the storyboard for Orpheus, students will be working with *cena* and *plano*. Therefore, it is important to expose them to these concepts. Since these concepts can be confusing, a way to help them differentiate these concepts is the following: After giving a general explanation of what *plano* and *cena* are (or without saying anything at all – don’t worry, they will figure it out!), show students the Bourbon Shopping commercial again, and, ask them to clap every time there is a new *plano*. Let them figure out by themselves where each *plano* begins. Obviously, the entire commercial is only one scene. You might have to show the video a couple of times. Ask them how many shots and how many scenes there are and if they can define a shot and a scene in their own words. The use of kinesthesis helps students to perceive the difference in a faster and more memorable way. Now, it is time to go back to the myth once more. Remember to do an appropriate transition (e.g., *Now, let’s go back to the myth once more.*).

**SECOND PART**

**Activity #3 – Making their own storyboard**

**Step 1**
Lead the students to reflect on the myth of Orpheus by asking them: *If they had to make a film about Orpheus, for which scene would choose to write a storyboard?* Invite students to write a storyboard for a specific scene for this hypothetical film. Have students work in pairs; each pair chooses a different scene, in such a way that the class covers the whole story of Orpheus. In order to do the storyboard, students have to think about the details of their scene. For instance, how many shots are necessary, what would fit in the framing, and so forth. It is also important to think about sounds: Would this scene have dialogue? Would it have sound effects?

Going back to the new vocabulary you have on the board: Ask students to add the new vocabulary when they are writing the storyboard. You might also want to establish other ‘rules’ with them (e.g., linking this activity to a grammatical content explored previously in the class). For instance, they should use at least two connectives; they should write the sentences in the past tense; they should add one sentence in the subjunctive form; use only complex sentences; and so on. Walk around in the class and give students assistance as necessary.

Give students a handout with the storyboard template (Appendix). The students should give a title to the scene. Emphasize that the goal is not artistic accomplishment; rather, this is an opportunity to experiment with storyboards and show what they have learned about the myth of Orpheus in a creative way. Let students work on their own; allow them to use their imagination. Let them surprise us!

**Step 5**

When the students finish their storyboard, each pair presents their creation in chronological sequence. They read and explain each shot to the class (if the classroom has an all-inclusive camera, such as an Elmo Projector, this will be a good time to use it). The teacher can instruct the students to present the storyboard in detail, describing it shot by shot, including
possible sounds, music, or dialogue, as well as the character’s feelings, and so on. Other students can ask questions or make comments at the end of each presentation. The presenters can also explain their decision (e.g., why they chose certain colors; why they added or omitted certain details, and so on).

**Step 6**

Now it is time to go beyond their work and establish connections with possible ways we could understand this myth in the modern world, more specifically in Brazilian culture. You could either let them come up with ideas, or you could guide them. For instance, *Which instruments (and why) do you think would represent Brazilian culture, in the same way that we link liras to classical Greece? Which type of Brazilian music/what band/singer would fascinate you, as people were charmed by Orpheus’ music? Why? Although Orpheus was a mortal, his father was the God of the sun. Could you cite any religious expressions in Brazil in which deities were also represented forces in nature?* (Since these connections are done in an exploratory way, it is not necessary, at this point, to go deep into the responses. The idea is only to help the students be open to make such connections.)

**Activity #4 – e-book**

Their storyboards are put together in an e-book. Ask for volunteers to make the front cover, back cover and index. This should be entirely the students’ work, as this is a way to give students complete ownership. There is a variety of software they can use. I recommend *Calameo*, which works with both PC and Mac, and is free. For an example of my students’ e-book, click on the following link (public access): [http://en.calameo.com/read/0022295404e76f8f9ed85](http://en.calameo.com/read/0022295404e76f8f9ed85).

**Activity #5 - Assessment:**
As a form of evaluation, students can write in Portuguese about their experiences with the storyboard. Did you enjoy doing the storyboard? Why? What did you learn by doing the storyboard? What was the most difficult/the most fun part of the activity? What would you do differently next time? Do you think this activity helped you to feel more confident using Portuguese? Why? This evaluation helps students become aware of their learning process and develops critical thinking about their own learning. It can also provide the teacher with useful information about the students’ perception of the activity.

The type of assessment suggested here is the self-assessment, which is considered an alternative in assessment (Brown and Hudson, 1998) and has a number of advantages. For instance, it involves the students in the assessment process, it promotes autonomy, and it increases motivation (p. 666).

**Suggestion for extension:**

The teacher could ask students to write a monologue for one of the characters. The teacher could, instead, ask students to write a story retelling the events from the point of view of one character.

**Students’ evaluation of the Storyboard activity**

Since the students’ feedback is essential for teachers to know if their expectations match the students’ expectations, students were asked to respond to a survey in which they had to give their personal opinions about the pre-activity on storyboard. The online survey was anonymous and students were asked to answer the questions in English. 17 students (out of 25) answered the survey. Below, I present and discuss some extracts from the students’ responses to the pre-activity on storyboard presented in this article. I also show how some of the students’ commentaries can contribute to improving the activity.
“I enjoyed it. It was helpful and fun.”
“Great way to compare the real myth and the movie.”
“Yes. It was nice to create a story, I enjoyed it because we got to bond.”
“It was very difficult, but a fun activity.”
“It was fun, it gave us the chance to write out our version of the story and see how others see the same scene of me [sic].”

Some of the students’ commentaries pointed out the difficulty they had regarding the artistic part of the pre-activity. For instance, a student stated that it was “Fun but I am not artistic.” Another student wrote that “We should have elaborated more on the scene at hand.” Although they were told not to worry about the drawing itself, it is obvious that this point should receive greater emphasis. In addition, as a way to implement this activity, students should be explicitly told that they will present their work to the class and that, if they all agree, an e-book could be made. The teacher could bring crayons and colorful markers, and make them available to students, so they could elaborate on the drawings as they wish.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration that student linguistic and cultural knowledge affects how they react to films (Barsam and Monahan, 2010), relevant and well-planned pre-activities for films are important in a PFL class. The pre-activity on storyboard can help students feel motivated and have a better understanding of the film. It also gives them an opportunity to create and use imagination in a meaningful context through the use of the target language and relevant vocabulary. Most importantly, through the target language Portuguese, students (and teacher) exchange ideas and construct meaning cooperatively in a dialogical way, “bonding everybody together,” as one of my students put it.
References


Storyboard: Orfeu

Imagine que o mito de Orfeu vai ser adaptado para um filme. Escolha uma cena que você e seu colega acham interessante. Discuta com seu colega os detalhes da cena (e.g., objetos, paisagem, personagens, posição da câmara, enquadramento, etc.). Agora, vocês vão fazer o *storyboard* desta cena em até quatro planos. QUE LEGAL!!

Cena: ____________________________  Artistas: ____________________________

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*Esta cena tem música ou algum tipo de som/barulho (efeitos especiais)? Quais?*

*Por quê?*

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