

## ***Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom* as a Text in the English Language Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

In the era of technological dominance, the twenty-first century teacher is expected to have sound digital skills and make appropriate use of multimedia tools for classroom purposes. The teaching learning scenario has moved far beyond conventional teaching methods and learning in order to adapt newer strategies. India's New Education Policy 2020 also emphasizes on using innovative and best teaching-learning practices for a better learning environment. In this context, adapting films and other multimedia come as an effective teaching strategy. Films serve as a significant tool in teaching. As a visual medium, it fosters better acquisition of knowledge and understanding. This article therefore explores the role of films in language learning environment, particularly in an English language classroom. As a practical approach, the article looks into adapting the Bhutanese film, *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom* (2019) as a text for classroom discourse. Further, it examines the different ways of using this visual text for enhancing language skills.

**Keywords:** Films, visual text, pedagogy, language skills, Bhutan, *Lunana*

### **Introduction**

With the advancement of technology, media has acquired immense popularity. The ubiquitous presence of media in the form of commercials, radio and television, documentaries, films, websites, blogs, social media has revolutionized the way we think, perform and behave. The existence of media on academic platforms as a pedagogical tool is widely acknowledged. Within this context, adapting films for classroom

discourse forms a significant aspect for discussion. Many scholars have pointed to the usage of films for language learning. Scholars such as Massi and Merino (1996) have discussed the significance of films to master the target language, pointing to the fact that it provides entertainment, fun and learning in the process. According to Massi and Merino, "Film is an excellent medium for the explicit teaching of syntactic, morphological, semantic and pragmatic aspects of a foreign language" (p. 20). Films thus help to create the appropriate "language environment" in the classroom.

Films can become one of the teaching strategies to maximize learning benefits in second language L2 and English as foreign language (EFL) classroom. Films enhance language competencies and can be a good teaching resource. Films provide ample scope for different learning styles and have larger advantages than conventional methods. Films enable visualization and help comprehension. Teachers can exploit films to teach verbal skills, vocabulary, writing, grammar and enhance listening and comprehension skills. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing are basic skills taught/practised in language classrooms. Films provide ample scope for writing tasks, for example, writing a movie review, describing a character or continuing an open-ended story. In this process, students also learn different narrative techniques that the film incorporates. Films use linear, flashback or zig-zag ways of narration conveying multiple meanings. A close examination of a film can allow us to foresee the scope it provides to engage in multiple activities in a language classroom (Katchen, 2003). Writing comparisons of one film with the other or discussing cinematic adaptations from novels generate interesting learning activities.

Van Abbe (1965) argues that audio-visual methods in the teaching-learning context are much more interesting than conventional methods (p. 11). Krashen (1985) notes that films help to acquire language subconsciously (p. 4). Films can be used to teach formal and informal conversations. Yuksel and Tanriverdi (2009) point out that reading subtitles or captions while watching movies aids in improving vocabulary. Films help not only in developing verbal skills but also in understanding cultural nuances through visual representations. Also, they allow us to compare/contrast cultural behaviours and expectations. Cross-cultural communication and behaviour can be well explained through films. Films also often have subtexts which may be inherent in words, proverbs, phrases or any visual element. This intertextuality of films provides a larger scope

for understanding and unearthing layers of meaning. This means, in a way films induce critical thinking. Application of films in the acquisition of second language teaching-learning has gained momentum in recent years and its pedagogical benefits in the language classroom have been well acknowledged. However, Stoller (1988) cautions that though films provide flexibility to engage in discussions, teachers must be judicious in choosing the right film based on the curriculum and the topic taught. Similarly, Allan (1985) too points that films need to be relevant to the students such that they motivate them to learn. Hence the choice of films is crucial; those which serve a true purpose.

Having reviewed the existing literature on using films as teaching aid and its significance particularly in the English language classroom, this paper takes the Bhutanese film, *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom* as a text for analysis, and looks at the scope of the film in its practical implication for language learning.

### ***Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom as a Text***

*Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom* (2019) is a Bhutanese film directed by Pawo Choyning Dorji, which got nominated for an Oscar in the Best International Feature category in 2022. The film revolves around the central character, Ugyen, who has one year left on his teaching contract to pay for his government-sponsored degree. He lives in Thimphu, the capital city of Bhutan, and like many other youngsters, dreams of musical stardom in Australia. However, as part of his teaching project, he is assigned to work at a school in Lunana, a remote village in Bhutan. Lunana is considered to be one of the remotest villages on earth that houses a Yak herding community of 56 people at a severe altitude of above sea level with no electricity, internet, running water and other basic facilities. Ugyen's excuse to avoid this project citing an 'altitude problem' goes in vain and he undertakes the arduous uphill eight-day trek into the mountains resentfully. He is escorted on this journey by the yak herders, Michen and Singye and their three packhorses. The entire village of Lunana walks two hours with their gentle and forward looking chieftain, Asha to welcome the young teacher to their village. On reaching, Ugyen finds that his housing and the school are both devoid of basic requirements. The school is an old wooden house with no essential supplies such as a blackboard, chalk or papers. He only finds a few books kept in a trunk by the previous teacher. What captures the

viewer's heart is the vibrant smiling faces of the school children (nine in all ) with their enthusiasm and eagerness to learn. The humble attitude of the villagers and their respect for teachers in particular, and the zeal displayed by school children brings in him a sense of transformation; a kind of spiritual awakening and consciousness. This transformation makes him perform his responsibilities with a sense of purpose. The class captain, Pem Zam, is a beaming girl of about seven years with an irresistible smile and eagerness to learn. She and the young lady Saldon's enchanting folk songs prove critical in softening Ugyen's resistance to his stay at Lunana.

What is most interesting about this film is that Lunana as a place is not just cinematic imagination but a real village with real children; the crew had to shoot the film using solar-powered batteries. With this real life portrayal and authentic representation, the director has brought the tiny village of the Himalayas with its rustic life and the folk music to the global audience. Ugyen's transformative inner journey from his initial resistance to acceptance and finding the true meaning of peace and happiness forms the plot of the film. The film offers us some interesting insights into life and living. Some of them are: Learning to adapt, finding solutions to problems, executing one's responsibilities, respect for teachers and understanding the true meaning of happiness. Happiness, as the film echoes, is something to do with our state of mind. Although the village is devoid of basic requirements, none of the characters complains or looks sad. The villagers seem to have accepted life as it is with no complaints. In fact, most characters enjoy their rustic environment amidst nature, their yaks and the folk music. Saldon says that she sings for nature and finds joy in it. She has no expectations in return. Ugyen understands these things which gradually make him realize the true sense of happiness. It is human nature to pine for happiness by seeking wealth, luxury and dream making careers in distant lands. The film addresses the issue of migration to foreign lands in search of happiness and comfort. When the school closes during its peak winter, Ugyen travels to Australia to pursue singing. Towards the end of the film, we find him singing at a bar where no one bothers to appreciate his folk music. There he is reminded of Saldon who sings not to gain or lose anything but only to find inner joy. Youth today are drawn towards the western way of life, popular culture and desire of going abroad. Ugyen represents this class. The film critiques this current

trend amongst the youth in Bhutan, and through its narrative structure suggests that the true essence of happiness lies in simple living. Pen Zam's vibrant smile stands testimony for this. The community has nothing except for the yaks, yet they have no complaints or regrets. The film is left open-ended for viewers to interpret. However, Ugyen's realization and transformation are unquestionable.

Ugyen's uphill climb is symbolic of the struggles of life in general. Once he reaches the village, he understands how the yak is closely associated with the villagers. Yaks are integral to the life of the Bhutanese people, especially those living in mountainous terrains. It is their only source of earning and comfort. Saldon tells the city-bred Ugyen that only dried yak dung can be lit as fire. For his comfort, she brings the yak named Norbu (meaning "wish-fulfilling jewel") to the class as a 'gift' so that he could use its dung to make fire. The yak Norbu is metaphoric. This "wish-fulfilling jewel" has perhaps brought about Ugyen's metamorphosis and realization of true happiness. Saldon sings songs that express the sacred bond the herders have with their yaks. She shares Ugyen's passion for music. Saldon finds happiness in singing for the mountains and the yaks; Ugyen takes this folk music to Australia, only to be unappreciated. The film also shows the contrast between upbringing in urban landscapes and remotest corners of earth. Ugyen's emotional journey and Buddhist lessons of life are well captured through the simple cinematic lens. Buddhist principles such as love, compassion, respect, wisdom and happiness guide all throughout the film. Through their cinematic rendition, director Pawo Choyning Dorji and cinematographer Jigme T. Tenzing have excellently placed Bhutan on the international map of filmmaking.

The sounds of nature and the folksongs of the yak herders, both capture the attention of the audience. The film motivates both teachers and learners; the teachers to execute their responsibilities, and the learners to exhibit the quest for knowledge. The film induces thought-provoking and take away messages of giving, caring, teaching and learning. Though not a formal teacher, Saldon teaches music and life lessons to Ugyen. The film gives us a vision for profound happiness, a happiness uncomplicated and corrupted by achievements of fame or fortune. Our association with nature, the earth and its environment and the relationship we build in the coexistence forms the bottom line of the narrative. Themes of migration, about life and living, happiness, the

teacher-pupil relationship, yak culture and its preservation are dispersed throughout the film. Happiness in Buddhism means contentment and acceptance. The film genuinely echoes this. Considering the layers of meanings, the film can be aptly used in life skills coaching and language classroom.

### **Practical Approaches for Classroom Pedagogy**

From a pedagogical perspective, this film can be referred to for teaching two things: first, as discussed above, the life skills components and secondly, for language acquisition. The film suits the pedagogical purpose as it makes an interesting and relatable experience for students through its narrative of classroom dynamics. What might interest the students is the way Ugyen through his creative skills, sets up the blackboard and makes the environment a suitable space for learning. Hence teachers can exploit the film for manifold learning activities.

Moving on to language learning, Stoller (1988) suggests pre-viewing activities such as brainstorming sessions, discussions before watching the film. Pre-viewing exercises help the teacher to understand the existing knowledge of the students and can set the stage for post-viewing activities for enhancing oral and written skills. Accordingly, the following questions can be discussed as a part of **pre-viewing activities** particularly for middle to high school level learners:

1. List a few things that you know about Bhutan.
2. What do you know about the Oscars? List recent films that won the Oscars.

Films used for classroom purposes should be watched twice; at least once with their instructor. Exercises must be designed keeping in mind, the age and level of learners. The following post-viewing activities are best suitable for middle to high school level learners of English in order to instil language abilities.

### **Follow Up Tasks:**

#### **Activity 1 (Vocabulary)**

Give a list of words, each word written on a slip of paper. The words are descriptive and the chits are shuffled. Students need to pick or choose the right words that help them describe Pen Zam and Ugyen respectively.

**Activity 2: Role Play (Speaking)**

The entire class demonstrates the class as shown in the film. One student takes the role of Ugyen, another Pem Zam and the rest as classmates. One student can become Norbu. The identified students can initiate a conversation (the scene where Pem Zam reminds Ugyen that it is already time for school and all the students are waiting).

Then the teacher asks the students to tell about what they learnt from their previous teacher.

**Activity 3: Debate (Speaking)**

Divide the class into two groups. One group says that Ugyen's decision to go to Australia to pursue his dreams is valid. The other group contests that true happiness lies in simplicity and finding joy in one's own land. This activity could also be used in higher / advanced English classes as it allows the students to express their perceptions on the subject.

**Activity 4: Worksheets (Listening and Writing)**

Specific scenes from the film can be played to the students. It can be replayed if required. A pre-designed worksheet can be distributed to them for responses based on their listening.

Sample questions from the first part of the movie:

1. In this scene, what is Ugyen's state of mind and how does he convey it to his superiors? (About his unwillingness to go to *Lunana*)
2. This scene shows Ugyen's upward climb to the hilly village. What are his conversations with his co-travellers?

**Activity 5: Work in Pairs (Discussion/Speaking)**

Students can work in pairs, discuss and state their opinion on the given sample questions.

1. Provide an alternative title to the film.
2. Create a dialogue between Pem Zam and Norbu.
3. What according to you is the most important take away message?

A significant aspect noticed in the film is the value that yaks have in the lives of the Himalayan tribes. This is justified with the title of the film itself. Yaks are indispensable in the lives of the Himalayan tribes in countries like India, Bhutan, Nepal and Tibet and they are referred to as 'camels of the snow'. Yaks are not just the source of livelihood of these

tribes, but they are also an indispensable part of their culture. *Lunana* as a film provides us the splendid pastoral life, portraying the value of yaks to the highlanders. This could be an interesting area for discussion in the classroom as most students would be unfamiliar with this species; thus, providing them an exposure to Bhutanese yak-herding tribes.

The suggested exercises could be initiated as pair or group work that allows discussion followed by a writing session which can be assessed as an assignment. For example, writing a review of the movie can be considered in advanced classes. *Lunana* is the kind of film that can easily be adapted at school level or with students of higher education. Identifying such films and using it as a pedagogical tool would make language learning interesting as films are enjoyable, entertaining and a source of visual appeal. Therefore, integrating films into the language curriculum can yield good outcomes. Although most language classrooms have multimedia options, yet the use of films as text for language learning is limited. As films are built with audio and visual components, it offers one the opportunity to observe the rhythm, intonation, speech patterns and pronunciation of native speakers. At the same time, following the English subtitles in a foreign language film aids in developing reading skills.

Along with language learning, using films for classroom discourse enables varied perspectives. For example, works of literature that have been adapted to films, such as *Haider* (2014), a Hindi adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* allow us to look at them from multiple perspectives. For junior classes, activities like writing dialogues for a role play on specific scenes, character analysis and extension of the story line by rewriting or recreating from another perspective form interesting activities which would strengthen language skills. Judicious use of the film component would optimize the learning outcomes. Hence, teachers need to come out of conventional teaching practices and adapt newer strategies that ascertain flexibility in learning and initiate classroom dynamics.

### **Challenges**

Having recognized the kind of versatility that films offer in language classrooms, it is pertinent to also relate to the practical challenges that a teacher may face. With his practical experience, Alluri (2018) points out that, there can be technical and non-technical challenges while

using a film for teaching purposes. Technical challenges include lack of appropriate gadgets, accessories, internet or sound failure and other technical issues. Non-technical includes other parameters such as the teacher's preparation, planning, execution and students' involvement. The teacher needs to choose the right film to use it for a particular context and accordingly plan the lessons. Hence it is time consuming (Stoller, 1988) and requires enough preparation from the teacher. Also, all the students may not exhibit the tendency to watch the film and be prepared for the class. As most teachers address heterogeneous classes, adapting films may not be suitable at all levels. For slow learners, such methods would consume a lot of time. Although many scholars have recognized the benefits of films, such hindrances inhibit teachers from adapting films as teaching aids. However, its pedagogical benefits are overwhelming.

### Conclusion

This article discusses the significance and utility of films in the EFL context. After reviewing suitable literature, the paper discusses how the Oscar-nominated Bhutanese film, *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom* can be adapted in the language classroom to engage in discussions that foster language skills. The article points to certain pre-viewing and follow up tasks that particularly benefit in enhancing vocabulary, speaking and writing abilities among middle to high school learners. Involving students into debates and discussions or encouraging students to rewrite/recreate the narrative are other interesting activities that the article suggests in a language learning session. Also, films initiate learners to observe rhythm, speech patterns and intonation; much needed for language learners. Apart from this, *Lunana* also serves as a suitable platform to make students understand/realize certain life skills such as patience as a virtue or finding happiness in performing small things. Films, therefore can become interesting pedagogical material if used in the right way. It is crucial that language teachers make efforts to identify such films and make a practical use of them in the learning environment.

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