

ARTICLE



Learning a foreign language and locality through an animated documentary film

Solvita Burr, University of Latvia Latvian Language Institute; University of Washington Department of Scandinavian Studies

Abstract

*This paper describes one 4-week long online language learning module which utilizes the animated documentary film *My Favorite War* (Burkovska-Jakobsen, 2020) and analyzes four students' final essays.*

The learning module was created considering ethnographic views of cultural inferences (Spradley, 2016), the framework of social space (Lefebvre, 1991), multimodal theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), and the model of learning activities, or knowledge processes (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). It was developed for a Latvian language course at the University of Washington (Seattle, USA) in 2021. Its goals are to help students learn more about the target language and locals' place-based experiences, and to promote students' semiotic consciousness while developing their multiliteracies. However, the assignment's assessment criteria related to the interaction of semiotic resources and of linguistic and non-linguistic information were not shared in order to find out if students would include these issues in their essays.

Analysis of students' essays show that after the learning module, students were able to comprehend (a) some individual compositional elements from the film; (b) symbolic and functional meanings of differently marked spaces; and (c) the main character's feelings in various social spaces, internal conflicts, relationship models, and thoughts about family, work, war, historical truth, and independence. The described learning model can inspire educators worldwide to develop similar teaching practices for other less commonly taught languages.

Keywords: *Less Commonly Taught Language, Soviet Latvia, Locals' Spatial Experiences, Multiliteracies*

Language(s) Learned in This Study: *Latvian*

APA Citation: Burr, S. (2023). Learning a foreign language and locality through an animated documentary film. *Language Learning & Technology*, 27(2), 199–225. <https://hdl.handle.net/10125/73509>

Introduction

Students who choose to study a less commonly taught language (hereinafter *LCTL*) may not know much about the target language, its users, and the environment in which it is spoken before starting the course (with the exception of heritage speakers, though even they may have somewhat outdated views depending on how long ago their families left their home countries). There are various ways to introduce students to these local contexts, including storytelling by the educator, readings of news or literature, and presentation of audiovisual material most often specially prepared for such courses or borrowed from the tourism field. However, students can also be introduced to foreign countries, cultures, and people through locals' stories and their experiences depicted in documentaries. In this way, students become a kind of ethnographer, learning from locals various individual, social, and cultural meanings expressed through language, symbols, traditions, habits, and places.

In language pedagogy, focus traditionally has been paid to disciplinary knowledge and skills while working with a film. TV series (including sitcoms) and short video recordings are more often discussed in terms of the need for authentic language input, the development of listening skills, vocabulary acquisition, and students' engagement in the classroom (e.g., Abrams, 2014; Bahrani & Tam, 2012; Doring, 2002; Rodgers,

2013; Weyers, 1999). Films usually combine various semiotic resources and meaning-making forms, or modes, and these modes are “simultaneously social, cultural, historical and with this also particular to social actors as they have acquired them in and through their experiences” (Norris, 2020, p. 17). In this vein, the content, form, and expression of such multimodal film should be introduced with respect to norms and practices of locals in the space in which the target language is spoken. Thus, language learning through an animated documentary is not just about learning a language; at least two additional pedagogical benefits of such extension are worth mentioning. First, a documentary, which depicts speakers of different languages and their relationships in various social spaces, allows students not only to learn the target language at the discourse level, but also to visualize the social spaces associated with the target language and to form awareness of processes related to language and of people’s experiences there (e.g., Kaiser, 2011; Soong, 2012). Second, if cartoons, as Clark (2000) holds, make learning an enjoyable and, importantly, memorable experience, then an animated documentary is a great way to present serious and complex information to students in a more understandable way.

This article focuses on the inclusion of the animated documentary film *My Favorite War* (Burkovska-Jakobsen, 2020) in the second-year language course of Latvian at the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington, USA. The film is a personal story about one girl’s observations, thoughts, and professional growth in Soviet Latvia. The film combines various modes, ideological and cultural perspectives, and local voices through audio, video, ideological symbols, linguistic landscape signs from Latvian cities and schools, family photo albums, paintings, and imaginary animation.

The article has two interrelated aims:

1. To describe theoretical notions and the methodological approach used to create an online language learning module with the film so that students could learn both the main characters’ experiences in Latvia and explore the techniques and resources of representing these experiences in the film.
2. To analyze student essays (originally written in Latvian, translated by the author) to gauge learners’ understanding of the motivation, functionality, and effectiveness of using diverse semiotic resources (e.g., verbal language, gestures, images, colors, and sounds) to represent locals’ experiences in the film.

Thus, the article offers an example of teaching one LCTL in the context of semiotic resources depicted in the animated documentary film. The described learning model, with emphasis on multimodal information analysis for in-depth cognition of both the target language and localities (people, places, and cultural practices), can inspire educators worldwide to develop similar teaching practices for other languages.

The article consists of eight parts and has three appendices. The introduction is followed by basic information about the Latvian language and its teaching abroad. The third part describes the methodological steps used in this research project. The fourth part combines the theoretical notions of the ethnographic approach proposed by Spradley (2016) with Lefebvre’s (1991) conception of social spaces and presents a methodological model of the pedagogy of multiliteracies. These theoretical and methodological frameworks were used in the development of the learning module. The next part is on the film, describing its selection criteria and the relevance of the content and features to the learning objectives. The sixth part presents the learning module, utilizing the film as the main learning input. Next, the seventh part describes the results of students’ final work, examining individual fragments of their essays. The discussion and conclusion section closes the article.

To provide some practical tools for readers, [Appendix A](#) summarizes the main social spaces featured in the film, their features, and typical participants and activities there. [Appendix B](#) describes learning activities, additional texts, and student achievement data from the learning module; it also includes methodological comments on the learning process. Finally, [Appendix C](#) contains the students’ essays in full length (originally written in Latvian, translated by the author).

The Context: The Latvian Language Abroad

Latvia is one of the Baltic States; it has a population of 1.9 million. The Latvian language is the only official language in Latvia, and it is the mother tongue of about 1.3 million people.

The Latvian language is an LCTL. It is taught at 24 universities abroad, mainly in European countries (The Latvian Language Agency, 2021). The University of Washington (UW) is the only university in America where Latvian language and culture courses are offered; this has been true since the end of 20th century.

The Latvian language course (hereinafter *the language course*) is offered at both three and five credits (respectively, three or five fifty-minute classes per week) for first-year to third-year Latvian language students. On average, three to ten students enroll in the language course each year. Mainly students who are interested in the Baltic Sea region, Baltic languages, LCTLs, or who are heritage speakers of Latvian choose the language course. In the 2020/2021 academic year, three first-year students and four second-year students studied Latvian in the five-credit language courses. There were no third-year students during this academic year. One first-year student out of these seven students was a heritage speaker.

Methodology

Transition from in-person classes to online classes in the 2019/2020 academic year at UW was one of the main reasons for the development of a new language learning module. Students needed to be offered interactive content, which they could learn in both synchronous and asynchronous classes or partly independently. As the main intention was to focus on multimodal learning input and locals' experiences in Latvia to develop students' semiotic consciousness, cultural awareness, and multiliteracies, the inclusion of a documentary in the course seemed to be a meaningful and potentially interesting learning practice for students.

In the spring quarter of the 2020/2021 academic year (March 29–June 4), three learning modules were planned for the second-year course: (a) a module on communication tools, information technologies, and people's communication habits in Latvia and the world in the past and today; (b) a module with a documentary about people's actions, behaviors, and emotions influenced by the ruling ideology; and (c) a module with a short film made independently by students on a freely chosen socially significant topic.

The learning module with a documentary was first aimed only as a language teaching path and a set of learning materials for the small group of students in the second-year language course, and not as a research source. However, this kind of research offers rich, ecologically valid data for better understanding language learning in genuine pedagogical contexts (van Lier, 2004, 2010), and the description of the learning module is of practical importance. The following paragraphs summarize the steps taken to develop the learning module.

The first step in early 2021 was to study the theoretical literature on the inclusion of film in the language learning process to better understand the conceptual role of learning modules in teaching. Emphasis was placed on ethnographic and social semiotics approaches so that students could expound on exploring the experiences of locals in the time and in the social spaces depicted in a film (e.g., Abrams, 2014; Kaiser, 2011). The second step was to explore pedagogical approaches to literacy to make sure that the learning module focused on the development of multiliteracies (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2015; Kern, 2000)

The next successive steps were (a) to choose, watch, and analyze a film based on the selected theoretical principles (see [Appendix A](#)) and (b) to develop a learning module with clear time schedule, objectives, additional topic-supportive texts, diverse assignments (class / home; individual / collective; language-focused / multimodality-oriented), and assessment plan (see [Appendix B](#)).

The learning module was implemented in the Department of Scandinavian Studies at UW in the spring semester of the 2020/2021 academic year with four second-year students. The level of students' knowledge and skills of Latvian varied between B1- and B1+, and all classes were conducted in the target language,

also explaining grammar or the meaning of individual words.

Although the collection of learning activities and assignments was extensive, combining linguistic and multimodal film analysis (see [Appendix B](#)), only the results of the final assignment—an essay—have been used for the research (four in total). The final essay had to be about 600 words long in Latvian. The essay assessment criteria included traditional parameters such as text structure (organization, coherence); clarity; support and development of ideas (e.g., formulation of the film’s ideas and main problems, description of the main characters); language (spelling, vocabulary, syntax); and the expression of learners’ own views, attitudes, and arguments with reference to the film. Although extensive attention was paid to multimodality during the learning module, assessment criteria related to the interaction of semiotic resources and of linguistic and non-linguistic information were not included. This was done to find out if students would include these issues in their essays and if so, what the students would pay attention to.

The analysis of student essays was based on three interrelated criteria:

1. Description of the film’s structure and main compositional elements: ring-shaped composition; intertexts; depiction of present and past events; change of narrators and points of view.
2. Functional, symbolic, and psycho-emotional description of the lived spaces depicted in the film: visual arrangement of the spaces; use of the spaces; characters’ actions, feelings, and dialogues in the spaces.
3. Combining linguistic and non-linguistic elements—character dialogues, posters, signs, symbols, visual metaphors—in discussing the ideas, themes, and problems of the film.

The next three sections expand on the above-mentioned steps regarding the theoretical and methodological frameworks that guided the development of the learning module.

Theoretical and Methodological Background of One Teaching Path

University Students as Ethnographers

If we interpret watching and interacting with documentary film as trying to understand another way of life from another (local) point of view—feelings, knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and different attitudes—then all viewers are ethnographers to some extent, especially university-aged and adult students. Ethnography, as Spradley (2016) puts it, is “rather than *studying people... learning from people... discovering the insider’s view*” (pp. 3–4). In this sense, students (as ethnographers) treat a chosen film as a data set of individuals’ stories, using them to find patterns of people’s everyday life and special occasions in various places (see also Abrams, 2014).

In ethnography, as in semiotics, cognitive linguistics, and semantics, *meaning* is a core concept. Some of these meanings are directly expressed in language, images, and actions, but people in every society constantly use various and complex meaning systems to organize their behavior, to understand themselves and others, and to make sense of the world in which they live. These systems of meaning constitute a unique culture, “the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior” (Spradley, 2016, p. 6). In this vein, a documentary film is one tool for foreign students to learn and understand several aspects of the culture of the target language speakers and engage in an intercultural act, combining different perspectives, without being physically present in that country and culture. Moreover, making inferences involves reasoning from evidence (what we perceive) or from presumptions (what we assume). According to Spradley (2016), people generally use three types of information to make cultural inferences: (a) what people do (*cultural behavior*); (b) what things people make and use (*cultural artifacts*); and (c) what people say (*speech messages*) (p. 10). People create, use, and share these types of information with others through various communication channels and semiotic resources (e.g., language, gestures, symbols, sounds, things).

The fourth essential type of information not mentioned in Spradley’s theory is *space*, a category in which all of the above becomes possible. Different social and cultural practices occur in various places; these

practices are influenced by conventions (e.g., linguistic, gestural, spatial), participant relationships, and contexts, and are perceived, described, and managed differently. Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualization of space includes three kinds of spaces or spatial knowledge: physical, mental, and social space. The lattermost is seen as physical space with human (inter)actions: habits of space-filling, functional use, and social relationships (including domination, control, and power). Lefebvre (1991) defines it as the content, or the social (spatial) practices, inherent to the forms under consideration (pp. 26–27). Based on this triad, the ideas of (a) representation of space, or *conceived space*, conceptualized by technocrats, planners, politicians, and other policymakers; (b) *perceived space*, seen, heard, observed, and felt by visitors and learners, and (c) *lived space*, experienced and known by locals, have been further developed and discussed in many public-space-related research (e.g., Malinowski, 2019, pp. 65–66; Trumper-Hecht, 2010, p. 237).

The framework of social spaces can be applied to language learning: the target-language country/-ies is a conceived space that students can find on maps from various periods of time: the geographical, cultural, historical, and social markers of which they might explore. This concrete environment becomes a perceived space for students during place- and culture-based courses, in which they obtain a certain amount of information on which to base their ideas about it and its inhabitants, depending on the educator's course plan, learning materials, and student initiative. Finally, students can learn of locals' lived spaces through texts included in the learning process: interviews, biographical stories, diaries, and other documentary materials that contain individual and collective narratives. The target language functions both as a goal and as one of the semiotic tools to explore the target-language-speakers' knowledge, experiences, and beliefs in their spatial systems.

The next subsection looks at the pedagogy of multiliteracies to improve students' multiliteracies and multimodal competence while exploring locals' experiences in various social spaces depicted in a documentary.

Guided Learning Processes to Improve Students' Multiliteracies

As many researchers in linguistics, language pedagogy, and semiotics acknowledge, “reading” in its broader sense is a complex multilevel process which, alongside the decoding, discussions, and comprehension of both linguistic and non-linguistic information (such as images, colors, and sounds), allows one to develop cognitive and intellectual skills and multiliteracies (e.g., Clark & Paivio, 1991; Gannon-Cook & Ley, 2020; He, 2021; He & van Leeuwen, 2020; Hobbs, 1998; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Multimodal theory (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Norris, 2020), social semiotics (e.g., Metz, 1974; van Leeuwen, 2004), and systemic functional linguistics (e.g., Bartlett & O'Grady, 2017; Halliday, 1978) provide useful conceptual guidelines for “reading” multimodal texts (including film) and are often utilized in cinema studies. The theories all address such topics as shared notions of the social dimension of communication, the grammatical (or structural, compositional) relations of semiotic elements (linguistic and visual grammar) in a text, the metafunctions of linguistic and non-linguistic texts (i.e., ideational, interpersonal, and textual), and contextually specific narratives, ideas, and meanings expressed in the interplay of different modes. These features and principles of “reading” multimodal texts are in line with the ideas of, first, edusemiotics (e.g., Deely & Semetsky, 2017; Semetsky, 2017), which interprets learning with signs and sign-based phenomena (including body language, actions, behaviors, and knowledge) as natural and meaningful learning experiences; and second, of place-based education in which environment, learning from local communities, and real-world experiences are valuable and useful learning resources, contexts, and even goals (e.g., Penetito, 2009; Smith, 2016; Sobel, 2004).

The pedagogy of multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2015; New London Group, 1996; Kern, 2000; Street, 1995) proposes a framework which allows for critical consideration of the multimodal and social-communicative nature of texts, the variability of meaning-making in different cultural, social, or domain-specific contexts, and the development of students' multiliteracies through four essential epistemic actions, or knowledge processes:

- *experiencing* (the known and the new)
- *conceptualizing* (by naming and with theory)
- *analyzing* (functionally and critically)
- *applying* (appropriately and creatively).

In other words, in the learning process, students go through a cycle of learning activities in which they share associations, previous knowledge, and experiences; empirically explore new information; define, explain, and structure concepts and principles; analyze the form, meaning, and functions of text elements and their impact on recipients; modify others' texts; and create new texts, knowledge, and meanings.

The theory defines *multiliteracies* as one's ability to meaningfully operate with numerous modes, semiotic systems, texts, communication patterns, discourses, and cultures in-person and online. As different combinations of components of meaning expression are possible even for one communicative act, scholars prefer the term *designs* (e.g., linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and audio design). For instance, according to Kern (2000), available linguistic designs include the linguistic systems of orthography, vocabulary, syntax, and cohesion and coherence, as well as the schematic systems of rhetorical patterns, genre, style, and cultural models. In turn, meaning-making and the interpretation of meaning involve access to, choosing from, and interacting with designs in a sociocultural context.

In a nutshell, interdisciplinary theories support comprehensive film exploration with students when all the semiotic resources that convey information, create meaning(s), and allow for a deeper understanding of the learning topics and topics-related social contexts are discussed in the learning process. Exploring a documentary together and completing assignments on typical features of a film (e.g., language, colors, sounds, and intertexts) and content (e.g., plot, facts, and characters' different views of the same people, events, or places and their experiences) in the language course is one of the approaches to help students not only learn more about the target language and time- and place- based locals' experiences, but also to promote students' semiotic consciousness and develop their multiliteracies.

Thus, this article attempts to answer the following question:

What do students include in their essays after the detailed multimodal analysis of film, which follows Spradley's (2016) ideas of ethnography and Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualization of space, as well as the principles of the pedagogy of multiliteracies, if the essay assessment criteria do not require an explicit discussion of multimodality in a film?

Characteristics of the Film

Criteria for Selection of a Film

During the 1970s and 80s, Soviet Latvia was characterized by a strong communist ideology in all spheres of social life and tightly regulated cultural and social practices. On the other hand, these decades marked the beginning among the public of a more vocal dissatisfaction with the prevailing political and economic system and individual oppression, as well as of slow, non-violent efforts to regain Latvia's independence and democracy. This time in the cultural history of Latvia was an important crossroads between extant Soviet culture, renewed Latvian culture, and coveted Western culture; various perspectives and practices were re-evaluated and (re-)defined. Therefore, these decades are always included in the culture-based language course at UW.

Bearing this teaching tradition in mind, topics related to locals' feelings and social and cultural practices during the Soviet era were one of the main criteria in selecting a film. Criteria such as the complexity of language spoken in the film and the language's clarity, intelligibility, speed, and linguistic content (vocabulary, grammatical forms, and syntactic constructions) were considered for the needs of the second-year language course in question as well. Other criteria included:

- different narrators, for comparing various views and perspectives (e.g., social groups, linguistic communities, and people with opposing political beliefs)
- modern cinematic qualities (including the richness of semiotic resources)
- the availability of related other texts (written texts, images, video).

Description of the Chosen Film

My Favorite War is an animated documentary (hereinafter *the film*) written and directed by Ilze Burkovska-Jakobsen (2020). The film portrays the director's memories of her observations, thoughts, and growth in Soviet Latvia and in the newly restored, independent Latvia, plus a few stories from the interwar period and the Second World War. According to the film director, critics, and viewers, Ilze's story resonates with the collective Latvian experiences during this period (Birkmane, 2020; *My Favorite War*, 2019; Šlāpins, 2020).

The film captures and cinematically illustrates individual places and events, objects, people, and emotions related to these places, thus marking them as lived spaces (according to Lefebvre, 1991) from Ilze's point of view (see [Appendix A](#)). It affords viewers a gaze into several local stories (especially one girl's experiences) in Soviet and nowadays Latvia. The film can be seen as a multi-layered text combining various modes, ideological and cultural perspectives, and local voices: audio texts (e.g., USSR anthem and Latvian pop culture songs), video texts (e.g., fragments of the Soviet film *Four Tankers and a Dog*, 1966; clips showing the hand-in-hand chain of approximately two million people which stretched across the three Baltic states to demonstrate Balts' desire for independence, 1989; contemporary interviews with the main character's best friend), Soviet and independent Latvian symbols and images (e.g., flags, postcards, photos, and certificates), linguistic landscape signs from Latvian cities and schools, family photo albums, paintings, and imaginary images (e.g., monsters in the main character's nightmares). The diversity of semiotic resources functions both as an illustrative background to the characters' monologues/dialogues and as an important provider of additional information. Moreover, the film changes narrators, with different linguistic styles also marking each new point of view.

In sum, the film is a semiotically rich learning material and a meaningful source of guided learning tasks and discussions of varying scope and complexity.

[Appendix A](#) summarizes essential lived spaces, their typical features and perceptions from Ilze's point of view, as well as social practices—linguistic and non-linguistic actions—taking place in these spaces and the participants involved. These spaces are characterized as private, semi-public, or public spaces. The objects in these spaces (“decorations,” or cultural artifacts according to Spradley, 2016), the activities that take place, the general atmosphere, and the interactions allow these spaces to be described as (a) psychologically and socially comfortable and safe or, on the contrary, uncomfortable and strange, (b) inclusive, exclusive, or even discriminatory spaces; (c) sample spaces of Soviet ideology or ideologically alternative spaces.

The next subsection describes the created learning module, a detailed description of which is included in [Appendix B](#).

Pedagogical Design of the Learning Module

The film was included in a four-week online module in Latvian. The study process was led via the online course management system *Canvas*, and online classes took place via the platform *Zoom*. The online learning module was prepared before the course and slightly clarified and developed during the study process. Multimodal analysis and interpretation of the film was gradually promoted through stimulating questions, prompts, and tasks. The developed learning module with the description of texts, learning activities, expected results, and methodological path in the learning process in chronological order is provided in [Appendix B](#).

The film was a starting point—the main text or central linguistic input—for teaching B1-level Latvian to four second-year students. The work with the film for the purposes of this study lasted four weeks; it

consisted of 12 online classes (12 x 50 min), students' independent work, a final essay, and an evaluation of the students' own and collaborative work.

The learning module had four general pedagogical objectives:

1. To acquaint students with the experiences of the Latvian population during the Soviet era and with modern reflections on this period.
2. To learn how to uncover, negotiate, and comprehend the ideas and meanings expressed by diverse semiotic resources, media, and communication techniques.
3. To learn how to describe the use of Latvian in communication situations with different participants, purposes, and influencing factors (e.g., speaker's/listener's emotional condition, relationships, place, time, political ideology, and social conventions).
4. To learn linguistic strategies and means to adapt the language depending on the situation in a particular context (e.g., by talking to a child, recounting past events, and comparing different points of view).

Specific discipline-based objectives included:

- To improve listening skills through authentic audiovisual text.
- To expand the vocabulary within topics such as home, education, work, power relations, individual and collective experiences, and Soviet Latvia.
- To strengthen knowledge about compound sentences, tenses (especially past-tense forms of verbs), and narration, as well as to form a habit of using this knowledge in creating one's own texts.
- To improve the ability to use different linguistic means in expressing opinions and forming arguments.

All learning activities that were used to help achieve these goals are described in [Appendix B](#).

Students watched the film in four fragments (each fragment lasted about 25 minutes) for homework, and individual scenes were viewed several times during online classes. The learning activities were created and arranged following the model of knowledge processes (experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing, and applying) proposed by the pedagogy of multiliteracies. They refer to pre-film-viewing activities, activities while watching the film, and post-film-viewing activities. The learning process included both linguistic and semiotic (i.e., multimodal) analysis of the film. Before, during, and after the film, students worked with other film-related texts (e.g., a video interview with the film's director and three reviews of the film) and completed classwork and homework of varying complexity, both independently and in groups (see [Appendix B](#)).

The final assignment was a 600-word essay on the film in Latvian. Students could use their notes and study materials discussed in the learning module when writing their essay. Students had six days after the last online class in this module to submit an essay in *Canvas*.

Results: Students' Essays

The essay writing guidelines and assessment criteria did not ask students to analyze non-linguistic information and semiotic resources or to describe the filmmaking techniques in their final work. However, the aim of the paper is to look at the inclusion of comments on multimodality in the essays and analyze students' understanding of the motivation, functionality, and effectiveness of diverse semiotic resources to represent locals' experiences in various social spaces depicted in the film.

The path to summarizing thoughts on the film was relatively long and full of various learning activities that supported the preparation of independent essay writing and potential inclusion of comments on multimodality (see [Appendix B](#)). Highlighted below are three of the activities that could have had some impact on essay creation with the inclusion of opinion on both linguistic and non-linguistic resources, their features, and meanings.

First, during the online synchronous language classes, students orally described places depicted in each fragment, telling what are included in these places, what people do in these places, and how Ilze, the main character, and other characters feel there. In other words, the students' attention was focused on identifying and characterizing social spaces from the aspects of material culture (everyday things at home, urban objects), social, cultural, and linguistic practices, and characters' psycho-emotional states.

Second, language use in different communication situations, intertexts (e.g., TV movies, banned radio broadcasts, and posters at school), ideological symbols (e.g., flags, anthems, and the red scarf), visual metaphors (e.g., transporting packages of butter to Moscow and Ilze's sailing with red sails on the river), and various medias and modes (e.g., real life interviews, animation, past narratives, sounds, and colors) were discussed together. Thus, students were encouraged to pay attention to the techniques and tools of film creation to learn their meaning and to interpret them.

Third, after watching the entire film, the students read and linguistically analyzed three reviews (by 6th graders, a high school student, and a professional), which gave them three different perspectives on how to look at the film and how to discuss it in written form. In short, the review written jointly by 6th grade students from the Saldus region focuses on the film as a historical source about Soviet times and war, which some students liked, but others found scary. The students indicated that it was interesting to learn more about the places in their surroundings and about the experiences of Ilze, their peer, at school. In the high school student's essay, the focus is on the moral growth of Ilze and the role of her best friend and grandfather in this process. The author highlights the ideological symbols that remind us of Latvian collective trauma, and the color changes in several film fragments to show the differences in atmosphere of the film and the experiences of the characters. Last, the professional critic discusses the challenges of portraying objective reality and subjectivity in a documentary and the animation as one of the techniques to combine historical facts, individual and collective stories, emotions, and attitudes. This review is complex as it contains theoretical references and terms, comparisons with other Latvian and international documentaries, and an in-depth analysis of the film.

The four submitted essays (see [Appendix C](#)) share some similar features. First, the essays briefly summarize the plot line of the film, highlighting the growth of Ilze as one of the main themes. Second, students unpack the experiences of Ilze in the context of the experiences of Soviet people, linking individual feelings, opinions, and activities with the emotional atmosphere, views, and practices of Latvian society at that time. Third, the spatial opposition—the grandparents' farmhouse and Saldus—is described from the socioemotional point of view of Ilze, and her first school in Saldus is included and described as an ideologically marked and important social space for the growth of Ilze in all essays. Lastly, all students reflected on the benefits of exploring the film, and on what they have noticed and learned from viewing the film.

The following subsections present an analysis of the four students' essays, written in their target language, based on three interrelated criteria introduced above: (a) description of the film's structure, (b) description of the lived spaces depicted in the film, and (c) inclusion of linguistic and non-linguistic information in the discussion of the idea, themes, and problems of the film. Full essays are provided in [Appendix C](#).

Description of the Film's Structure

All students highlight a child's perspective on things, processes, and relationships in Soviet Latvia in their essays. Although the student who wrote Essay 2 states that "*The film used both sceneries and characters to tell a story,*" two other students directly focused on film composition and general filmmaking techniques in their final works. Essay 4 (see [Appendix C](#)) shows one student's interest in the structure and compositional elements of the film more broadly.

Excerpt 1

The film uses both animation and historical video, as well as interviews with Ilze and her female friends and family today to help viewers understand what Ilze's experience was and how she felt at the time.

Excerpt 2

I really liked that the end of the film linked to the beginning. Both at the beginning and at the end, Ilze was at sea with her family, but the contexts of the scenes were very different. At the beginning of the film, the army had closed the beach, and her parents had to leave the car in the woods and walk through the trees to stand on the beach and see the sea. In the end, she could take a bus to the sea and didn't hide when her children ran and danced.

Excerpt 3

Many things helped explain the emotions in the scene. One was the color palette. Dark colors were used to reflect both history and memories. For example, the film was dark and brown when a young Ilze listened to a talk between her grandfather and her friend about a friend's memories after the end of World War II.

Excerpt 1 contains the media elements included in the film and explains their usefulness from a viewer's perspective. **Excerpt 2** shows the writer's affinity for the film composition and compares the opening scene and the ending scene, which share a common feature—the seaside as an experienced space—and its use, perception, and symbolic meaning in different times. The excerpt shows the student's ability to describe the openness of one space to society, indirectly revealing its symbolic meaning in the times depicted in the film: captivity during the Soviet era and freedom in independent Latvia. The student had noticed that in one case, Ilze's family are passive observers of the sea, then in another case, the family actively uses the space (i.e., running and dancing). It is one social space, but the use and locals' feelings are different in Soviet and independent Latvia. **Excerpt 3** highlights colors as a tool to distinguish characters' narratives in the past and nowadays. The choice of dark colors reflects hard and painful memories. Thus, the clear change of media, text genres, contexts, and modes in the film may have helped the student to follow the content of the film and understand Ilze's experiences more deeply.

In Essay 3 (see [Appendix C](#)), the student highlights the color change as the most important storytelling technique in the film to distinguish between different spaces, the experiences of the film's characters in these spaces, and Ilze's feelings in them. **Excerpt 4** shows the student's reflections on, first, the ambivalent countryside home due to its relative isolation and tight inclusion in the Soviet Union at the same time and, second, Ilze's forced stay in Saldus where she does not feel psychologically comfortable.

Excerpt 4

First of all, it is important to tell how director Ilze Burkovska-Jakobsen chooses to tell her story to all people. It is easy for us to understand in which year the film takes place, and also how Ilze feels in the film, because the colors change. In Ilze's grandparents' home, the film has a lot of colors, and everyone looks happy, although all the people are unhappy. So, we see how everything in Saldus is three or four colors, because maybe Ilze doesn't want to be and live there. When the director talks about war, everything is brown and white, and we can understand the year in an instant. There are also few buildings, trees, or other objects in Saldus, and it feels like Ilze doesn't feel that there is much for her in Saldus.

Additionally, some intertexts have attracted students' attention. For instance, the Polish film *Four Tankers and a Dog* is referenced in two essays (Essay 1 and Essay 2) discussing the theme of war. The video depicting a chain of people, the Baltic Way, is explained as an essential symbol of independence in the Baltic states in Essay 1, and Essay 3 recounts the tragic story of an old woman's experience with strawberry soap.

Although students were not encouraged to address the structure of the film, each essay displays at least some attention to individual compositional elements. This shows that the students see the film not only as a story in the target language, but also as a multimedia, multimodal, and multilayered text, and that the elements of text creation play an essential role in the discussion of the film.

Description of the Lived Spaces

Table 1 summarizes students' descriptions of the lived spaces, social practices, and main characters associated with these spaces in their essays.

Table 1

Lived Spaces and Their Descriptions in Students' Essays

| Space | Essay | Description | Social practices | Participants |
|-----------------------------|-------|--|--|---|
| Farmhouse | 1 | Place of Ilze's childhood | Kids watch TV series <i>Four Tankers and a Dog</i> , then they play war | Ilze, mother, father, grandfather, and cousin |
| | 2 | Place where Ilze is happy | Kids play war-themed games, watch television on the theme of war, and admire the feats of warriors | Ilze and her cousin |
| | 3 | Place with lot of colors. Everyone looks happy, although all the people are unhappy | Family talks Ilze experiences different pressures from each person in the family | Ilze, grandfather, other family members |
| | 4 | - | Ilze listens to a talk between her grandfather and his friend about a friend's memories after the end of World War II | Ilze, grandfather, and his friend |
| Seaside from the Baltic Sea | 1 | - | - | - |
| | 2 | Coast in a closed border area | Ilze sees the sea for the first time | Ilze and parents |
| | 3 | - | - | - |
| | 4 | First, it is closed by the army, then it is open and accessible | Parents with Ilze leaving the car in the woods and walking through the trees to stand on the beach and see the sea Ilze taking a bus to the sea without hiding when her children ran and danced | Ilze and parents Ilze and her children |
| Saldus | 1 | City in which Ilze's dad got a new job | Ilze's dad tragically dies | Ilze's narrow family |
| | 2 | City with depressing Skrunda locator (The Skrunda Radio Location Station), rectangular box shapes and dark-colored buildings. Ilze's mother is not happy here. Place where Ilze stays alone during high school | Ilze's father works Ilze sees the consequences of Soviet Occupation and its "war" (lines in stores, a drunk man walking down the street) | Ilze and her narrow family, locals |

| Space | Essay | Description | Social practices | Participants |
|-----------|-------|--|--|---|
| | 3 | City with a few buildings, trees, or other objects in three or four colors. Ilze doesn't feel that there is much for her here | - | Ilze |
| | 4 | Ilze feels sad here | - | Ilze |
| School | 1 | - | Students practice explosion avoidance and learn communist ideals and propaganda | Ilze and her class |
| | 2 | Place where Ilze develops independently | Ilze becomes the chairman of the whole pioneer unit and is a pioneer journalist Students learn to be always ready to serve the country, to sacrifice pleasure, and to work to strengthen the country and ensure peace Students view video footage from past battlefields Ilze joins the Communists, the pioneers, works hard and learns new skills, gaining experience as a journalist and taking part in military training Ilze gathers the other students to sign a petition that would cancel military training for girls | Ilze, teacher (a speaker of communist propaganda), director |
| | 3 | - | Military training Ilze collects signatures from classmates to cancel military training | Ilze, classmates |
| | 4 | Place with signs on the walls | Students learn how to be a good Soviet man, view videos Class girls collect signatures because they do not want to attend military training | Ilze, girls in her class |
| Apartment | 1 | - | - | - |
| | 2 | - | Ilze sees nightmares, she is worried about upcoming war and mother's depression | Ilze |
| | 3 | - | Family members' talks | |
| | 4 | - | Family view people in videos | Ilze |
| Store | 1 | - | - | - |
| | 2 | - | - | - |

| Space | Essay | Description | Social practices | Participants |
|--------------|-------|--|--|---|
| | 3 | Place where there are not many things to buy, and when there is something, there is only one variety, like strawberry soap | Standing in lines | Ilze and her mother, war hero, old lady |
| | 4 | - | - | - |
| River/sea | 1 | - | Ilze uses her red pioneer scarf as a sailboat for her family's life | Ilze |
| | 2 | - | - | - |
| | 3 | - | Ilze's experience sailing their lives like a boat in a big sea with little help | Ilze, narrow family |
| | 4 | - | - | - |
| Soviet Union | 1 | Communist-controlled Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia | People learn communist ideals and propaganda Society has been trained from childhood to be ready to fight and die for its country | Ilze Society |
| | 2 | Soviet-occupied Latvia | Everyone is listening Ilze's mother does not trust the government | Ilze, her father, mother, grandfather, and oppressed people |
| | 3 | Soviet Union in Latvia A big shock to a person who was not in the Soviet Union Life was not so happy for adults | People who control products give them to people in government, or to their friends to get luxury things in return. Other people don't have many things in stores | Soviet people |
| | 4 | - | - | - |

Table 1 shows several trends, even among the few participants. First, Ilze's feelings and the children's fascination with the war dominate in the description of the grandparents' farmhouse. This space is described as psychologically and socially comfortable and safe. Second, the description of Saldus consists of a general visual characterization, defining it as an uncomfortable and strange space. Students have not written much about what people do there. In contrast, in the description of the school, more attention is paid not to the visual description of the space, but to its functional use (What do students do here? And What are the main goals of education?). The school is a sample space of Soviet ideology.

Students have pointed to the change of lived spaces as an important milestone in Ilze's life. The idyllic farmhouse of her childhood is replaced by an apartment in Saldus, where Ilze does not feel psychologically comfortable and where Ilze lives alone during high school and learns independence. One student highlights another space change—the move of Ilze's mother and brother back to the countryside (Essay 2).

Discussion of Ideas, Themes, and Problems

The themes of growing up and personal changes are important in the film, and the students have discussed them widely in their essays. The students associate Ilze's growth with her ability to make own decisions,

take responsibility, make choices that she is not ashamed of, and actively engage in social processes to change her and others' lives. Three essays (1, 2, and 3) show how Ilze, as a teenager, feels socially responsible for her mother's well-being and the family's future after her father's death. This responsibility is associated with active and successful work for the Communist Party, just as her father had done. Communism is what provides individual strength and a secure future; however, Ilze changes this belief by critically evaluating the information that is presented to her and her peers.

The students highlight Ilze's close relationship with her grandfather, an enemy of the Soviet Union who was exiled to Siberia, and show that he played a major role in the development of Ilze's personality. The most striking example is the metaphor with the tomato and the radish he uses to show Ilze the difference between a communist by conviction and a communist who pretends to be such for self-preservation without losing their own identity. This linguistically and visually depicted metaphor is included in Essay 1 and Essay 2 to discuss Ilze's changes

Excerpt 5

I believe that the story effectively showed the little girl's growth into a woman at a difficult time. The symbolically depressing Skrunda locator's building was blown up; the ghost child, a symbol of Ilze's fears, was thrown in the trash; and she was able to visit the coast again. Moreover, she with her children were in a free and open Latvia in this time.

Excerpt 5 is the last paragraph of Essay 4, and it shows the student's ability to generalize: look at the place, a strategically important military object (the Skrunda locator, the coast), and an image (imaginary monsters in Ilze's nightmares) depicted in the film metaphorically, and interpret their symbolic meanings. According to the student, the growth of Ilze and her mental freedom from "The World War III", which everyone was preparing for, but which did not come, is possible only by getting rid of the Soviet military objects in Latvia, getting rid of personal fears, and appreciating freedom (including freedom to choose what to do and how).

Excerpt 6

The film brought together different themes (daily life, memories from World War II, personal experiences) to show how everything was connected and affected everyone else and, most importantly, how it affected Ilze and how she grew out of those experiences. Experiences that were hers, but also experiences that were given to her and that she heard.

The interrelated relations between events, people, and their experiences are highlighted in Excerpt 6 (Essay 4). The student is convinced that Ilze's growth was influenced not only by personal experiences, but also by the experiences she encountered, heard, and learned.

However, students engaged much less with the experiences and stories of other characters in their final works. Essay 1 demonstrates the influence of ideology on children through TV movies and education, particularly highlighting the idealization of war. The theme of war has a specific narrative in the film; it is painted as something very real and possible that both intrigues and terrifies Ilze and her peers. Table 1 shows that the students see the school as an ideologically constructed place with a focus on forming a communist-oriented mindset and attitudes in students, as well as strengthening certain social and military activities. The theme of war also appears in the students' essays through the stories of the grandfather's friends about World War II and post-war events, and of the old woman's memories of using strawberry soap after cleaning the battlefield.

Individual social problems are mentioned but not elaborated on in the essays, such as depression, alcoholism, lack of goods in stores, eavesdropping on other people, and reporting to the responsible authorities.

Discussion and Conclusion

Students as ethnographers (Spradley, 2016) worked with the film for a month, learning to notice, analyze, and discuss important linguistic and non-linguistic details using the model of knowledge processes

(experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing, and applying; Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). One of the main starting points was the different social spaces in the film: what is seen, heard, and happening in these spaces (Lefebvre, 1991; Spradley, 2016). The final essays functioned as a summary of students' thoughts and interpretations in the target language. This was not an easy task, as one had to think about the choice of vocabulary, syntax, and style in addition to discussing the film. As mentioned earlier in the article, the film does not have a linear plot; it is complex due to the many symbols, cultural references, and intertexts.

The description of the four essays in the previous section shows that the semiotics of social spaces are given the greatest attention in the students' essays, viewing lived spaces in the context of Ilze's psychological comfort and personal development. The students have considered it important to include in their essays the visual, symbolic, and functional characteristics of the spaces and the influence of these spaces on the plot line of the film, the main characters' experiences, and the formation of Ilze, as a real person's, mindset and life. The students have supplemented the description of Ilze's development with discussions of the themes of family, friendship, studies, war, and independence.

However, students' essays do not show clear references to learning module activities and additional texts, which were there to provide a wider and deeper understanding of the film. In the essays, the students did not include the parts of previous conversations about:

- the apartment in Saldus, which is not visited by any family members or friends
- residents met in the store who do not include Ilze's mother in the conversations
- the positions of power displayed by the seller in the store and the teacher at school
- classmates as types, not individualized characters (exception is Ilze's friend, Ilga)
- Ilga's confession about attempting suicide after a failed exam in high school
- such ideological symbols as the Lenin monument in the center of Saldus, the Soviet Union flag, communists' photos at school
- the opera that Ilze's mother listens to and enjoys
- TV news broadcasting the funerals of prominent communists from Moscow in the 80s, etc.

These issues may have remained unmentioned due to the abundance of information, or students found them too difficult for an individual essay in the foreign language. It might have been more effective to have given prompt questions that could help students think about and discuss the dimensions of structure, content, and meanings of the film.

In sum, the theoretically considered, methodologically framed, and practically tested learning module with the film in the language course allowed students to get to know not only Latvia and locations therein as geographical representations on maps (Soviet Union and modern Latvia) and perceived spaces through the course materials, but also as lived spaces through exploring a few personal locals' stories. Students were ethnographers who contextually learned from people (especially the young girl, Ilze), places, and social activities to uncover and understand symbolic and functional meanings of differently marked spaces, internal conflicts, different relationship models, and social structures. They learned not only the content of the course, but also how to "read" a target language film: the way to see the details (small-yet-crucial semiotic elements, intertexts, and cultural references) and the broader overview, how to talk about the film, and how to analyze it semiotically. They combined words, sounds, colors, images, spatial objects, and (inter)actions—a diversity of semiotic resources—to analyze the film as a multimedia, multimodal, and multi-layered text. In this vein, the students were successful in this ethnographic role, describing the activities (cultural behaviors) of the locals of Latvia, things (cultural artifacts), and people's speech (according to Spradley, 2016).

Although I am satisfied with the implemented learning path, the collaboration with the students, their individual or group work, and the essays, I would probably pay more attention to the process of writing the essay when repeating this learning module in the future, not leaving it as a completely independent task for the students. Students could go through the learning module together in *Canvas* once again, remember the most important things and activities, and discuss how the previous learning work and its outputs can be

meaningfully used in planning the structure and main points of their essays. Similarly, students could discuss the essay drafts in pairs, exchanging constructive and useful suggestions for improving the content and language of the essay. Perhaps this would be an even more successful way to complete the learning module.

Limitations must also be noted regarding this article. The small number of essays can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, small-scale studies tend to be very rich sources of information to be interpreted. On the other hand, four essays do not allow one to generalize the results or define the typical benefits, challenges, and disadvantages of working with such a learning module. Therefore, future research should compare the learning outcomes of different groups of students at universities in different countries, analyzing the correlation between students' prior knowledge (cultural, historical), native language, and achieved results. Despite this limitation, the findings in this study are encouraging. More practical-based research should be conducted to discuss several possible learning modules including film (of different genres) and to identify the main pedagogical benefits of including films in LCTL courses in general.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude goes to the editors of the journal and anonymous reviewers for their constructive and very valuable comments on the manuscript. My thanks also goes to the students who participated in the study.

References

- Abrams, Z. I. (2014). Using film to provide a context for teaching L2 pragmatics. *System*, 46, 55–64. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2014.06.005>
- Bahrani, T., & Tam, S. S. (2012). Audiovisual news, cartoons, and films as authentic language input and language proficiency development. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 11(4), 56–64.
- Bartlett, T., & O'Grady, G. (2017). *The Routledge handbook of systemic functional linguistics*. Routledge.
- Birkmane, Z. (2020, September 23). “Vienmēr gatavs!” – filma “Mans mīļākais karš” dodas pie skatītājiem. *Latvijas Sabiedriskie Mediji*. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/kultura/kino-foto-un-tv/vienmer-gatavs--filma-mans-milakais-kars-dodas-pie-skatitajiem.a375426/>
- Burkovska-Jakobsen, I. (2020). *My favorite war*. Ego Media.
- Clark, C. (2000). Innovative strategy: Concept cartoons. *Instructional and Learning Strategies*, 12, 34–45.
- Clark, J. M., & Paivio, A. (1991). Dual coding theory and education. *Educational Psychology Review*, 3(3), 149–210. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01320076>
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2015). *A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Learning by design*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Deely, J., & Semetsky, I. (2017). Semiotics, edusemiotics and the culture of education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49(3), 207–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2016.1190265>
- Doring, A. (2002). The use of cartoons as a teaching and learning strategy with adult learners. *New Zealand Journal of Adult Learning*, 30, 56–62.
- Gannon-Cook, R., & Ley, K. (2020). *Engaging learners with semiotics: Lessons learned from reading the signs*. Brill Sense.

- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. Arnold.
- He, Y. (2021). Towards a stratified metafunctional model of animation. *Semiotica*, 239, 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2019-0078>
- He, Y., & van Leeuwen, T. (2020). Animation and the remediation of school physics – a social semiotic approach. *Social Semiotics*, 30(5), 665–684. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2019.1568957>
- Hobbs, R. (1998). Teaching with and about film and television: Integrating media literacy concepts into management education. *The Journal of Management Development*, 17(4), 259–272.
- Kaiser, M. (2011). New approaches to exploiting film in the foreign language classroom. *L2 Journal*, 3(2), 232–249. <https://doi.org/10.5070/L23210005>
- Kern, R. (2000). *Literacy and language teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- The Latvian Language Agency. (2021). *Universities*. Valoda. <https://valoda.lv/en/latvian-abroad/universities/>
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Blackwell.
- Malinowski, D. (2019). Learning to translate the linguistic landscape. In M. Pütz & N. Mundt (Eds.), *Expanding the linguistic landscape: Linguistic diversity, multimodality and the use of space as a semiotic resource* (pp. 58–71). Multilingual Matters.
- Metz, C. (1974). *Film language: A semiotics of cinema*. Oxford University Press.
- My Favorite War. (2019, September 26). *Režisore par filmu “Mans mīļākais karš”* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irNeLlnmlhE>
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 66–92. <https://www.sfu.ca/~decaste/newlondon.htm>
- Norris, S. (2020). *Multimodal theory and methodology: For the analysis of (inter)action and identity*. Routledge.
- Penetito, W. (2009). Place-based education: Catering for curriculum, culture and community. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 18, 5–29. <https://doi.org/10.26686/nzaroe.v0i18.1544>
- Rodgers, M. P. (2013). *English language learning through viewing television: An investigation of comprehension, incidental vocabulary acquisition, lexical coverage, attitudes, and captions* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington]. <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtm.17005078.v1>
- Semetsky, I. (2017). *Edusemiotics: A handbook*. Springer.
- Šlāpīns, I. (2020). Vēsture sievietes acīm. Ilmārs Šlāpīns par filmu “Mans mīļākais karš”. *Delfi Kultra*. <https://www.delfi.lv/kultura/news/screen/vesture-sievietes-acim-ilmars-slapins-par-filmu-mans-milakais-kars.d?id=52568333>
- Smith, G. (2016, November 3). The past, present and future of place-based learning. *Getting Smart*. <https://www.gettingsmart.com/2016/11/past-present-and-future-of-place-based-learning/>
- Sobel, D. (2004). *Place-based education: Connecting classrooms & communities*. Orien Society.
- Soong, D. (2012). Using documentary films in oral interpretation class what is the appropriate length? *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 1(6), 131–141. <https://doi.org/10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.6p.131>

- Spradley, J. P. (2016). *Participant observation*. Waveland Press.
- Street, B. (1995). *Social literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography and education*. Longman.
- Trumper-Hecht, N. (2010). Linguistic landscape in mixed cities in Israel from the perspective of ‘walkers’: The case of Arabic. In E. Shohamy, E. Ben-Rafael, & M. Barni (Eds.), *Linguistic landscape in the city* (pp. 235–251). Multilingual Matters.
- van Leeuwen, T. (2004). *Introducing social semiotics*. Routledge.
- van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning: A sociocultural perspective*. Springer.
- van Lier, L. (2010). The ecology of language learning: Practice to theory, theory to practice. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 3, 2–6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.07.005>
- Weyers, J. R. (1999). The effect of authentic video on communicative competence. *The Modern Language Journal*, 83(3), 333–349. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0026-7902.00026>

Appendix A. Lived Spaces and Their Characteristics in the Film, from Ilze’s Point of View

| Space and its general description | Features and perceptions | Social practices | Participants and their relations |
|--|--|---|---|
| Farmhouse Real, but not geographically marked | “Green planet” Sunny and colorful sceneries, a lot of the green and yellow (e.g., flowers, forest, starks, bees) Joy of life Psychologically safe and inclusive place Place of life learning | Children playing TV (movie) watching Sharing experiences (memories, news) and food Serious and deep talks Not talking about different political views (salience) Listening to prohibited radio programs Hay gathering | Ilze Ilze’s cousin Ilze’s parents and grandparents Grandfather’s friends Private and close relationships between trustable people |
| Seaside from Baltic Sea Part of closed area, observed place | Symbol of captivity Symbol of freedom Place to be with the closest ones, to be loved and to love | Viewing the sea from distance, forest Experiencing the sea, wading | Ilze with parents Ilze with her kids Narrow family |

| | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| <p>Saldus</p> <p>A city created in the Soviet era (Conceived space)</p> | <p>New apartment buildings and infrastructure, old private houses, the monument of Lenin, and lanterns</p> <p>“Something in this town was sad, scary, and secret”</p> <p>Dark, spooky</p> <p>Emptiness</p> <p>Noises from military aircraft and construction machinery</p> | <p>Movement</p> <p>Public appearance</p> <p>Surveillance</p> | <p>Locals</p> <p>Ghosts</p> <p>Distanced and reserved relationships</p> |
| <p>Apartment</p> <p>Part of the new apartment building</p> | <p>Gloom, greyness</p> <p>Soviet furniture and wallpapers with daisies, central heating system, warm water</p> <p>Clothes drying on the balcony</p> <p>Psychologically uncomfortable space</p> <p>Place where she lives alone during high school</p> <p>Place for independence, personal growth</p> <p>Place not visited by relatives, friends, and neighbors</p> | <p>TV (mainly news from Moscow) watching</p> <p>Listening to classical music</p> <p>Talks (mainly about schooling, career, and work)</p> <p>Daily work management</p> <p>Silent mourning for the husband/father</p> | <p>Ilze with her brother and parents (only with mother after father’s death)</p> <p>Ilze’s imagined monsters</p> <p>Narrow family relationships</p> |
| <p>School</p> <p>New building</p> | <p>Table arrangement in rows with the teacher in front of the class</p> <p>Minimalism</p> <p>Soviet symbols (the flag, red star), plaques of honor for Soviet soldiers, written information on walls and blackboard (<i>schoolscape</i>)</p> <p>Place to rebel against the usual order</p> | <p>One way communication (<i>top-down</i>)</p> <p>Listening to the truth provided by the teacher</p> <p>Viewing historical movies in Russian</p> <p>Repeating the learnt</p> <p>Strict adherence to instructions</p> <p>Idealizing war heroes</p> <p>Observation of secret activities (cook’s bringing leftovers home; flights of military aircraft to a military base)</p> <p>Classroom cleaning</p> <p>Agreement on the preparation of a joint request to abolish military training for girls</p> <p>Shared silence as part of learning practices and keeping knowledge and experiences as secrets</p> | <p>Students (mainly Ilze’s grade and mainly girls)</p> <p>Teachers and director</p> <p>Members of the pioneer organization</p> <p>War veterans</p> <p>Power relationships, peer (mainly girls’) relationships</p> |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| Store Real place with the name <i>Kalnsētas</i> | Gloom and lack of goods on the shelves Seriousness and patience Book for objections and recommendations (with title in Latvian and Russian) behind the store counter, a seller Statement of preference for the heroes of the Great Patriotic War in Latvian and Russian | Waiting in lines for special goods (butter, soap, washing powder) Favoring war veterans Gossiping and quietness | Ilze and her mother Shopman Local community Group relations and power |
| Pioneer Camp in Crimea | Cypress smell, Black Sea “Red” place Psychological space to rethink identity and ideology | Marching Public demonstrations Sharing stories Spreading the word about Soviet values, beliefs, heroes, and enemies Formation and maintenance of transnational friendships | Pioneers from entire Soviet Union Leaders of pioneer organizations Power relationships, transnational relationships |
| River (Visual metaphor) | “River of fate” Fighting challenges and making choices | “Staying in the water,” “Sailing” “Allowing the current to flow” or “Motion control” | Ilze and her parents Political leaders Leaders and passivity |
| Soviet Union (Conceived place) | Map in classroom (representation of place) “The happiest land in the world” (general narrative) Incomprehensible (abstract) space | Plans and intentions from the top (In)equality Double life and morality in the micro spaces | Soviet citizens |

Appendix B. Description of the Learning Module in the Latvian Language Course

| Input | Learning activities & literacy strategies | Comments on activities and knowledge processes | Output |
|---|---|---|--|
| Video interview with the film director (2.5 min) | Viewing the interview (2x) Answering the question <i>What is the movie about, according to the film director?</i> Identifying and describing five keywords used to describe the film Forecasting the plot (e.g., characters, actions, and places) | Joint learning activity in online class Introduction to the film Experiencing the new Conceptualization | Joint conversation Written keywords with their descriptions and short definitions Predictions in spoken language |
| Informative article on the news portal (Film shots and their descriptions) | Gradual reading of the article with the one-paragraph-long descriptions and visual depictions of ten historical facts related to artifacts, places, symbols, traditions, and social initiatives shown in the film Assessing and evaluating the importance of information Excerpting keywords Focusing on past participles | Individual work (home assignment) Experiencing the new, focusing on the essential elements of the film before watching it Conceptualizing | Recounting of the main information in spoken language Awareness of the spatial, social, cultural, and political contexts in Soviet Latvia Written notes on the use of past participles |
| The list of words The film (Written text and multimodal text) | While watching the film, trying to understand meanings of words provided by the teacher Excerpting important words from the film while watching it Creating a collective digital glossary in <i>Google Doc</i> with these words and writing their definitions Discussing, proofreading, and editing the definitions (meanings, word order, syntactic constructions, style) | Individual work and collaborative learning Experiencing the known and the new Conceptualization Analyzing | Shared digital glossary Metalinguistic talks on glossary entries |
| - | Predicting actions, feelings, and places before each fragment of the film Writing potential dialogues between various characters considering their social roles, characters, and the plot Presenting (reading aloud) the dialogues | Individual work and pair work in online classes and out of class Experiencing the known Applying | Prediction of the plot of the film in spoken language Dialogues in written form |

| | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| <p>Individual fragments of the film</p> <p>Additional materials found by students (e.g., information about youth organization in the US; Siberia; modern Saldus)</p> | <p>Teacher-led or student-led discussions on each fragment of the film, unpacking and describing relevant themes, historical facts, spaces, characters and their relationships, feelings, experiences, etc. shown in the film</p> <p>Five written forums about film-related topics in <i>Canvas</i> (Choice and happiness; Individual and national peace; Soviet person's essence; Journalism in various times; Gathering signatures as influential social initiative)</p> <p>Focus on individual keywords, phrases, and sayings</p> <p>Focus on verb tenses, voices, and moods</p> <p>Metalinguistics talks on speech differences depending on the speaker, participants, context, and purpose of speech</p> <p>Metalinguistic talks on the use of languages in oral and written form in various communication situations shown in the film</p> <p>Talks on semiotic resources (including visual metaphors), their meanings, and functions</p> <p>Writing an oath of modern students after the episode of taking the solemn oath of pioneers</p> <p>Talks on film watching ("reading") strategies</p> | <p>Collaborative work (pair, group) both in online classes and out of class</p> <p>Individual work</p> <p>All knowledge processes: experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing, and applying</p> | <p>Various discussions in spoken and written form</p> <p>Posts on the Forum section of <i>Canvas</i></p> <p>Descriptions of spaces, participants, and social activities</p> <p>Oath of modern students</p> <p>Talks on learning process (learning strategies and techniques) and the analysis criteria of multimodal text</p> |
| <p>Interview with a contemporary journalist</p> <p>(Written text)</p> | <p>Reading the interview on the standards, growth opportunities, and challenges of the journalistic profession</p> <p>Comparison of the interview and the information obtained in the film</p> | <p>Individual work (home assignment)</p> <p>Collaborative work</p> <p>Experiencing the known and the new</p> <p>Analyzing</p> | <p>Joint conversation about journalism in Soviet and modern Latvia, the US</p> |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>Nine sentences of the film (90 sec)</p> <p>(Mother's statement about moving to the countryside and Ilze's stay in Saldus)</p> | <p>Dictogloss (listening to the sentences, writing down, and analyzing them)</p> <p>Focus on compound sentences and conjunctions</p> | <p>Individual work Pair work Analyzing</p> | <p>Written and analyzed nine sentences</p> <p>Joint metalinguistic conversations on compound sentences</p> |
| <p>TV episode with the first impressions of the film's premiere audience and actors (3.15 min) and/or its transcription on the Latvian Public Media website</p> | <p>Viewing video and/or reading its transcription</p> <p>Comparison of different impressions, thoughts, and opinions of the film</p> <p>Focus on modes of expression and structures of opinions and arguments used by different people</p> <p>Discussion of various opinions on the film</p> | <p>Individual work The whole group</p> | <p>Written summary about audience's impressions and opinions in 5-7 compound sentences</p> <p>Joint discussion</p> |
| <p>Three written reviews of the film (pupil of the 6th grade, student of 12th grade, and professional cinema critics)</p> | <p>Reading reviews and talks on reading strategies</p> <p>Collaborative completion of shared table in <i>Google Docs</i> by analyzing the reviews: formulation of at least five keywords; examination of the language forms used by review authors to express their views, positions, and attitudes; characterization of verbal grammatical features; description of sentence structures and punctuation; characterization of the structure, coherence, and cohesion of the text; evaluation of written language and authors' personal style</p> | <p>Collaborative work both in online classes and out of class</p> <p>Conceptualizing Analyzing</p> | <p>Collective table with the description and analysis of reviews of the film</p> |
| <p>All learning materials</p> | <p>Summarizing the known, discussing, and reflecting on the film</p> | <p>Individual work (home assignment)</p> <p>All knowledge processes</p> | <p>Final essay in 600 words</p> |

Appendix C. Students' Final Essays

Essay 1

The 2020 film "My Favorite War" tells the story of Ilze Burkovska, a young girl who lives and grows up in the communist-controlled Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia. We see Ilze grow from a young child into a responsible young adult, seeing how she reacts and understands the communist ideals and propaganda she is taught at school and in life. "My Favorite War" is the story of growth and change of thought, and it is told with many themes and symbols throughout the film. In this essay, I want to write about the symbols of animation and narration used in the film, arranging examples of symbolism into three categories: symbols of war, symbols of family, and symbols of freedom.

War is very important in the world where Ilze lives. Ilze and I learn so important that it is in many different places. During Ilze's childhood, when she lived with mom, dad, and grandfather, Ilze and Ilze's cousin enjoyed watching a TV series called "Four Tankers and a Dog." This Polish film was about four heroic tankers (and a dog) who fought in World War II; a story of courage and brotherhood during the war. Ilze and her brother play a war, and it shows us how much this film, which was a popular propaganda tool, affected Ilze and other kids. Later in the film, we see Ilze and her class practice explosion avoidance, one of many activities that students did to prepare for war. These may seem unimportant events, but they symbolize a society that has been trained from childhood to be ready to fight and die for its country.

Secondly, family is a very important part of Ilze's life in the film, just like any child. In her youth in Ilze's family we see on the screen: mother, dad, grandfather, cousin, and brother. However, a few years later, after living together with wife parents in the countryside, Ilze's dad got a new job in Saldus, where her dad tragically died. Worried about herself and mom, Ilze starts to think that she should try to fulfill the role left by dad. Ilze believes that she can serve as a strong follower of communism, just like her dad, using her red pioneer scarf as a sailboat for her family's life. This example of symbolism shows how young Ilze saw her dad: communist thoughts would strengthen a man in the role of head of the family. But as Ilze gets older, her grandfather opposes this method of being strong. Unlike her dad, Ilze's grandfather was not a communist and was even deported to Siberia years ago because he was an "enemy of the Soviet Union." At the end of the film, the death of his grandfather at such an old age serves as a symbol of spite and inspires Ilze to continue to protest for change and independence.

Finally, I would like to talk more about independence. This film takes place in a very unique history, because we see that Ilze is starting to think more about the possibility of independence. As already written in the previous section, Ilze's grandfather is a very important symbol of independence in Ilze's life, and he shows her a very powerful metaphor. When Ilze doubts the ideals she learned at school, grandfather asks her, "Who do you want to be? Tomato, red all over, or radish with a white middle?" A lot of people have lived like radishes, not to mention what they really mean by acting like strong party members all over the red, but Ilze wants that to change. At the end of the film there is a video with the most famous symbol of Baltic independence: the Baltic Way. About two million people took part in the metaphor, joining hands across Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Independence was found due to people such as Ilze.

We see Ilze grow up in this film, but the film can only be so long. Symbolism allows you to get much more out of the story, and Ilze's story is full of beautiful and powerful metaphors, including more than just examples. In this essay, I have written about three types of symbols in the film, but there are many more. The director understood the power of animation and placed metaphors and symbolism in almost every scene in the film. I recommend watching this movie several times, looking for all the hidden details that can be found in the beautiful animation. "My Favorite War" is a story on many topics, and it can mean something different and new for anyone who views the film.

Essay 2

Childhood is an unforgettable period of personal development, a time which those who are lucky enough to become adults remember their entire lives. However, when a child grows up in a difficult period, these memories can often be unwanted. The film "My Favorite War" follows a girl who lives in Soviet-occupied Latvia during the Cold War. This girl, Ilze Burkovska, tells about her life and how she grows from a dreamy and frightened child into a responsible and hopeful young woman. The film used both sceneries and characters to tell a story.

The film begins with Ilze as an innocent child protected from the reality of her country. Her parents took her to the coast in a closed border area, where she saw the sea with her ribbon for the first time. On her grandfather's farm, she played war-themed games with her cousin and watched television on the theme of war, admiring the feats of warriors. She loved the war and was happy there.

Ilze's grandfather depicts strong people during the Soviet occupation. Although he was a Siberian and an "enemy of the state," he continued to stand proud and appreciate the beauty of life while painting. He did not like the communists very much, but he acknowledged his communist son-in-law. Hoping she [Ilze] will reject it; he gives an illustration with a tomato and a radish to let Ilze decide on communism herself. His death freed him from a state that called him an enemy of the state.

The family moved to Saldus due to their father's work, and Ilze saw the Skrunda locator for the first time. In the city, she also saw the consequences of the Soviet occupation and its "war": Rectangular box shapes and dark-colored buildings were endured; residents had to stand in line for butter; a drunk man was walking down the street. She was a little scared, but her father's smile comforted her. However, her father died in a car accident, leaving her alone in a world unknown to her mother and brother: the world from which she was protected.

Ilze's mother was less emotional, so she often ignored her daughter's difficulties in adjusting to her new lifestyle. She depicts oppressed people during the Soviet occupation. She went a long way to work and finished many household chores, but she had difficulty providing food for her family due to Soviet rule. She was the daughter of an enemy of the state, so she was not allowed to join the pioneers in her childhood. Due to her father's stigma, she did not trust the government. She told Ilze that "Everyone is listening" to protect her from a similar childhood. Becoming the chairman of the council of the whole pioneer unit and becoming a pioneer journalist, Ilze decided to help her mother smile again, but her mother could not be happy in the city. When Ilze was a high school student, her mother moved with her brother to the countryside, leaving her alone to overcome her problems at school.

At school, Ilze develops independently. There she learned to be always ready to serve her country. Her teacher, a speaker of communist propaganda, insisted that all students and their families should sacrifice pleasure and work to strengthen the country and ensure peace. She shows her students video footage from past battlefields that scared Ilze and caused her nightmares and worries at home.

Although Ilze was afraid of death and worried about her mother's depression at home, she was still determined to save her mother, so, like her father, she joined the Communists: the pioneers. Together with the pioneers, she worked hard and gained new skills. She gained experience as a journalist and took part in military training (walking, shooting, enlistment, etc.). Eventually, she realized she wanted to be an ordinary girl, so she gathered the other students to sign a petition that would cancel military training for girls. The director agreed to their petition, and they were finally allowed to enjoy their youth. Ilze lowered her hair, reflecting her freedom.

I believe that the story effectively showed the little girl's growth into a woman at a difficult time. The symbolically depressing Skrunda locator's building was blown up; The ghost child, a symbol of Ilze's fears, was thrown in the trash, and she was able to visit the coast again. Moreover, she with her children were in a free and open Latvia in this time.

Essay 3

In the film “My Favorite War” we see Ilze from the time of her children until her adulthood in the Soviet Union in Latvia (USSR). Because Ilze’s story is not just the story of a friend, but is a self-portrait of the film’s director, we can also listen to the director and her thoughts about her experiences and memories. There is also a third part in the film that shows us the history before Ilze was born, for example, about the war in 1945. When we watch a movie, we not only understand what happened every day in the Soviet Union in Latvia, which is a big shock to a person who was not in the Soviet Union, but also how it looked from child’s point of view. Ilze’s experience is also a bit different, as she had a father in the Communist Party and a grandfather who was in Siberia, which is a small thing that became a conflict in Ilze’s life. But after all, we look at Ilze, who chooses herself and does what she thinks is right, and that’s the most important thing in the film.

First of all, it is important to tell how director Ilze Burkovska-Jakobsen chooses to tell her story to all people. It is easy for us to understand in which year the film takes place and also how Ilze feels in the film, because the colors change. In Ilze’s grandparents’ home, the film has a lot of colors, and everyone looks happy, although all the people are unhappy. So, we see how everything in Saldus is three or four colors, because maybe Ilze doesn’t want to be and live there. When the director talks about war, everything is brown and white, and we can understand the year in an instant. There are also a few buildings, trees, or other objects in Saldus, and it feels like Ilze doesn’t feel that there is much for her in Saldus.

About the story, although we learned a lot about the Soviet Union and life at the time, we learned more about children’s experiences in Soviet times. The children had to get lost in what the family was talking about at home, and there was a lot of pressure from the family, maybe different pressures from each person in the family. Because Ilze’s grandfather was in Siberia, he does not want Ilze to become a member of the Communist Party. Although this is the case, Ilze’s mother wanted something different so that Ilze would become a journalist, a profession that requires being a communist. We see her experience sailing their lives like a boat in a big sea with little help. The children also had a military training at school, something Ilze did not want to learn, and because she was rebellious, she collected signatures from her classmates.

The film also shows us how life was not so happy for adults in Soviet Latvia and the Soviet Union. In the Soviet system, people who controlled products gave them to people in government, or to their friends to get luxury things in return. Other people didn’t have many things in stores, and when there was something, there was only one variety, like strawberry soap. In the film, we learn it through people’s stories, as in the moment when there was no butter for Ilze and her mother because the last one was given to a war hero. There was also a moment when some old lady wanted soap but could not buy the only strawberry soap, because soap was the same as she used after the cleaning the dead from battlefields during the war. Through these personal stories, we learn about the Soviet era in a very important way.

In the film “My Favorite War,” director Ilze Burkovska-Jakobsen shows us her childhood, the Soviet era, and life at that time, in a very stylistic and personal way. We look at the colors as the film unfolds and the objects on the screen as Ilze liked where she was. We learn how classes were in school and how children should keep quiet and choose between two ideologies through Ilze’s childhood. In conclusion, we also know what life was like for adults in the Soviet Union, through Ilze’s memories in stores. “My Favorite War” started as a self-portrait but became a good story of the Soviet Union for all people today.

Essay 4

“My favorite war” shows Ilze Burkovska-Jakobsen’s life in Latvia, from her childhood with her family in the countryside to the restoration of Latvia’s independence. The film uses both animation and historical video, as well as interviews with Ilze and her female friends and family today to help viewers understand what Ilze’s experience was and how she felt at the time.

One of the main themes of the film was conflict. Ilze had a good relationship and friendship with her grandfather, and she also loved her father very much, but from the beginning of the film, we see a conflict between her grandfather and father. Her mother’s father had problems with the USSR government and was deported to Siberia when he was younger, but her father was in the Communist Party. As she grew up, she learned at school and in the city how to be a good Soviet man, and that too caused Ilze to have a decision, because then she had to decide who she wanted to be. She wanted to be a journalist. But to get this job at the time meant that she would have to join the party like her mother. Ilze’s mother wanted her to become a journalist, but Ilze’s grandfather was afraid that she would be in the Communist Party, and that was difficult for her.

The whole movie was not sad. Another topic was change. I really liked that the end of the film linked to the beginning. Both at the beginning and at the end, Ilze was at sea with her family, but the contexts of the scenes were very different. At the beginning of the film, the army had closed the beach, and her parents had to leave the car in the woods and walk through the trees to stand on the beach and see the sea. In the end, she could take a bus to the sea and didn’t hide when her children ran and danced. The film also shows Ilze and other girls in her class as they collected signatures because they did not want to attend military training. Ilze recognized what was the problem at her school and worked to change it. I think we can all learn from her teachings and express ourselves when we don’t like what we see.

Many things helped explain the emotions in the scene. One was the color palette. Dark colors were used to reflect both history and memories. For example, the film was dark and brown when a young Ilze listened to a talk between her grandfather and her friend about a friend’s memories after the end of World War II. The film focused on Ilze’s experiences, and the colors helped to show how children see and understand the world: what’s important to them and what’s scary. The color palette also changed when she moved to Saldus. It symbolized her thoughts of Saldus and the sadness she felt because she could not live with her grandparents.

“My Favorite War” was an informative film, but it also felt different and new because the film was from a child’s perspective. There were no specific facts at the center of the film, but emotions and experiences that helped make the film more moving and personal. The style of the animation allowed the use of small details, such as signs on the walls or people in the videos that Ilze saw at school and at home, explaining things not talked about out loud in the film. The film brought together different themes (daily life, memories from World War II, personal experiences) to show how everything was connected and affected everyone else and, most importantly, how it affected Ilze and how she grew out of those experiences. Experiences that were hers, but also experiences that were given to her and that she heard.

About the Author

Solvita Burr is a Senior Researcher at the University of Latvia and an Instructor of Latvian at the University of Washington. Her research includes comprehensive studies of cityscapes and language pedagogy. In 2020, she published a methodology book and a textbook in Latvian, both concerning how to include public texts in the language learning process.

E-mail: solvita.burr@gmail.com