

“No te voy a dejar nunca” – Culture and Second Language Acquisition for Survival in *Fear the Walking Dead*

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture reinforces and shapes the beliefs and values of the individual, the community, and the masses. It can also transmit hidden messages about aspects of human behavior that are reiterated in scholarly research. In the field of education, particularly in world language teacher education, film and television can be used as an effective tool for examining how we acquire a second language. Using a symbolic convergence theory perspective (SCT) (Bormann, 1972), I employ Sellnow’s (2014) three-step process for the rhetorical analyses of mediated popular culture texts to reveal “covert messages” (p. 9) within the popular American Movie Channel (AMC) television series, *Fear the Walking Dead* (FTWD). These messages inform how second language and culture acquisition develop and serve as life-saving resources in extreme cases of cultural and linguistic isolation. In Season 1 of FTWD, Nicholas “Nick” Clark, embarks on an unintentional language and cultural immersion trip to Mexico. His experience reflects research on second language and culture acquisition, reinforcing the understanding that languages can be learned rapidly when it is a matter of survival. My analysis will show that while language learning can transpire through a formally-structured classroom experience, it can also transpire informally—through a Vygotskian (1978), sociocultural, “survivalist” language and culture learning experience—as reflected in FTWD. Applying Sellnow’s process and Bormann’s perspective can help teacher educators and their students find deeper meaning through new and engaging popular culture texts.

Keywords: *Fear the Walking Dead*, zombies, second language acquisition, teacher education, Spanish language teaching, popular culture

INTRODUCTION

Current research on second language acquisition (SLA) explores and affirms informal immersion as an effective means for learning languages and acquiring cultural awareness (Duff & Talmy, 2011; García, 2013; Kurata, 2011; Roses-Nieves, et al., 2017). García (2013), for example, suggests that an informal setting can provide a more successful learning environment than the privileged formal language education classroom, as well as more comprehensive language policy to fully promote bi- and multilingualism. As a researcher and language learner, I study media texts as vehicles to both educate and entertain. As a world language instructor and teacher educator, I encourage my students to find meaningful texts that can be used in their own studies and in the classroom environment. Using a three-step process established by Sellnow (2014), educators can employ popular culture texts¹ in the classroom as teaching tools, analyzing the rhetoric² they transmit to the audience. Popular culture is defined here in a way many critical theorists, such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1999), define it, as a “site of struggle” between subordinate and dominant groups, and for critical educators, a balance “between lived experiences and the school culture” (Morell, 2002, p. 73). Sellnow (2014) advises that “[a]nalyzing a popular culture text is a three-step process: “...(1) selecting a text and formulating a research question, (2) selecting a rhetorical perspective, and (3) examining the text via description, interpretation, and evaluation” (p. 9). As a fan of the universe created through graphic novel-turned television series, *The Walking Dead* (TWD), I was drawn to a character from its prequel, *Fear the Walking Dead*, who learns Spanish to survive imminent threats as he travels alone through northern Mexico. Following Sellnow’s (2014) first suggestion of choosing a text piquing your interest, and one representative of popular culture, FTWD will be here analyzed and considered as a tool in the world language teacher education classroom to demonstrate how informal language immersion contributes to holistic language and cultural education.

Selecting the Text

Sellnow (2014) advises that one must first “select a text and formulate a research question” (p. 9). The text should be of interest to the instructor and/or their students. To me, there is something about surviving in a zombie apocalypse that intrigues me. I question: What creates the difference among life, death, and undeath? Is it a split-second decision for better or worse, or a set of skills that one must have or quickly acquire to stay alive? In addition to the pure entertainment factor, the rich intersections of language and culture in TWD and FTWD inspire me to look critically at how personal interactions in dire situations shape us as individuals and learners. Before analyzing FTWD and its connection to SLA, it is important to discuss how it fits into the Walking Dead universe.

The Walking Dead

Taking place in the early aughts, TWD—a popular graphic novel-turned television series—chronicles the story of Rick Grimes, a Georgia sheriff’s deputy who, after being wounded in a shoot-out, wakes up recovered from a coma some time later in a local hospital. It is abandoned, and he quickly senses something terrible has happened there. Hospital records and dead, half-eaten bodies litter the hallways. Finding an exit door, he leaves the hospital only to find more rotting corpses, covered in sheets, lining the grounds. As he wanders, still injured, through the streets, he encounters nothing but “walkers,” as they are referred to in both the series and the graphic novel. As Rick meets other survivors, it becomes clear that the outbreak did not begin in Georgia, a U.S. state that lies along the southeastern coast. Instead, it occurred on the west coast, more specifically in California, and many of the survivors Rick encounters along his journey migrated east to escape the outbreak. What is unclear from both the graphic novel and the series is what transpired during the weeks he was in a coma.

¹ In SLA, “texts” are not solely printed materials, but other forms of media, as in the “authentic texts” Peterson and Coltrane (2003) recommend introducing into world language classrooms.

² Rhetoric in popular culture are “...messages designed to influence people...persuasive communication” (Sellnow 2014, p. 6).

Fear the Walking Dead

Enter *Fear the Walking Dead*, an AMC original series—soon to enter its sixth season—developed to shed further light on the time during which Rick was unconscious. The prequel begins at ground zero in the working-class Los Angeles, California neighborhood of the ironically-named El Sereno—Spanish for “the serene [one].” The first character in the series to encounter an “infected” (the term “walker” is not used in this series) is Nicholas “Nick” Clark, a 19-year-old, street-smart drug addict. Awakened from a drug-induced sleep in an abandoned church, he searches for his girlfriend Gloria, only to find her undead and feeding on a young man. In this, the opening scene of FTWD, Nick is already depicted as a survivor, the last person standing after a feeding frenzy inside the church. His instincts—immediately arming himself with a candelabra after seeing a blood-smearred piano in one of the stairwells, reflects his ability to use every resource available to stay alive. Nick’s experiences in FTWD are the foci of my rhetorical analysis, as he adapts himself to a changing world, learning both a new culture and language in the process. The consistent theme of survival is woven throughout both series, and it is the impetus for Nick’s second language and culture acquisition in FTWD.

Informal vs. formal language education: Nick and Alicia

What viewers grow to understand of Nick’s background is that much of his adult life has been spent off and on the streets of Los Angeles, and in and out of drug rehabilitation centers. After getting hit by a car while fleeing the church, his sister Alicia, who has grown tired of the impact his addiction has had on the family, visits with him at the hospital. Through their conversation, we discover that while Alicia is Harvard University-bound, Nick was kicked out of a local community college. We know Alicia excels in her high school classes, including Spanish. Meanwhile, there is no indication Nick knows Spanish at all. Once the epidemic takes hold of their city, however, Nick adapts more easily to this changing world than his sister. The skills and knowledge they bring to the apocalypse are metaphors for informal/formal learning environments. Alvermann (2012), in discussing the inclusion of popular culture texts in formal literacy instruction writes, “[t]he co-existence of informal and formal learning is evident in studies of curriculum and classroom instruction where overlapping practices involving popular culture texts and literacy are taken for granted, even celebrated” (p. 216). Indeed, these environments co-exist and often complement one another in the classroom, but in comparing these two characters, it is often Nick’s informal life lessons that keep his family alive. Alicia’s more formal learning experiences, though valued by those around her—including her brother—are not as useful in the apocalypse, an event that terminates virtually all manner of formal education. Human instinct and cunning become much more valuable in this world than the other, formal, type of knowledge that is quickly disappearing.

EXAMINING THE TEXT

The second step of Sellnow’s (2014) analytical process is to “select a rhetorical perspective through which to examine [the text]” (p. 10). She lists and describes nine perspectives, each with its own set of goals and applications. Here, Ernest Bormann’s (1972) Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) perspective, with its fantasy theme analysis (FTA), is used as the tool to identify and examine converged symbols in the text. SCT reveals the shared ideology³, or “rhetorical vision,” of a cultural group. Bormann explains:

A rhetorical vision is constructed from fantasy themes that chain out in face-to-face interacting groups, in speaker-audience transactions, in viewers of television broadcasts, in listeners to radio programs, and in all the diverse settings for public and intimate communication in a given society (p. 398).

³ Ideology: = “a cultural group’s perceptions about the way things are and assumptions about the way they ought to be” (Sellnow, 2014, p. 6).

The life cycle of the rhetorical vision is composed of many stages, the first being the creation of consciousness, and the last stage being terminus, essentially the death of the rhetorical vision. This shared vision helps a community make meaning of the world, and in FTWD, the dire circumstances imposed on survivors create strong community ties while sowing seeds of distrust when encountering outsiders.

Los muertos vivientes⁴

As the Clark family and other survivors migrate south, language and culture play pivotal roles in their development. They sail toward Rosarito, in the Mexican state of Baja California. They land, however, in Valle de Guadalupe, a Baja village. There, the group meets a community of people who see the infected as restless spirits seeking solace, where undead family members and neighbors roam inside of a locked wine cellar. Their keeper, a Mexican woman named Celia, believes the infected are not dead, they merely represent “what comes next” (Buckner & Dennis, 2016). It is here, in this pivotal episode and beyond, that we can look more critically at popular culture representations of life, death, and survival, and ponder how these intersect with the development of second language and cultural skills.

Over time, Nick becomes Celia’s mentee and finds himself drawn to her philosophy of the undead. He sympathizes with the state of the villagers, aligning himself with a culture deeply rooted in valuing the spirits of the ancestors through life and prayer. What he does not know is that Celia poisoned her own people to ease them into this state of being. Scenes between Nick and Celia represent the social component of culture (Williams, 1998), as it depicts “a particular way of life that expresses certain meanings and values...in institutions and ordinary behavior” (as cited in Morrell, 2002, p. 73). The more Celia speaks with him about her beliefs, the more capable he becomes of understanding his own life and of reconciling the things he has done and seen.

Later, Nick and Ofelia Salazar, one of the survivors traveling with the Clarks, approach an outdoor shrine that honors those who have died before and after the outbreak. This tradition is especially practiced during the Day of the Dead—El día de los muertos—a celebration that honors one’s ancestors. Lit candles, rosaries, offerings, and photographs adorn the shrine. As Ofelia—who is of Salvadoran descent—approaches the shrine to “speak” with her dead mother, Nick begins to experience a connection to it, and to the people whose spirits are represented in the photos. Again we see how informal learning can greatly improve one’s language and culture acquisition. Kurata (2011) maintains that

[second language] learner’s social interactions with [native speakers] in natural informal settings have the potential to afford opportunities to use and possibly further develop interactional competencies that would help him/ her to participate in socially organized interactions in the community where the learner is situated (p. 143).

This is Nick’s introduction to the ways of life, customs, and religions of many Latin American and Spanish people, and the relationship some create with the dead and dying. The shrine that documents and pays tribute to the lives of the villagers, as well as the church and wine cellar that houses the infected are institutions, preserving life in the face of impending doom, providing hope for the future, forgiveness, and a reason to continue living.

Nick’s relationship with Celia and her community represent Bormann’s first and second stages of consciousness creation and consciousness raising. The basic values of death and community are taught and absorbed. Here is also an interesting point of discussion in terms of second language acquisition and cultural awareness. The main characters have, by necessity, been thrust into a culture unfamiliar to most of them, and

⁴ Used here as a subtitle, *Los muertos vivientes* is the title of the Spanish-language translation of *The Walking Dead* graphic novels. It literally translates to “the living dead.” Note here and throughout the text that Spanish-language title formatting differs from English-language title formatting.

they bring with them their biases with regards to the beliefs of others. While Nick's mother, Madison, believes her son is being indoctrinated, Celia believes she is preparing him for this new world. Indeed, Nick's acquisition of the "other" forms of knowledge are the impetus for his eventual learning of Spanish. Lightbown and Spada (2013), in discussing how languages are acquired, explain that Vygotskian (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) theories of second language acquisition dictate how we learn through social interaction. Cognitive development, which includes language development, occurs as one interacts and communicates with those within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). Celia sets Nick on the path for learning both the Mexican culture and the Spanish language, because it is with her he interacts most; therefore Celia's home and community represent Nick's initial ZPD.

As Season 2 culminates, Valle de Guadalupe becomes the stage for a twist of fate for many of the main characters. Madison feigns interest in Celia's views, and upon taking her down to the wine cellar, she locks Celia inside where she is consumed by the infected. Nick, inspired by Celia's words, chooses death over life—not physically, but symbolically—coating himself with the blood of the infected, merging into a roaming herd, and leaving his family behind. The last few episodes are rife with rhetorical signs. Pulled, or perhaps pushed, away from his family, Nick valiantly embarks on a hero journey, an unintentional immersive trip of sorts, through the countryside of Baja California. Separated from the protection of the herd, Nick heads toward the Mexican border, a crossroads where the knowledge he has acquired on the streets and in Celia's village will converge, allowing for his transformation into biculturalism and bilingualism. Bormann's fourth and fifth stages: the decline of the rhetorical vision, where values are challenged, and terminus, the implosion of the vision, are evident in Madison's actions and the subsequent unraveling of Celia's vision for the future, the destruction of her cellar, and the separation of the Clark family. This is one example of how Bormann's perspective can be applied to Nick's story arc. It can also be applied to his informal language-learning experience as he ventures deeper into Mexico.

FINDING THE VALUE: SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE

The final step of a SCT analysis is to "address the value found in identifying the rhetorical vision of community" (Sellnow, 2014, p. 105). Recall that Nick is a now-recovering drug addict. He is a street-smart loner. Those features along with his mindset might engage in similar post-apocalyptic activities: venturing out alone, assimilating into the new world, and embracing what society has become. Sellnow states, "[if] the mind-set of others is in sync with yours, then you have the basis for symbolic convergence" (p. 98). Perhaps what Nick needs most now, unlike his family at this point in their journey, is someone who can teach him the cultural and linguistic skills that will help him survive.

Entering Tijuana

At nightfall, and presumably after crossing the U.S. border into Mexico, Nick finds shelter in what seems to be an abandoned home. After falling asleep, he is awakened by a screaming woman—a mother with her young daughter—wielding a baseball bat. She screams in Spanish, "¡Lárgate! ¡Aléjate de mi hija!" ("Get out of here! Get away from my daughter!") (Barnow & Sackheim, 2016). Nick, who has until now overcome every adversity, tries to reason with the woman in English, begging her to allow him to collect his things. Lost in translation, the situation worsens, with the woman hitting him several times until he flees the house, leaving his belongings. Clearly, Nick has now found himself at a rare disadvantage. All his prior survival tactics and acquired cultural knowledge are insufficient in the face of one simple fact: Nick does not speak Spanish.

After more wandering, flashbacks, and escapes from infected and humans alike, Nick is alone with no food or water. But someone is watching—a woman, Luciana, and her companions. They save Nick and she invites him to La Colonia, a walled-in survivor's colony, in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. Inside La Colonia

is a bustling village, with vendors selling their wares and children laughing and playing soccer. With only a few villagers with whom he can communicate in English, Nick is an outcast. But he begins to forge a relationship, albeit professional, with Luciana. Unlike Nick, Luciana has strong family and community ties. Like him, she is staunchly independent, and they become travel companions, trading medicine for supplies with a nearby gang. Luciana calls Nick a *gringo* and advises him to keep quiet during their negotiations. Though he obeys, he is caught stealing snacks for a child in the colony. Faced with having his hands severed, he begs Luciana to translate from Spanish into English for him. Through Luciana, they negotiate an offer to provide more medicine in exchange for supplies and continued use of Nick's hands. This serves as an informal, teachable moment for him, as he realizes in that instant if he is to survive and be an asset to the community, he must learn Spanish.

Acquiring Spanish

Not long after the incident, Nick devises a plan, born from his life on the streets of Los Angeles. With help from Alejandro, the village doctor and spiritual leader, he dilutes the medicine without the gang's knowledge. He informs Luciana not of his plan, but of his desire to negotiate personally with the gang. "You have no Spanish," she tells him, but he persists, and she helps him carry out the plan. His efforts are rewarded: Alejandro gives him his own living space, and Luciana visits him, sees he is teaching himself Spanish with a dictionary, and assists him. We also finally learn about Nick's formal experience with the Spanish language. Nick tells Luciana, "If I'd have known this would happen, I would have taken Spanish in high school." She asks, "What did you take?" He answers, "Uh, just myself, very seriously" (Erickson & Briesewitz, 2016). It is also in this scene that Nick and Luciana's relationship is solidified and becomes romantic. When the community later comes under attack, they escape together.

By Season 3, Nick's understanding and command of Spanish has increased significantly as, carrying a wounded Luciana, he tells her "No te voy a dejar nunca" ("I will never leave you"). There are also scenes in which the two codeswitch (Blom & Gumperz, 1972), a linguistic phenomenon where two (or more) languages are used during a single conversation. Depending on the situation, or the level of discretion required in each instance, Nick and Luciana alternate Spanish and English phrases or sentences as they together negotiate their new-found cultural and linguistic identities, surroundings, and relationship. Toribio (2004) states that code-switching "is rule-governed and systematic, demonstrating the operation of underlying grammatical restrictions. Proficient bilinguals may be shown to exhibit a shared knowledge of what constitutes appropriate intra-sentential codeswitching" (p. 137). For Nick, mastering a second language has become valuable capital in negotiating for necessities like medicine and water, but he also uses it to outwit enemies, gain allies, and find love. It is a skill he combines with his street smarts that were developed pre-apocalypse. García (2013) states that informal bilingual acquisition can be unplanned or unintentional, "with speakers becoming bilingual without explicit formal intent simply by living and participating—what we're calling human education" (p. 104). By the end of Nick's journey on FTWD, he is well on his way to Spanish proficiency and his informal, survivalist language and culture learning experiences contribute to achieving symbolic convergence with the people around him. He has also moved from displaying a lack of knowledge and interest in learning Spanish, to the other side of the ZPD as a capable and confident L2 speaker of Spanish.

CONCLUSION: TO SURVIVE IS TO LEARN

Unfortunately for fans of Frank Dillane, the character of Nick Clark is killed off in Episode 3 of Season 4 (Bonomolo, 2018) at the hands of Charlie, a young girl Nick was trying to shield from the horrors of a rapidly changing world. In 2015, executive producer of FTWD, Adam Davidson, speaking about his goal for the series, commented that "[w]hat I wanted to explore was this idea of what makes us human" (Prudom, 2015,

p. 60). Both the original series and its companion explore what essentially makes us all human: the need to belong, the need for love, and the need to live. These are basic aspects of humanity. In a global crisis, like the viral epidemic depicted in FTWD, these human qualities become more significant and valuable for survival. Albert Bandura (1977), the Stanford University psychologist who developed what is known as *social learning theory*, confirms that human behavior is learned “by observing others who model certain behaviors and the consequences they experience as a result” (as cited in Sellnow, 2014, p. 239). Nick’s vision of family and community as well as his understanding of death—beyond his own close calls—was challenged by people like Celia, Luciana, and Alejandro, the latter of whom sacrificed himself to save Nick and the people of La Colonia. Nick observed them, learned from them, and patterned their behavior, helping him become a stronger, more adept individual. Before his death, Nick was reunited with his family and stepped into the role of patriarch. The social, cultural, and linguistic capital Nick acquired upon leaving his family served him well, but ultimately his story reached its terminus, the death of the rhetorical vision. But the answer is still clear: to survive is to learn.

Morrell (2002) affirms that “any pedagogy of popular culture has to be critical pedagogy where students and teachers learn from and with one another” (p. 73). FTWD engages the viewer to think critically about human nature in the face of a zombie apocalypse, one in which every survivor employs their experience and knowledge to stay one step ahead and live one more day. Nick Clark, a troubled young man with a wandering soul, is a metaphor for young people who might find themselves disengaged from formal schooling, their families, and society (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012). Nick leaves us with a valuable lesson, echoed by Rick Grimes in TWD Season 5, Episode 10. Hidden in a barn, Rick attempts to motivate his group with a message of survival to inspire them to move forward on a journey north: “This is how we survive” he says. “We tell ourselves that we are the walking dead” (Bellson & Ramsay, 2015). Like Nick, they must adapt to their surroundings and learn from their environment. Rick’s speech pushes them forward, continuing, like Nick’s family, on a constant quest of hope. Sellnow (2014) optimistically suggests that unlike animals—or in this case, the undead—“only human beings have the capacity to envision a common future together” (p. 105). It is this commonality, expressed through the popular, fantasy theme of a zombie apocalypse, that binds the characters together, and makes for engaging analysis and discussion of language and culture learning, both within the world language classroom and in teacher education courses.

Implications

Alvermann and Hagood (2000) suggest that teachers should figure “the power of popular culture texts” (p. 197) into their attempts to help students develop critical literacy skills. Considering some of its adult themes, a high school or post-secondary classroom context are ideal environments for looking more deeply into the messages that FTWD depicts, and the ways the characters use their background and skills to survive while developing new ones. Nick is a salient example of how second language and culture can be acquired rapidly when it is a matter of survival. Social interaction within one’s zone of proximal development is also key to cultural and linguistic competency. Students who are drawn to this genre of popular culture can engage in discussion on the personality traits and skills needed to survive a viral apocalypse, and how culture and language play pivotal roles in staying one step ahead of both the dead and the living.

Nick’s story exemplifies a world where formal language education has little value, where instinct and resourcefulness become paramount to engaging with others and to daily survival. In addition to analyzing Nick, students can look at other FTWD characters (e.g. Strand, Chris Manawa, Althea), many of whom “resist, negotiate, and accommodate power relations around issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality...” (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015, p. 371). Nick’s rise from a downtrodden drug addict to a hero is a powerful example of survival and second chances. Analyzing this posthuman site of struggle, students can explore culture and language in their most basic forms, as new cultures and forms of communication collide with those that have been preserved and maintained through generations.

Sellnow (2014) asks, in evaluating popular culture texts through SCT, “what does [the interpretation] tell us about the power of storytelling?” (p. 105). In FTWD, humanity is the overarching theme. Life and death are no longer the only realities in this world, instead it is the possibility of undeath takes the story to a new level. Human communication is vital to the shared rhetorical vision of survival, and the ability to adapt to unfamiliar cultures, languages, and ways of being and knowing is a necessary part of life. Nick Clark possesses this ability; he uses it to his benefit, and for the benefit of others. He is able, at least for a time, to survive death and undeath. Learning Spanish, something that by his own admission had not been very important to him in the past, became a requirement to making the journey from El Sereno, California, to Tijuana, Mexico. His journey represents the power of culture and language acquisition in informal spaces, and can perhaps inspire students to think more critically about the value of second language education, respect for culture, the determination to be bicultural and bilingual, and of course, about being a survivor.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

APA

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