

Exploring Cold War Narratives with *The Americans* in the EFL Classroom

Christian Ludwig & Elizabeth Shipley

Moving images are increasingly integrated in English as a foreign language teaching, as streaming platforms allow for an easy (class) access to audio-visual content. TV series, as an example of popular culture, can be used for a variety of purposes, including teaching the foreign language itself but also talking about cultural topics and critically analyzing media discourses. To talk about TV series, teachers can rely on existing methods and techniques for teaching movies, which aim at discussing how meaning is conveyed in moving pictures in a learner-oriented environment, encouraging students to negotiate different interpretations of a given scene or movie. This article illustrates the potential of TV series for the EFL classroom by concentrating on The Americans, which features the lives of Philip and Elizabeth Jennings, two Soviet secret agents in the United States during the time of the Cold War. The series appears particularly suitable for foreign language contexts as it mixes facts and myths about the Cold War, depicting the life of deep cover agents at the time and allowing viewers to relive 1980s life and popular culture.

Das Potential bewegter Bilder für den Fremdsprachenunterricht ist keineswegs neu. Nicht zuletzt die digitale Verfügbarkeit, z. B. über bekannte Streaming-Dienste hat zu einer verstärkten Nutzung von Fernsehserien als popkulturelles Phänomen im Englischunterricht geführt, die sich nicht nur zur praktischen Spracharbeit, zur Thematisierung kultureller Themen, sondern auch zur kritischen Be(tr)achtung globaler Mediendiskurse eignen. Hierzu kann auf eine Vielzahl bekannter Ansätze und Methoden aus der Filmdidaktik zurückgegriffen werden, die es Lernenden erlauben, fremdsprachliche Texte im Sinne eines erweiterten Textbegriffes lernerzentriert zu erarbeiten, unterschiedliche Bedeutungsebenen zu erkunden und verschiedene Interpretationen auszuhandeln. In diesem Artikel dient die bekannte amerikanische Fernsehserie The Americans, die das Leben der beiden Geheimagenten Elizabeth und Philip Jennings zur Zeit des Kalten Krieges in

den Vereinigten Staaten thematisiert, als Beispiel für die Behandlung von Fernsehserien im Englischunterricht. Das besondere Potential der Serie liegt dabei nicht nur in der absichtlichen Vermischung historischer Fakten und Mythen über den Kalten Krieg und das Leben von Deep Cover Agenten, sondern auch in der Rekonstruktion der amerikanischen sowie sowjetischen Populärkultur der 1980er Jahre.

Introduction

TV series have become a 'regular' in the English as a foreign language classroom (cf., e.g., Allrath & Gymnich, 2005; von Finckenstein, 2017, pp. 5-8; Merse, 2017a, pp. 9-11; Merse, 2017b, pp. 11-15) as they offer ample opportunities for enhancing students' text and media competence but also other more foreign language-related competences and skills. The world of Netflix, Amazon Prime, or Disney as well as other streaming platforms has made the access to contemporary series and thus materials that match the viewing habits of today's students much easier. Moreover, there is a multitude of forms and genres which can be watched and critically analyzed with students, allowing them to share and reflect their own thoughts and opinions but also discuss how a diverse range of topics has been realized in the serial format to convey certain opinions and viewpoints.

One genre which so far has largely been neglected in the context of EFL, at least in its visual representation, is the spy genre. This is surprising, for espionage films and TV series are booming as famous examples such as *Homeland* (2011-2020) or *Fauda* (2015-) impressively illustrate. Although spy stories, according to Seed (2003, p. 115), a "close but distinct variation on the tale of detection," even go all the way back to antiquity, with Odysseus being the spy archetype of Western fiction (Wilder, 2021), spy fiction as a genre did not really emerge until the nineteenth century

and gain popularity until much later with the turn of the century and World War I espionage offering the right backdrop for this genre. Spy series offer secret governmental activities, political conspiracies, and illegal and often immoral covert operations. In other words, the success of the genre is not only due to its thrilling action but also its almost mysterious aura of the clandestine. Yet, the stories of secret spies who seek out secret information through deceiving people and exploiting relationships also appear to allow the viewers to identify with the actions and trappings of the spy. As Barzun (1965, p. 165) poignantly puts it, spy stories “fulfil our unsatisfied desires.” Against this background, this article discusses how one well-known series can be used in the EFL classroom to improve students’ audio-visual literacy in a learner-centered way.

The highly acclaimed spy thriller TV series *The Americans* (Weisberg, 2013-2018) tells the story of two Russian deep-cover secret agents living in 1980s Cold War America. While the series does not necessarily strive for historical realism, it illustrates that history is never neutral but fabricated and told from a certain perspective, recalling the famous saying, “History is always written by the winners.” In the case of *The Americans*, the series allows viewers to explore the Cold War and related aspects such as national identity reconstruction, popular culture, and everyday life in the 1980s both from the perspective of Russian undercover agents and through the eyes of Americans. This makes the series a useful resource for the English as a foreign language classroom, especially as the imagery in the series is ambivalent and thus “reveals the power that representations, understood as both cultural production and public discourse, have held in shaping the imaginaries of [...] Cold War America” (Carosso, 2013, blurb). This promises to be particularly fruitful as students can potentially put those examples in the context of current events, whether it be the U.S. fake news and conspiracy narratives that the 2020 election was stolen from former President Donald Trump by the Democrats or that Bill Gates uses COVID-19 vaccines to implant monitoring microchips in people, or whether it be the arrest and conviction

of Alexej Nawalny after his insistence on returning to Russia in order not to let President Putin control the narrative.

This article begins by providing some Cold War background, looking at two visual examples of the Red Scare as lived reality: first, the 1947 “Is This Tomorrow: America under Communism,” a comic which powerfully illustrates how anti-communist ideologies were kept alive in pop-cultural media. The second example is the spy series *I Led 3 Lives* (Davis et al., 1953-1956), the story of an FBI undercover agent in the American Communist Party. *The Americans* will then provide a mirror image of this battle against the Other from the Russian counteragent perspective as it continues the portrayal of U.S. history through the Reagan Era. Following this, audio-visual competence, which comprises a set of sub-competences and skills, will be discussed beyond its assumed motivational value. Finally, the usefulness of this series will be analyzed with the examples of one episode to address the question of how this specific TV series can be used to train students’ audio-visual competence as well as enhance their understanding of the ambivalence engendered by a lived reality of conflicting political narratives.

The Red Scare

In order to make the context of *The Americans* clear to students in the foreign language classroom, we must go back to the origins of the Red Scare. Although the first wave of the Red Scare (1919-1920), with its anti-communist sentiments, began already after World War I, it is the second wave of the Red Scare following World War II (1947-1957) that will concern us primarily in this article. The United States emerged from World War II as a world power with the Soviet Union as the feared enemy. Phrases such as ‘the iron curtain’ and ‘the cold war’ testify to this period. Led by Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, a war against the Communist Party within the United States began. In particular, it was feared that members of the Communist Party were working within the government to overthrow the United States. There were purges and court trials, the

most infamous being the 1951 Rosenberg trial, during which Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were sentenced to death for passing U.S. atomic secrets to the Soviet Union.

The very popular Red Scare comic book “Is This Tomorrow: America under Communism,” published in 1947 by the Catechetical Guild Educational Society (with Charles M. Schulz, the creator of Peanuts, as one of the artists), is the story of American communists taking over the United States from within, using the people, the press, and political institutions. It serves as an example of how the dangers of communism were depicted at this time. The following panel from the cautionary tale has grim ironic overtones recalling an event in the real recent future on January 6, 2021.

The panel shows Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., after American Communist Mr. Jones has pulled off his plan to overthrow the American government and transform the United States into a communist state. Instead of the American flag it is the red Soviet Union flag with hammer and sickle that is waving on top of the United States Congress with a small group of resistance fighters attempting to enter the building but who are stopped by supporters of the new system, clearly identifiable by their red armbands with an R on them.

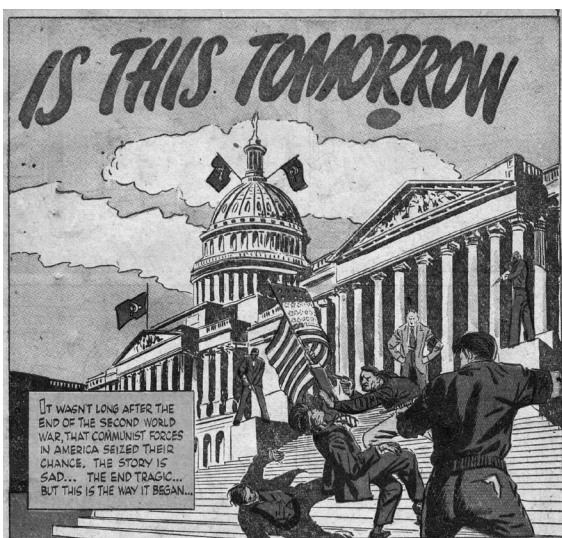


Figure 1: The opening panel from “Is This Tomorrow: America under Communism” (1947).

Particularly attention should be paid to the ‘old’ American flag, which in the original color version of the comic has lost some of its blue color, alluding to the fact that the former United States is defeated. Adding to that, the man holding the flag is thrown down the stairs and the flag, as a symbol of liberty and democracy, goes down with him.

The syndicated American drama series *I Led 3 Lives* (1953-1956), is based on the 1952 real-life autobiography of the same title by Herbert Philbrick, who was a member of the Communist Party for nine years in the service of the FBI. “For over a year, the series was America’s top-rated syndicated series” (Kozloff, 1992, p. 98), when the purchase of a television was just becoming a part of American family life. Thus, both of these very popular examples testify to the very real effect of the Red Scare and Communist Conspiracy theories. Communism was at that time the ubiquitous insidious danger of utter destruction, lurking anywhere in spheres outside the familiar parameters, other religions, other educational institutes, other ethnic backgrounds, in short, the image of the Other.

The Americans

The FX series *The Americans* (2013-2018), presently available on Netflix, picks up this historical thread but from a different perspective. It features the lives of Elizabeth and Philip Jennings and their children, who live in Falls Church, a Virginia suburb of Washington, D.C. On the surface, the Jennings live a normal suburban middle-class life. They run a successful travel agency, meet friends, go on family vacations, and take their children to theme parks. They even speak with American accents and, on the surface, act and think like Americans. Yet, Nadezhda and Mischa hide their true identities as Russian deep undercover agents who were both facing difficult circumstances as they grew up and underwent brutal training in a KGB training camp. Although their marriage had originally been arranged by the KGB, their relationship has evolved into authentic affection. This culminates in their wedding in season 5 when Philip proposes to Elizabeth and organizes a sur-

prise underground wedding with a Russian Orthodox Father. In their undercover life, however, the laundry room in the basement of their house serves as their headquarters where they plan their secret actions, the kitchen phone turns into a communication channel with their handlers and other in-country agents, and the family car becomes a means to kidnap people and transport corpses. Philip and Elizabeth – and later on their daughter Paige – constantly fear to be exposed. In fact, in the season finale of the second season, the viewer gets a vivid illustration of the danger of their mission when the Jennings discover that their close friends, Emmett and Leanne, both undercover KGB agents, and their daughter are killed by their own son Jared when they disagree with the Center’s decision to recruit him as a second generation agent. The real strength of the series lies in the fact that instead of portraying the Russian sleeper agents, who continuously deceive, blackmail, kidnap, and kill people, as morally bankrupt automatons, the series tells much of the story through their eyes as it combines factual and fictitious elements, providing multiple versions of Red Scare history. By doing that, the series breaks up the strict divide between us and them, or as Frank Gaad, Director of FBI Counterintelligence, tells Arkady Zotov, his KGB counterpart in the series: “You target our people, we target yours” (Weisberg, 2014, “Youssaf” season 2, episode 10, 09:00-09:02). In other words, the series lets us even sympathize with the Jennings and makes us complicit in the very subversion of our own culture(s) and in tearing the fabric of our own realities. Furthermore, the series plays with several key political events and different Cold War narratives and illustrates how these discourses were both culturally produced and constructed through public discourse (cf. Carosso, 2013). By doing so, *The Americans*, as the author of an online review of the TV series points out, “dismantles this dichotomy of nominal Americans versus Soviets or Russians, thus, belying other dichotomies, such as the nation versus the individual, reality versus truth, assimilation versus integration, and morally good versus morally bad, to just name a few” (Amanda, 2017, para. 1).

Here, episode 4 from season 1 (Weisberg, 2013b, “In Control”) may serve as an example. The episode features the shooting of President Reagan, with both the United States and the Soviet Union believing the other to be responsible for the shooting. When Alexander Haig, Reagan’s Secretary of State at the time, declares publicly that he is in control while the President is in hospital, things get out of hand as the Jennings’ handler tells them to get ready for guerrilla warfare in case of a coup. When Elizabeth and Philip believe that Haig may have the codes for the United States nuclear missiles, they are faced with the difficult decision to pass on the information to the KGB, “which is running around like cut-off chicken,”¹ and risk a nuclear war or confirm the information without telling their government. This leads to a heated discussion between the couple, which reveals the deep differences between the two of them in their values and beliefs and their assumed level of assimilation as Philip does not believe that the United States would ever start a nuclear war and refuses to risk the life of his children. This is illustrated in the following conversation between Elizabeth and Philip in the basement of their house when Elizabeth, once again, accuses her husband of enjoying his American life too much and no longer being entirely true to the cause.

E.: We need to map our targets.
P.: Oh, my God.
E.: Can you just stay with me here?
P.: Stay with you and what?
E.: We’re in the middle of a crisis.
P.: Yeah, and you don’t think Moscow’s overreacting just a little?
E.: Well, you almost defected a few weeks ago, Philip, so maybe you’re not the one to be passing judgment on whether or not Moscow is overreacting. [...] (“In Control,” 22.07-22.02)
E.: Philip, please. Philip. Can we please move on this now? He’s holding a copy of the nuclear football. We need to transmit.
P.: All these years walking these streets, living with these people, you still really don’t understand this place. Haig could have 10 nuclear footballs. This still wouldn’t be a coup.
E.: Really?
P.: Yes, really. And if we send that to Moscow, they will go on high alert. And our

command control isn't quite state-of-the-art. We will escalate. They will escalate. This thing will spin out of control. So, could you please... can you please just try and get yourself in a different way of looking at it for one minute?

E.: You think you understand things so much better than I do. Why? Because you look good in an American suit?

P.: What?

E.: Because everybody loves talking to you because you think like the kids do?

P.: No, that's not what I think.

E.: Because I fit in just fine, but I remember where I came from... not having all of these things, it being about something bigger than just myself.

P.: I remember, too. That doesn't blind me to what's in front of my face. I know how the Americans do things, and Al Haig isn't taking over the government. ("In Control," 31.06-32.12)

At the end of the scene, Philip leaves the laundry room and 'returns' to their 'upstairs' American life while Elizabeth stays behind in their secret command center, both feeling that the other is blindsided, no longer seeing things for what they really are.

Teaching *The Americans*

Although *The Americans* is a highly complex and multi-threaded series, it tells the history of the Cold War from different perspectives and offers new ways of thinking about the conflict. Discussions of the TV series in the classroom could revolve around a cornucopia of topics such as the Cold War itself, everyday American (and deep agent) life against the background of a global conflict but also Cold War popular cultures such as fashion, computer games, and music.

Teaching the whole TV series, which consists of six seasons with 75 episodes, would require more time than available. However, using an approach which only features selected episodes or scenes of the series already provides a rich resource for students to explore the complex life of the two KGB spies against the background of the 1980s Reagan administration. This can be done using different methodological options for

developing students' audio-visual competence, many of which, such as debates, discussions, role plays, are participatory in nature, allowing students to engage in open and democratic discourse where they express their own opinions but also value the opinions and viewpoints of others.

For the purpose of this article, the focus is on the ongoing and slowly evolving struggle between Elizabeth and Philip. While both characters have mainly used their marriage and family life as a cover story², they eventually fall in love, letting them both doubt their assignment and causing a conflict of interest about their allegiance to the cause and, ultimately, Mother Russia and their right to a life as individuals. While Elizabeth's priority is and remains her Russian motherland and her mission, Philip seems to increasingly want to leave their fake, spy life behind and defect to the United States as he becomes more and more consumed in American traditions and puts family life above being true to the cause of protecting Russia against the class enemy (cf. Dietrich, 2015, pp. 211-212). This point of conflict for the married couple also alludes to the fact that the series plays with different narratives of the same period as the dichotomy between 'good Russia' and the evil United States is frequently being challenged.

The first episode introduces us to the basic story, set in 1981, after Nadezhda and Mischa have settled well over a decade in suburban American life and had two children. Already in this episode the stage is set for what could be referred to as one of the major conflicts of the mammoth series: the differences between the two protagonists and their relationship to America and to Russia. Nadezhda is deeply loyal to 'Mother Russia,' to the extent that she has even cast doubts to her superiors on her partner's loyalty to the Party, even though in her early years of KGB training, she experienced a brutal foreign language lesson. "I am sorry," she says, during a sparring session. "I'm sorry," corrects her instructor. "Use the contraction" (Weisberg, 2013a, "Pilot," 16.58-17.00). He then proceeds to brutally rape her, which he much

later explains is just a routine part of training. Philip, on the other hand, is able to enjoy his life in the United States and seems to want to live the American Dream. After having kidnapped a defector, Elizabeth wants him out of his house. Philip, however, says:

Hey, if you're that worried about it, we could just defect ourselves. At least, we'd be millionaires. We wouldn't have to worry about going to jail and leaving the kids all alone. A lot of our problems would just go away. Poof. ("Pilot," 27.18-27.32)

This scene defines Elizabeth and Philip's relationship for the rest of the series as Philip's suggestion to defect to the United States hangs like a sword of Damocles over their relationship. When the two are given the task to capture Nikolai Timoshev, a former KGB officer, Philip is responsible for the failure of the mission and Timoshev's death. However, instead of informing General Zhukov, the head of Directorate S, Elizabeth covers for Philip and takes full responsibility for the failure of the mission. Afterwards, Philip takes his daughter Paige to the new shopping mall, buys cowboy boots and starts dancing in the store, as "Cherokee Fiddle" (Murphey, 1982) from the film *Urban Cowboy* (1980) plays: "Now the Indians are dressing up like cowboys. And the cowboys are putting leather and turquoise on," with the lyrics of the song fitting really nicely into the theme of disguise of the whole series. In future episodes, putting on his cowboy boots and going line dancing seems to represent his insertion into American culture. Once again in this episode when they learn about their new neighbor being an FBI agent, Philip suggests, this time seriously, that they defect:

P.: Look, maybe this is an opportunity. Maybe this is the perfect time for us just to think about – living the life we're living. But just – really living it. Just – being us.

E.: What are you talking about?

P.: [...] [O]ffer ourselves to them. We could get a lot of money – three million for Timoshev, three million for us. We just get relocated, take the good life, and be happy.

E.: Are you joking? This is a joke?

P.: No.

E.: You want to betray our country?

P.: [...] I don't think it's such a betrayal.

E.: Defecting to America?

P.: America's not really so bad. We've been here a long time, what's so bad about it? The electricity works all the time, food's pretty great, closet space... ("Pilot," 34.28-35.41)

Philip later takes his son Henry to a school event honoring the astronaut William Stafford.



Figure 2: Philip and his son Henry singing the national anthem at the school event ("Pilot," 44.21).

On a visual level, Philip's emotional attachment to his son and 'his' country is very tangible. The audience stands closely together and is united by singing the Star-Spangled Banner at the beginning of the scene, with the American flag very prominent in both visual representations of Stafford's achievements in space on the wall on either side of the podium. To the left we see the 1975 Apollo-Soyuz Test Project, which marked the end of the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union and the easing of Cold War tensions. Both the American astronaut and the space capsule figure very large in the picture, compared to the tiny Soviet counterparts. Philip looks thoughtful throughout this scene, thinking no doubt about his suggestion to Elizabeth that they defect and also perhaps about his own Russian identity, and his desire for the merging or coming together of his two lives. A soft and brief musical phrase, perhaps distantly evocative in a few of its notes of the Soviet national anthem as the scene fades out, hints at his secret life.

Their undercover relationships affect their lives in complex ways. Just as Elizabeth and Philip's feelings for their children are genuine, so are

many undercover relationships between characters in the series genuine relationships that cause conflict in the attempt to maintain professional deception. Having an FBI agent involved in counterespionage as a next-door neighbor is a tricky game for the Russian agents, especially as Stan Beeman begins to suspect them almost at once, sensing something 'off' about them and breaking into their garage to check if there is a corpse in the trunk of their car almost immediately after meeting them. Yet Phil and Stan do develop a genuine friendship, which in the end causes Stan to let them escape to Canada and eventually Russia, thus betraying his own country and agency. And this is not his first betrayal. At the same time that Philip is having an undercover affair with Martha Hanson, the secretary at Stan's counterespionage department, Stan is having a secret affair with Nina Krilova, a KGB officer at the Russian embassy, while extorting her to release information. Both Philip and Stan have genuine feelings for the women whose lives they ruin in the end despite their attempts to protect them. Philip and Elizabeth's daughter Paige as a young adolescent starts to become serious about social justice and is attracted to a church group, which is politically active. At the same time, and in contrast to her brother Henry, who is oblivious to these clues, she observes that there is something odd about her parents' lives and begins to ask them uncomfortable questions and to talk about her parents with the pastor of the church. As a result, even though the parents have agreed that their children will grow up knowing nothing about their other life, they tell Paige the truth. The KGB begins to recruit Paige as a second-level spy and her education takes place gradually. In episodes in season 6 (e.g., Weisberg, 2018, "Tchaikovsky"), we see how a cultural studies lesson of the old school – Russian television and music and the KGB version of history – is taught to Paige in the KGB safehouse. "Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive," goes the old saying and the characters live entangled in webs of deceit, in contradictory narratives while showing real humanity in their everyday lives. This causes the viewer to not always know who to sympathize with, whose side they are on.

Developing Students' Audio-visual Competence in the EFL Classroom

TV series play an important role in everyday popular culture and fulfil a number of personal and social functions. They are one of "the principal storyteller[s]" (Kozloff, 1992, p. 67) of our time. Yet, TV series use their own language, and students need to 'understand and speak' this language, i.e., they need to be able to critically interpret audio-visual messages in both their channels: the audio and the visual channel. Closely related to this, students should become acquainted with narrative techniques in TV series in order to, as Peter Freese points out,

understand both their informative and their manipulative possibilities and to develop the productive and receptive skills that will enable them to employ the strategies of narration in the stories they write and tell themselves and recognize themselves in the tales they read and hear. (2015, p. 159)

These skills and competences can be subsumed under the broader goal of audio-visual competence (or literacy), i.e., the simultaneous or consecutive reception and processing of audio and visual input (cf. Blell & Lütge, 2008, p. 128). Yet, the two information tracks are "the composite of a large and complex variety of communicating devices" (Chatman, 1990, p. 134) both on the visual and audio level. These may, for example, include noise, voice, and music on the auditory level or angles, cuts, and mise-en-scène on the visual level. Furthermore, audio-visual integration, i.e., the ways the two channels interact, is a highly individual process. Thus, it may, among other things, depend on the students' experience with audio-visual input or their knowledge of the world, which can lead to positive but also negative interference.

Henseler, Möller, and Surkamp (2011, pp. 2-3) as well as Thaler (2012, p. 178) suggest a multi-step approach to working with audio-visual texts as this allows for a more sophisticated understanding and more critical perception of a film or specific scene without destroying the students' viewing experience. Having the opportuni-

ty to watch the same scene more than once can help students to gradually move from a more global towards a more detailed audio-visual understanding as they focus on different aspects of a scene exploring, as Viebrock argues, the “yet not random meaning-making processes and a general understanding of the interplay of image, sound, camera perspective, mise-en-scène, the use of colours etc.” (2016, p. 18).

The lesson sequence presented here follows a pre-, while-, post-approach and integrates elements of the flipped classroom, which combines traditional classroom and at home learning (Loucky & Ware, 2017).³ Moving part of the content delivery online or to the students’ homes, where learning can be self-paced, not only provides space for more student-oriented learning later on but also allows students to engage with the series in a more individualized way as they can watch individual episodes or scenes as many times as they want, or, for example, stop it where necessary. Still, such an approach allows for the teacher to scaffold the viewing, for example through placing questions in the video or giving the students questions that they have to answer after watching the episode/scene such as: Did the character sound and look like you imagined them?

Lesson Sequence for *The Americans*

The goal of the following series of activities is to enhance students’ abilities to analyze an episode from a TV series, describe the depiction of a specific character, and discuss how conflict and tension are related to their character. By following one character closely, students are encouraged to reflect aspects such as a character’s traits, motivation and needs but also to explore the ‘anatomy’ of a scene at a deeper level, two important dimensions of (audio-visual) literacy. Furthermore, in the case of *The Americans*, students critically question the objectivity of historical narratives, look beyond stereotypical depictions of the Russian spy, and discuss how voice is given to Russian undercover agents as “previously ignored groups” (Amanda, 2017, para. 1).

During the pre-phase, the teacher introduces the students to the topic of the series. The words ‘spy,’ secret agent and ‘espionage’ are written on the black- or whiteboard and students talk about the meaning of the words with a partner. The answers are then discussed with the whole class. Now, the teacher introduces the students to the Red Scare. As background, students can be shown the cover of the “Is This Tomorrow” comic for class discussion and told about its political purpose. *I Led 3 Lives* could also be introduced as an artefact of the Cold War, and a short clip from a *YouTube* video from the series could be shown, representative of, as Büscher-Ulbrich and Lieber remind us, “the spectacular history and pervasiveness of anti-communism in the United States” (2017, p. 512). Together with the students, the teacher could collect a few events that create a rough Cold War timeline from the end of World War II until today, including major milestones of the Space Race (important for the interpretation of the “Pilot” episode), concluding with a brief discussion with the students about current events in the United States relating to these events, before moving on to the topic of espionage fiction by posing the following questions:

- Which agencies in the U.S. or elsewhere deal with espionage?
- Do you know any famous cases of espionage?
- Do you know any spies and secret agents from TV series, movies, literature, or video games?

The students are then told that they are going to focus on one famous example of a contemporary spy series: *The Americans*.

In order to analyze the sample episode later on, students need to be introduced to the basic premise and character relationships of the series. Depending on the time available, the previous knowledge of the students as well as their (language) level, this can be done in various ways, for example, using a “*The Americans Explained*” clip from *YouTube*, the trailer, or a character relationship web. Alternatively, especially if teachers are planning to work further with the series, scenes from the episode can also be watched

first. Now, each student is assigned either Philip or Elizabeth to focus on. Students should be told to watch the scenes at least twice, focusing on a more global understanding of the episode, while making notes on the premise of the series and the characters' main conflict(s) during the second viewing. In order to guide students through the viewing process and provide further scaffolding, students can be told to use the script, which can be found online, or switch on the subtitles. Furthermore, categories for analysis such as the following can be used: the Jennings' day and night life, Elizabeth's and Philip's life in the past and now, American (suburban) life and culture, gender roles, etc. In addition to this, guiding questions such as the following can be provided in order to draw students' attention to specific aspects of the series:

- Which characteristics of the spy genre, e.g., action, disguise, can you identify?
- Is the character going through a conflict in the episode?
- What is your character's attitude towards defecting to the United States? What are their arguments for and against defecting?
- What kind of conflict(s) are they going through?
- What do you think needs to happen to the character on the series to continue their character arc?

A further focus would be how camera angles, shots, or cuts are used to create meaning and also establish Elizabeth's and Philip's relationship(s). Here questions such as the following would, for example, be possible:

- How is the story told (linear or with flashbacks)?
- How does the episode influence you as a viewer through sounds, characterization, or camera angles?
- Which objects with a symbolic function can you identify? What do they symbolize?
- Which shot distances are used?
- What is the music's purpose in the episode?

The first episode of the series was selected for this activity as it focuses on the struggles of two of the series' main characters, namely Philip and

Elizabeth and yields productive discussions.⁴ While both characters are very different, they go through similar struggles around the obligation to their children, their nation(s), and their religious, social, and cultural values. While Elizabeth – not without struggling – continues to prioritize their mission over everything, Philip becomes more and more unwilling to self-sacrifice as he increasingly suffers from the life on the front lines and questions the morality of their actions, which makes him withdraw from active duty later in the series. These struggles are in the focus in the scenes chosen for the next activity, the jigsaw puzzle.

In the following lesson, the students get together with the other members of their group to share their image of their character in that particular episode but also talk about questions they may have. Using the jigsaw group puzzle, a cooperative learning technique, one member from each group gets together in new groups, which allows students to compare the two characters. During the post-phase, students share their results with the whole class, allowing for a multifaceted discussion of two of the series' main characters and leading into a more general talk about the competitive relationships during that period. Last but not least, the episode's themes can also be discussed in the light of current events.

In addition to this, students should also be encouraged to reflect their active viewing of the scenes and compare it with their active-passive TV consumption at home. Here, questions such as the following could be used: *How was this activity different from how you watch TV for fun or relaxation at home or on your smartphones when being on the bus or the train.*

Conclusion

TV series are becoming a well-used resource in the EFL classroom as using them can improve students' audio-visual skills. In addition, they are a particularly appropriate tool for teaching American cultural studies, especially when series like *I Led 3 Lives* and *The Americans* reflect such

direct political content that can be integrated into a lesson topic. The example lesson sequence presented here encourages students to examine different aspects of visual and verbal storytelling, not only allowing them to explore various aspects of the series itself but also how history is less shaped by ‘what really happened’ than reconstructed in the media. Discussing these aspects of history and reality in the making in collaborative learning settings can also help students develop strategies of examining the reliability of and negotiating the conflicting narratives that result.

Endnotes

¹ This is what Nina Krilova says, misquoting the idiom “running around like chickens with their heads cut off.”

² See Dietrich, 2015, for a detailed discussion of how “spheres of shared secrecy” (p. 211), such as family and home in *The Americans*, function as “transgressive sites which the secret KGB operatives use to undermine the liberal capitalist system of the U.S.” (p. 199).

³ Due to the graphic sex and violence of a series recommended for age 16 or older, teachers may prefer to work with selected scenes in class instead of assigning the entire episode as home viewing.

⁴ It is Paige who is perhaps particularly interesting for the secondary classroom, as pupils may be more easily able to identify with her search for meaning and identity than with the adults’ conflicts. Scenes that display this search for identity, however, are hard to find, especially in the first episode, as her coming-of-age process is gradual – and we see her more from her parents’ perspective and their discussion with one another than from her own.

Literature

Allrath, G. & Gymnich, M. (Eds.). (2005). *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230501003>

Amanda (2017, February 12). *The Americans*, Reviewed by Amanda. [Web log post]. Retrieved from

<https://blogs.mcgill.ca/hist-399-2014/2017/02/12/the-americans-reviewed-by-amanda/>

Barzun, J. (1965). *Meditations on the Literature of Spying*. *The American Scholar*, 34, 167–178.

Blell, G. & Lütge, C. (2008). *Filmbildung im Fremdsprachenunterricht. Neue Lernziele, Begründungen und Methoden*. *Fremdsprachen lehren und lernen*, 37, 124–140.

Büscher, D. & Lieber, M. (2017). *The United States of Marx and Marxism: Introduction*. *American Studies*, 62(4), 511–529.

Carosso, A. (2013). *Cold War Narratives: American Culture in the 1950s*. Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0351-0515-5>

Catechetical Guild Educational Society with Therrian, K. & Schulz, C. (1947). *Is This Tomorrow: America Under Communism*. Catechetical Guild Educational Society.

Chatman, S. (1990). *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Cornell University Press.

Davis, E., Goodwins, L., Herzberg, J., Kessler, H. & Strock, H. (Directors). (1953-1956). *1 Led 3 Lives* [Television series]. Ziv Television.

Dietrich, R. (2015). *Secret Spheres from Breaking Bad to The Americans: The Politics of Secrecy, Masculinity, and Transgression in 21st-Century U.S. Television Drama*. In B. Däwes, A. Ganser & N. Poppenhagen (Eds.), *Transgressive Television: Politics and Crime in 21st-Century American TV Series* (pp. 195–215). Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.

von Finckenstein, S. (2017). *Serien im Fremdsprachenunterricht. Populäre Serien für einen kompetenzorientierten Fremdsprachenunterricht nutzen*. *Praxis Fremdsprachenunterricht. Basisheft*, 17(7), 5–8.

Freese, P. (2015). *Teaching Narrative Competence: American Short Stories in the EFL Classroom*. In W. Delanoy, M. Eisenmann, & F. Matz (Eds.), *Learning with Literature in the EFL Classroom* (pp. 159–179). Peter Lang.

- Henseler, R., Möller, S. & Surkamp, C. (2011). Filme im Englischunterricht. Grundlagen, Methoden, Genres. Kallmeyer and Klett.
- Kackman, M. (1998). Citizen, Communist, Counterspy: I Led 3 Lives and Television's Masculine Agent of History. *Cinema Journal*, 38(1), 98-114. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1225737>
- Kozloff, S. (1992). Narrative Theory and Television. In R. C. Allen (Ed.), *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (pp. 67-100). Routledge.
- Loucky, J. P. & Ware, J. L. (Eds.). (2017). *Flipped Instruction Methods and Digital Technologies in the Language Learning Classroom*. IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-0824-3>
- Merse, T. (2017a). Praktische Perspektiven auf Fernsehserien. Potenziale und Herausforderungen für den Fremdsprachenunterricht. *Praxis Fremdsprachenunterricht. Basisheft*, 4(17), 9-11.
- Merse, T. (2017b). Upstairs, Downstairs. Mit der Fernsehserie *Downton Abbey* im Englischunterricht arbeiten. *Praxis Fremdsprachenunterricht Englischheft*, 4(17), 11-15.
- Murphey, M. (1982). *Cherokee Fiddle* [Recorded by Johnny Lee]. Asylum.
- Seed, D. (2003). Spy Fiction. In M. Priestman (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge Companions to Literature, pp. 115-134). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521803993.008>
- Thaler, E. (2012). *Englisch unterrichten. Grundlagen, Kompetenzen, Methoden*. Cornelsen.
- Viebrock, B. (2016). Fostering Film Literacy in English Language Teaching. In B. Viebrock (Ed.), *Feature Films in English Language Teaching* (pp. 13-30). Narr.
- Weisberg, J. (Creator). (2013-2018). *The Americans* [Television series]. FX cable network.
- Weisberg, J. (Creator). (2013a). "Pilot." *The Americans: Season 1, Episode 1* [Television series]. FX cable network.
- Weisberg, J. (Creator). (2013b). "In Control." *The Americans: Season 1, Episode 4* [Television series]. FX cable network.
- Weisberg, J. (Creator). (2014). "Youssaf." *The Americans: Season 2, Episode 10* [Television series]. FX cable network.
- Weisberg, J. (Creator). (2018). "Tchaikovsky." *The Americans: Season 6, Episode 2* [Television series]. FX cable network.
- Wilder, U. M. (2021). Odysseus, The Archetypal Spy. *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence*, 0(0), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2020.1847517>