REVIEW

The use of films in the teaching of English as a foreign language: a systematic literature review

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Abstract

Background: Especially over the last decades, the use of cinema in the English as a foreign language (EFL) class has been gaining momentum. Although this interest has resulted in a complex body of research, no review to date had aimed to systematically map out (i) the pedagogical guidelines available for English teachers to implement films in class; (ii) the perceptions of EFL teachers and learners on the educational use of films; and (iii) the impact of cinema-based EFL on students' learning, pertinent aspects as they contribute to deactivate instructors' reported reluctance to use films as a proper teaching material. Thus, a systematic literature review has been conducted along the three previously-mentioned research questions with the aim of highlighting in a comprehensive manner the robust pedagogical value of cinema in EFL contexts.

Methods: A systematic search was carried out in Web of Science, ERIC, MLA International Bibliography, Education Database, and Scopus, which were last consulted on 2 December, 2022. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, which covered journal papers written in English, peer-reviewed, published in open-access, and focusing on the exploitation of films for the teaching of English as a foreign language. Following the search and selection stages, a coding scheme was established, and the authors conducted a thematically based qualitative analysis to answer the research questions. Reliability was tested to check the agreement rate among the researchers.

Findings: Of the 416 sources found, 44 were eligible. Twenty-five percent of the selected references consist of theoretical or practical methodological orientations for the implementation of films in the EFL class, 16% of the sources explore EFL teachers' and students' perceptions on the educational use of films, and the remaining 59% of the references tap into the impact of cinema-based EFL on students' learning. The results revealed that more informed guidelines on the exploitation of this resource are needed, that both instructors and teachers have a great attitude towards this method, and that films provide EFL learners with linguistic, intercultural, and motivational benefits.

Interpretation: On a general note, scholars have adopted a narrow focus when exploring cinema-based English teaching since they only address some of its benefits and they have mostly concentrated on the University educational context. Specific research gaps are highlighted in relation to each research question, and avenues for

further research are proposed. Finally, pedagogical implications for the educational use of cinema in the English class are provided.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, English teaching, English learning, Films, Systematic literature review, Benefits, Perception, Pedagogy

Introduction

Since the invention of cinema in the 1890s, films[1] have been exploited as a didactic resource in various disciplines, including the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL or EFL) (Li & Wang, 2015; Wang, 2009). Nonetheless, not until the 1970s did cinema become a popular pedagogical tool. At that time, the communicative approach replaced the audio-lingual method in the foreign language classroom and, consequently, EFL instructors opted for updated and more dynamic materials like film excerpts to foster interaction among learners. Later on, technological advances, the lower prices of the required equipment, and the reduced legal obstacles to accessing films made it easier for teachers to introduce cinema into their lessons, fostering an increasingly frequent implementation of this resource in the EFL class (Chetia & Bhatt, 2020; Parisi & Andon, 2016; Singh et al., 2021; Vyushkina, 2016; Yue, 2019). Today, films are regarded as an extremely helpful tool for learning English, to the extent that film screening is EFL students' preferred way of enhancing their language competence (Damanik & Katemba, 2021; Nguyen & Stracke, 2020; Robert & Marpaung, 2022; Sinyashina, 2022).

The growing presence of cinema in the teaching of English as a foreign language has led a plethora of scholars to focus on its educational potential, which has been examined along three strands: the necessity of providing specific training as instructors commonly report a lack of awareness on how to use cinema in their lessons (Allan, 1985; Herrero & Vanderschelden, 2019; Sherman, 2003; Tomalin, 1986); English teachers' and students' outlook on the implementation of films in the classroom (Boufahja, 2019; Larasati et al., 2021; Saleh, 2022); and the advantages of conducting TEFL using cinema, with those advantages divided into the linguistic, the intercultural, and the motivational dimensions (Sánchez-Auñón & Férez-Mora, 2021).

According to multiple experts in the field, EFL students may develop their linguistic competence when working on films since they hone their listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills at the same time as they learn English grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics (Kabooha, 2016; Liu, 2019; Vyushkina, 2016). The paralinguistic information displayed in films, namely the actors' facial expressions, gestures, and postures, helps English learners to better comprehend what they hear, understand complex grammar patterns, guess the meaning of new lexical items, and even identify pragmatic rules in real-world social encounters (Alharthi, 2020; Barón & Celaya, 2022; Basol & Kartal, 2019; Bostanci, 2022; Hameed, 2016; Kabooha, 2016; Liu, 2019; Sherman, 2003; Tomalin, 1986; Vyushkina, 2016). Apart from enhancing their listening skills and their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics, the films played in the classroom may be used as background material for English learners to further practice their speaking, reading, and writing abilities. By way of illustration, teachers

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[1] Throughout this paper, the terms *cinema* and *film(s)* are used interchangeably, meaning an artistic production which "consists of moving pictures that have been recorded […] and tells a story or shows a real situation" (HarperCollins Publishers Limited, 2022, Definition 1).

may ask students to do roleplays, read film reviews, or write a summary of their favorite scene (Hameed, 2016; Li & Wang, 2015; Scacco, 2007; Seo, 2017).

With regard to the intercultural benefits of using cinema in the EFL classroom, it has been stated that it helps students learn about English-speaking cultures and their own societies (Asyidiq & Akmal, 2020; Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011; Tomlinson, 2019; Yue, 2019). Films often represent multiple areas of English native speakers' lifestyle, whether habits and values, behavioral or legal systems, housing, clothing, food, history... This allows EFL students to come into contact with essential features of the foreign language which cannot be fully illustrated in coursebooks (Albiladi et al., 2018; Asyidiq & Akmal, 2020; Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011; Kabooha, 2016; Lee, 2017, 2018; Tomalin, 1986; Vyushkina, 2016; Wang, 2009; Yaseen & Shakir, 2015; Yue, 2019). When learners explore these aspects of the target culture through films, they spot similarities and differences with their own community, which makes them more conscious of the cultural characteristics of their home country (Xue & Pan, 2012; Yue, 2019; Zoreda, 2005).

Furthermore, cinema has been asserted to be a highly motivating pedagogical tool for EFL students for diverse reasons: (i) films are perceived as engaging stories which learners are eager to hear rather than theoretical contents they must memorize (Iranmanesh & Darani, 2018); (ii) cinema-based lessons contribute to creating an enjoyable and pleasant atmosphere which stimulates students to learn (Kalra, 2017; Sakić, 2022; Seo, 2017); (iii) this audio-visual material provides English learners with a broad range of authentic language in a context where, otherwise, they would receive limited and adapted L2 input (Alharthi, 2020; Allan, 1985; Chetia & Bhatt, 2020; Hadi & Zad, 2019; Tsang, 2022; Yue, 2019); (iv) students can enhance their creative and critical thinking skills (Charlebois, 2008; Tabatabaei & Gahroei, 2011; Yaseen & Shakir, 2015); (v) they learn to deal with emotions by analyzing other people's feelings and by expressing their own affective responses which are elicited by the film (Xue & Pan, 2012); and (vi), as films are pieces of reality, they tend to include non-trivial topics such as homophobia, sexism, and environmental degradation, among others, which learners might see around them or experience in their everyday lives (Allan, 1985; Yaseen & Shakir, 2015; Zoreda, 2005).

Despite the numerous advantages that films seem to have for TEFL, English instructors hardly exploit the potential of this modality in their lessons, commonly considering it as a mere time filler (Albiladi et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2021). This narrow understanding of cinema seems to stem from teachers' limited knowledge and expertise in this respect (Kabooha, 2016; Saleh, 2022; Sánchez-Auñón & Férez-Mora, 2021). To heighten teachers' awareness of the pedagogical possibilities of films for EFL formal instruction, this systematic literature review centers on three areas which are now formulated as research questions:

RQ1   What pedagogical guidelines does available scholarship offer EFL teachers to implement films in class?

RQ2   What are the perceptions of EFL teachers and learners on the educational use of films?

RQ3   How does cinema-based EFL impact students' learning?

Method

This systematic review was carried out following the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA, 2022) statement (Page et al., 2021), an extensive series of recommendations to conduct this kind of research presented in a checklist.

Literature search

A systematic search was performed using five databases: Web of Science, ERIC, MLA International Bibliography, Education Database, and Scopus, all of them last consulted on 2 December, 2022. These databases were selected on the grounds that they are widely recognized sources of academic production in the fields of applied linguistics and education (In'nami & Koizumi, 2010; Newcastle University, 2021; PennState University Libraries, 2021; Zhu & Liu, 2020). The search strategy used to find articles was the same for the five selected databases: (English teaching OR TEFL OR TESOL OR EFL OR ESL OR TESL) AND (cinema OR film* OR movie*), and it was limited to those sources which included these keywords in their title or abstract.

Moreover, the following inclusion criteria were applied: journal papers written in English, peer-reviewed, and published in open access journals. It must be highlighted that, since this is the first systematic review which has been conducted on the use of cinema in the teaching of English as a foreign language, no limitations were established concerning country or time span.

After carrying out the systematic search described above, a total number of 416 sources were found (118 in Web of Science, 176 in ERIC, 14 in MLA International Bibliography, 63 in Education Database, and 45 in Scopus). Some of the articles found were duplicates. The authors checked these sources carefully so as to make sure that they complied with the inclusion criteria and that they included the different keywords of the search strategy in their title or abstract.

Then, the researchers read the selected sources, and, during the reading, some exclusion criteria were set as several papers did not provide clearly consequential data on the topic of this systematic review. Given the research questions formulated, only those sources which exclusively examine the implementation of feature films in the teaching of English as a foreign language were selected. Therefore, the authors discarded articles which revolve around different audio-visual materials like Internet videos, TV series or documentaries (Lazebna & Prykhodko, 2021); tap into cinema alongside other textual modalities such as literature (Mahmood et al., 2022), or alongside other resources like ICTs (Chaya & Inpin, 2020); and delve into the exploitation of cinema either in the teaching of other foreign languages or in the learning of English as an L1 (first language) (Shcherbak et al., 2022). As a result of this selection process, 44 journal papers out of the 416 sources which had been initially identified were included in this systematic review. The search and selection steps followed in this study are summarized in the flow diagram below (see Fig. 1).
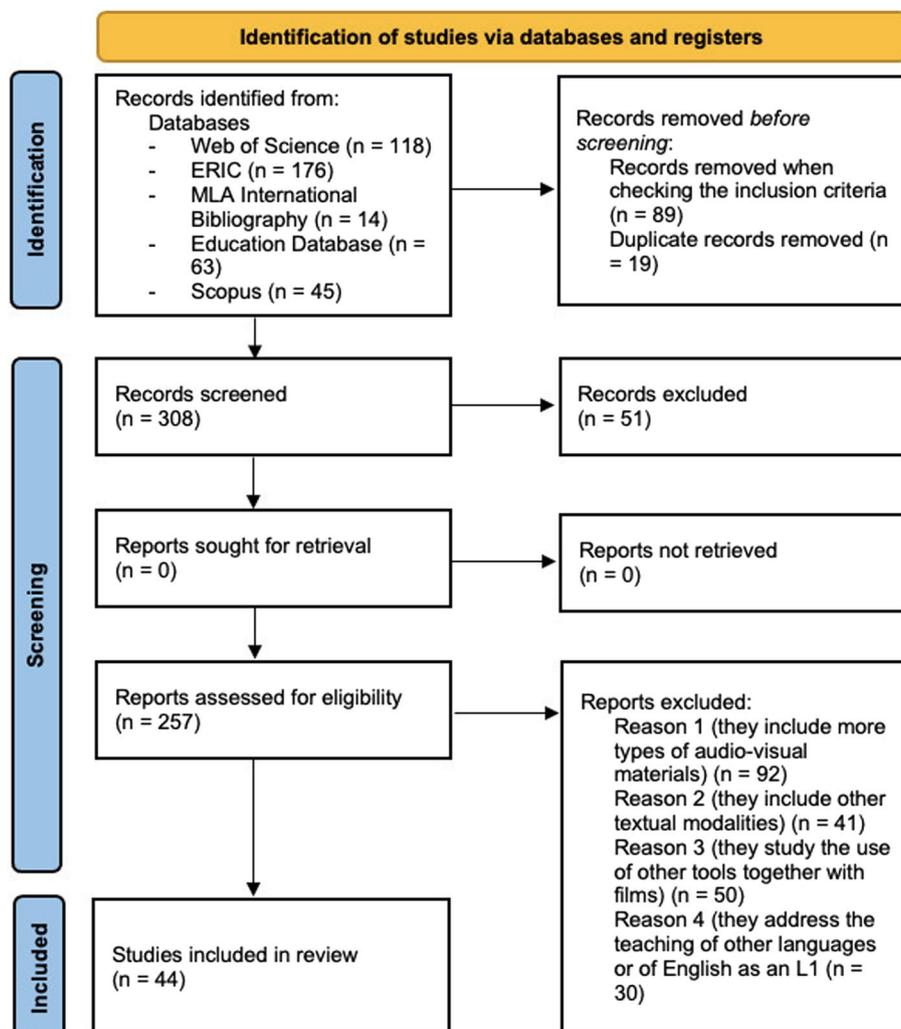
Fig. 1 Flow Diagram of the Systematic Search and Selection Process of Sources. From PRISMA: Transparent Reporting of Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses, by Page et al. 2021, Home: Key Documents (https://www.prisma-statement.org//). Copyright 2021 by PRISMA

Coding procedure

A coding scheme was then defined to map out the characteristics of each study, including: article number, author(s) and publication year, country, database(s) in which the article is indexed, research question, and methodological quality (number of participants, educational context, research design, method, etc.). This coding scheme resulted from the codification of five articles which were chosen randomly from the sample, and after multiple rounds of revision. A subset of 10 articles were also coded by a second rater in order to test the reliability of the data obtained, which reached 100% agreement.

Additional file 1: Table 1 includes the complete coding scheme. However, the general characteristics of the reviewed sample are provided now. The 44 references chosen cover a time span of 34 years, from 1988 to 2022, which suggests that this research field is relatively new and, therefore, still flourishing, as the first source found was published at the end of the twentieth century. Although the most productive year in terms of academic

production was 2016, when seven journal papers out of the 44 sources were published, the fact that eight further sources from the selection have been published from 2019 to date seems to indicate interest in the field remains stable.

About geographical location, the study sample reveals that the existing research on the use of cinema for TEFL has spread across three continents (Asia, America, and Europe), and that it has mainly concentrated in Asia. Thirty-six out of the 44 references chosen were Asian, Iran being the most frequent country of reference. As for America, four research projects were carried out in the United States, one in Brazil, and another one in Mexico. This research field is infrequently explored in Europe, where only two of the selected sources were set, both in Eastern Europe (Slovenia and Russia).

Analysis

The selected sources were classified into the three research questions. For this purpose, the authors of the present paper conducted a thematically based qualitative analysis of the rationales for implementing this audio-visual material included in the 44 target articles. More specifically, we focused on the descriptions, explanations, justifications, and pedagogical exploitations related to the use of films provided by these researchers in their studies.

Results and discussion

For the sake of organization and clarity, the results obtained are presented and discussed below for each research question. Finally, significant common findings are highlighted in a separate sub-section.

RQ.1. What pedagogical guidelines does available scholarship offer EFL teachers to implement films in class?

Eleven out of the 44 selected sources, which constitute 25% of the study sample, are related to RQ1. These references reveal that experts in the field have provided two major types of pedagogical guidelines on the exploitation of films for TEFL: general recommendations and didactic proposals.

General recommendations

Some scholars have made methodological suggestions to successfully incorporate cinema into EFL formal instruction. For their part, Li and Wang (2015) present a model for using films which is divided into four stages: preparation (teachers design cinema-based tasks and students look for information on the film to be watched); before watching (background information on the film like characters and plot, and vocabulary explanation); during watching (students watch the whole film once and focus on vocabulary. Then, they can watch selected fragments again and do some activities like script dictation); and after watching activities (tasks to hone the language skills). Apart from discussing the upsides and downsides of the film-based approach, Wang (2009) outlines practical recommendations to be taken into account when introducing this audio-visual material into the teaching of English as a foreign language. This scholar details the role of the teacher in this method, gives advice on film selection, and proposes five steps which should be followed: (1) vocabulary explanation, (2) plot prediction, (3) description

of cultural background, (4) discussion of thematic issues, and (5) listening and speaking practice. Along similar lines, Parisi and Andon (2016) offer a theoretically grounded set of criteria for film selection and an explanation on multiple techniques to exploit cinema. They address the salami tactics, arguing in favor of using short film excerpts; subtitling modes; and the pre-, while-, and post-viewing stages to design film-based tasks. Additionally, they analyze potential obstacles that might arise when implementing cinema in class and explain how to overcome them. For example, they strongly advice EFL teachers to assess the appropriateness of the language portrayed in films before selecting one so that students do not feel overwhelmed by unintelligible accents, period language, or high verbal density.

Didactic proposals

Most of the pedagogical guidelines provided so far are of a practical nature. In eight of these 11 sources, researchers present cinema-based didactic proposals which serve EFL teachers as instructive examples on the educational use of films.

A minority of these scholars have followed the theoretical methodological orientations explored above. Scacco (2007) details a teaching sequence based on the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* which consists of four main parts: pre-viewing, while-viewing, post-viewing, and Internet follow-up tasks that target the language skills and intercultural development. As for Seo (2017), the researcher presents a teaching unit to teach English formulaic expressions which only includes the trailer and seven selected fragments from the film *Chef*, illustrating the salami tactics recommended by Parisi and Andon (2016). The students' outcomes and teacher-learner interactions at the end of the instruction process indicated that this proposal had been effective and stimulating.

Nevertheless, most of the academics presenting didactic proposals have not adhered to the methodological practices suggested since they implemented a whole film and they failed to divide the film-based activities into any stages, showing other alternative manners of exploiting cinema. Zoreda (2005) provides a teaching plan to work on classic American films in the English classroom, tackling the four language skills and the intercultural dimension of cinema. Vyushkina (2016) offers a guide to teaching legal English through cinema in an ESP course, whose main objective is to help students develop their communicative professional competence. The learners' feedback to this pedagogical intervention was reported to be highly positive. Charlebois (2008) presents a didactic unit aimed at fostering English learners' critical consciousness regarding race and gender. The students' writing production signaled that the activities had helped them to reflect more deeply on those issues and to enhance their language skills. In a similar vein, Fluitt-Dupuy (2001) includes a didactic unit to teach argumentative writing and highlights the learners' favorable reactions after its implementation.

Eken (2003) and Carney and Foss (2008) go one step further because, apart from working on certain films, they deal with the technical aspects of cinema. Eken (2003) proposes a course in which students are taught film theory at the same time as they learn new vocabulary and practice their speaking, reading, and listening skills. Also, group interviews were conducted in order to assess the course, and the learners confirmed that working on films had helped them develop their critical thinking ability and their language skills. In the case of Carney and Foss (2008), they designed a project in which

English students were asked to record several films. After putting it into practice and analyzing the learners' outcome, the authors discuss the advantages and disadvantages of filmmaking in the EFL classroom. As concluded by these scholars, filmmaking tasks allow students to learn essential features of cinema and to practice the four language skills. Nevertheless, this project is time-consuming and it may lead to unequal learning due to the different roles assigned to learners (director, writer, costume designer, and set and sound designer).

The fact that these scholars have generally ignored the methodological practices recommended when designing their film-based didactic proposals may suggest either that they are unaware of these recommendations, as EFL instructors have been reported to be in existing research (Allan, 1985; Herrero & Vanderschelden, 2019; Kabooha, 2016; Saleh, 2022; Sánchez-Auñón & Férez-Mora, 2021; Sherman, 2003; Tomalin, 1986); or that they consider other techniques to exploit cinema more suitable, which remains so far unknown. As can be observed in (Additional file 1: Table 1), the general recommendations reviewed have not been put into practice, and only Eken's (2003) course has been empirically tested. For the most part, these researchers have implemented the didactic proposal presented and have briefly described the students' performance and reactions during the intervention (articles 10, 11, 14, 34, 39).[2] These results stress the need, firstly, to validate empirically all the available pedagogical guidelines on the use of films for TEFL, including both general recommendations and didactic proposals, to determine their effectiveness; and, secondly, to promote an informed and more homogeneous implementation of cinema in the EFL class in order to ensure an adequate educational use of films.

RQ.2. What are the perceptions of EFL teachers and learners on the educational use of films?

Sixteen percent of the selected references, i.e., seven journal papers, investigate teachers' and students' views on the inclusion of films in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Teacher perception

Aksu-Ataç and Günay-Köprülü (2018) check prospective English teachers' thoughts on the utility of cinema when it comes to honing language skills, on the film genres they consider most suitable to exploit in lesson plans, and on subtitling modes. In brief, the results reveal that the participants acknowledged the potential of this audio-visual resource as a teaching material.

Learner perception

Most of these articles delve into students' opinion, who, like teachers, show great acceptance of this method. Albiladi et al. (2018) scrutinize English learners' views on the benefits and challenges of the cinema-based approach. They highlighted exposure to authentic language, the improvement of language skills, vocabulary learning, and

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[2] In order to synthesize the paper's content, in some cases, articles are identified with their coding number (Additional file 1: Table 1).

intercultural awareness as the main advantages, whereas the only challenge they mentioned was the difficulty involved in understanding film scripts. In Tuncay (2014), English learners stress the usefulness of films regarding the practice of the four language skills, translation, critical thinking, grammar, intercultural consciousness, and the depiction of authentic language. Likewise, in Argynbayev et al. (2014), EFL students affirmed that working on films had helped them to learn implicit features of the foreign culture and to identify negative language transfer in their writing assignments. In accordance with these learners, the EFL students participating in Chetia and Bhatt's (2020) research asserted that they had enjoyed the cinema-based approach and they confirmed that it had allowed them to enhance their English language skills, particularly, their listening ability. Remarkably, they even supported the incorporation of cinema into the school curriculum.

Teacher and learner perception

Two of the sources examined in RQ2 tap into the opinion of both EFL instructors and learners as regards the use of cinema for instructional purposes. Kabooha (2016) and Kalra (2017) report that both agents of the teaching–learning process have positive views on the exploitation of films for TEFL, and they gather similar data on teacher perception which have profound practical implications. The EFL teachers who participated in the two investigations underlined film selection as a deal breaker when introducing cinema into the English class as it was a rather tough task for them. Moreover, in Kalra's (2017) study, some of the instructors seemed unsure about their opinion on this topic, and, despite recognizing some of its educational benefits, were unwilling to start including cinema in their lessons because they lacked methodological and technical know-how in this area. These findings further emphasize the necessity to offer and spread empirically grounded pedagogical guidelines on the use of films for TEFL discussed in the previous sub-section.

Overall, the study sample shows that EFL instructors and students have a favorable opinion on the educational use of films. These English teachers are aware of some of the pedagogical possibilities of cinema and largely willing to make a more frequent implementation of this material, which supports Singh et al.' (2021) and Yue's (2019) claims. Regarding these learners, they are so satisfied with the film-based approach that some of them have urged the formal inclusion of cinema in education, corroborating other scholars' findings on the popularity of this resource among the youth (Robert & Marpaung, 2022; Sinyashina, 2022).

However, the results indicate that research attention has been mainly directed towards learners, and future studies on teachers' and/or students' thoughts on this topic should tackle the problematic aspects we now mention. These academics hardly describe the film-based interventions they carried out to gather the data (Argynbayev et al., 2014; Chetia & Bhatt, 2020; Kabooha, 2016; Kalra, 2017; Tuncay, 2014), and, since they only administered post-tests, they failed to measure the effect those interventions had on the participants' opinions. In fact, in some of these sources (Aksu-Ataç & Günay-Köprülü, 2018; Albiladi et al., 2018), the results are based on teachers' and students' intuitive perception on the use of films for TEFL as no cinema-based teaching plans were implemented and no pre- and post-tests were conducted.

RQ.3. How does cinema-based EFL impact students' learning?

The greatest amount of research on the potential of cinema for TEFL, more concretely, 59% of the sources chosen, target the third research question. In this respect, scholars have explored either theoretically or empirically the diverse effects film-based instruction may have on English students' learning processes.

Theoretical research

Three references are theoretical papers in which academics discuss the linguistic and intercultural advantages of films for TEFL. Gallagher (1988) predicts the revolutionary introduction of films into the EFL classroom and supports its use, in particular, for the teaching of writing. Kitai (2011) highlights the usefulness of this resource to challenge social stereotypes. As argued by the scholar, asking EFL learners to identify negative representations of certain communities throughout films and to reflect on them will help them to acquire a more accurate cultural understanding. More comprehensively, Xue and Pan (2012) explain how this audiovisual material can be used to tackle students' intercultural communication competence. According to these authors, since cinema allows English learners to practice their language skills at the same time as showing them cultural aspects, they can learn how to properly interact and immerse themselves in any foreign community.

Empirical studies

Twenty-three sources are empirical investigations through which researchers have tested and documented the theoretically-claimed advantages of cinema for English learners. Ashcroft et al. (2018) and Hadi and Zad (2019) measure the effect of film viewing on English students' lexical acquisition, and the results they obtained show that this method facilitates incidental vocabulary learning. Alharthi (2020) concentrates on students' incidental vocabulary learning too, but this researcher includes other variables like receptive and productive lexical acquisition and the retention of particular word classes. The participants scored higher on receptive vocabulary learning and the word class they retained the most was nouns. Plentiful academics have analyzed differences in students' outcomes in relation to subtitling modes. Yaseen and Shakir (2015) and Bostanci (2022) prove students' vocabulary improvement as a result of film viewing and reveal that subtitled screening has a particularly positive effect in this respect. Soltani and Soori (2015) compare the effectiveness of pedagogically adapted and authentic films with different subtitles when learning English vocabulary, showing that authentic films with English subtitles are preferred. Similarly, Mardani and Najmabadi (2016) explore the impact of three kinds of subtitled films on EFL students' lexical acquisition: bimodal (English audio and text), standard (English audio and Persian text), and reversed (Persian audio and English text), and they also examine the gender variable. Reversed subtitles had a greater positive effect on the participants' lexical learning, however, there were no statistically significant gender differences.

Other researchers have centered on the learning of a single lexical content. Iranmanesh and Darani (2018) and Tabatabaei and Gahroei (2011) examine the influence of the film-based approach in idiom acquisition. Besides the students' performance,

the former test gender differences and the latter explore English learners' and teachers' perceptions on the use of cinema to aid idiom learning. These studies have demonstrated that working on films helps EFL students memorize idiomatic expressions, and that instructors and learners have a positive attitude towards this teaching strategy. Moreover, Jurkovic (2016) presents a textual analysis of two film scripts to ascertain if cinema can be exploited to teach, particularly, maritime vocabulary. It is shown that *The Far Side of the World* and *The Perfect Storm* are useful didactic resources in this respect since both films are full of maritime lexicon.

As Jurkovic (2016) does, Basol and Kartal (2019) test the potential effectiveness of cinema when dealing with English pragmatics. They conduct a frequency analysis of four film scripts to check whether or not British and American films can be used to teach micro-level discourse markers (DMs). The researchers assert that this material allows EFL instructors to teach DMs both implicitly and explicitly since the films they analyzed reflect their use in English native speech.

Another benefit which has been extensively tested is the improvement of English language skills. Hayati and Mohmedi (2011) confirm the beneficial impact of subtitled films on EFL learners' listening comprehension. Qiu (2017) supports Hayati and Mohmedi's results because, in this study, the experimental group outperformed the control group, for which no film was screened. Besides, Qiu (2017) explores how the film-based approach influences the participants' motivation and anxiety when doing listening tasks. Nevertheless, no significant differences were reported between the groups regarding these two additional variables.

Also, experts in the field have scrutinized the effect of cinema on EFL learners' speaking ability. Ayand and Shafiee (2016) show that watching subtitled films helps English students improve their oral fluency and accuracy. As demonstrated by Liaghat and Afghary (2015), when films are exploited in the English classroom, learners start using more conversational strategies, which, in turn, results in a more fluent speech. Concerning Kim (2018), the researcher investigates the influence of two types of film screening on the students' oral expression. The control group worked on film fragments with the sound on whereas the experimental group used silent film clips, proving that the latter are more beneficial. Essentially, as silent film viewing stimulated the learners to speak and to be creative, they produced livelier and more natural utterances, as they emphasized.

Some research attention has been directed towards writing too. Asyidiq and Akmal (2020) use animation short films to teach EFL learners how to write narrative texts, and the data gathered reveal that the intervention had a positive influence on their writing ability. As affirmed by the students, this method helped them to understand the structure of narrative texts, capitalization, and punctuation marks, and film plots had been inspiring. For her part, Hameed (2016) checks the impact cinema has on the participants' listening, speaking, and writing skills, demonstrating that films allow students to improve their overall English language proficiency. Torabian and Tajadini's (2017) paper revolves around reading. They prove that watching animated films helps English learners enhance their reading comprehension, and that students have a positive perception on this approach.

Furthermore, three of these investigations address the intercultural advantages of cinema for TEFL. The two studies conducted by Lee on this issue (2017, 2018) demonstrate that the film-based approach allows EFL learners to broaden their cultural knowledge on specific themes such as Christmas in the United States or Indian customs. Nonetheless, in tune with Kitai (2011), the scholar underlines the importance of the instructor's guidance when using cinema to teach culture in order to avoid misconceptions. This is because, as she observed during the interventions, some films might provide exaggerated representations of cultural aspects for cinema purposes—to make the scenes funnier or more captivating. Yue (2019) tests interculturality together with the language skills and conducts a qualitative study to check the impact of the film *Mulan* on learners' intercultural communication competence, providing empirical support for Xue and Pan's (2012) theoretical discussion.

The enhancement of critical thinking skills has been documented as well. Liu (2019) shows that the cinema-based approach helps EFL students to develop their critical literacy since watching *I Am Legend* and *Blade Runner* encouraged the participants to think about technology and the future, crucial social matters that are portrayed in the two films.

The 26 references analyzed in this sub-section, whether from theoretical or empirical stances, report that cinema is a highly advantageous tool when learning English as a foreign language. Concretely, all these data show that cinema impacts EFL students' learning holistically because, as exposed above, working on films allows them to enhance various aspects of their language competence (the four language skills, their English vocabulary and pragmatics, and their intercultural knowledge), while, at the same time, honing their critical thinking skills appealingly. Hence, the study sample verifies, in turn, the linguistic, intercultural, and motivational dimensions of cinema other researchers have established (Sánchez-Auñón & Férez-Mora, 2021).

Although the pedagogical impact of cinema-based EFL has received most of the critical attention in this field, there are still some matters that merit further consideration. A major area of concern is the lack of detail as regards the film-based teaching sequences that were implemented in the selected empirical studies. Similarly to what happens for the references examined in RQ2, most of the above-mentioned empirical investigations provide little information on the teaching sequence used for obtaining data (articles 3, 5, 6, 9, 16, 17, 23, 30, 32, 35, 42, 43). The interventions reported are so fleetingly referred to that it is impossible to obtain a clear picture of what happened in class and of how cinema was exploited. This becomes even more evident in a set of studies in which the only cinema-based activity acknowledged as part of the intervention is watching the whole film (articles 7, 18, 36, 37). Such lack of information together with the too general condition of the activities proposed (in the case of mere film screenings) subtracts validity from the data since the reported gains might be due to other factors. Besides, as indicated in Additional file 1: Table 1, in some cases, the sample of participants was limited to one sex (Ayand & Shafiee, 2016; Hadi & Zad, 2019; Tabatabaei & Gahroei, 2011). Accordingly, larger samples of participants representing all sexes are needed so that results can be more reliable.

Common findings

In view of the data obtained, available research on this topic seems to have adopted a microscopic stance. As previously discussed, the use of cinema has multiple effects on EFL students' learning which can be divided into linguistic, intercultural, and motivational benefits (Alharthi, 2020; Charlebois, 2008; Hameed, 2016; Li & Wang, 2015; Sáchez-Auñón & Férez-Mora, 2021; Tabatabaei & Gahroei, 2011). Nevertheless, academics have mostly tackled these benefits in isolation when examining the potential of films for TEFL. The benefit of the film-based approach which has been explored the most in this field is the improvement of the four language skills (articles 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 27, 28, 31, 32, 33, 34, 37, 38, 39, 41, 43, and 44), followed by vocabulary learning (articles 2, 3, 5, 9, 13, 16, 19, 20, 27, 30, 34, 35, 36, and 42), development of intercultural consciousness (articles 2, 4, 24, 25, 26, 27, 31, 33, 38, 39, 41, 43, and 44), critical thinking ability (articles 11, 29, 38, and 39), and depiction of authentic language (articles 2, 31, and 38). Grammar (articles 34 and 38) and pragmatic (articles 8 and 34) learning as well as motivation (articles 22 and 31) have been studied to a lesser extent, and some benefits have not even been examined yet from any of the three perspectives—understanding of emotions and portrayal of non-trivial topics.

In fact, several researchers have focused on one of these advantages despite having addressed more during their film-based interventions. This might have altered the results obtained (Bostanci, 2022; Hameed, 2016; Kalra, 2017; Kim, 2018; Lee, 2017; Yaseen & Shakir, 2015). As an instance, after implementing film-based tasks that target vocabulary acquisition and the four language skills, Bostanci only tests their effects on the students' lexical learning (2022). Thus, it would be extremely enlightening to delve into the whole spectrum of advantages at once, covering, in such a way, the three dimensions of the benefits which films can bring to TEFL, and examining the benefits which have not been addressed to date. In such a way, further key elements on how best to articulate film-based EFL lesson plans could emerge, and a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of films on EFL students' learning could be defined.

Moreover, the study sample reveals that scholars have centered on university settings. Therefore, more research on the use of films for TEFL should be conducted at high school, a clearly under-researched setting, and at other educational levels which have been left aside, like primary school. This is of utmost importance since, for one thing, cinema might require distinct pedagogical exploitations depending on the maturity of students and, besides, the educational setting in which films are implemented might be an influential factor for EFL instructors' and learners' views on this method.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review was aimed at exploring the pedagogical potential of films for this discipline by addressing three research questions. The analysis of the study sample has indicated that EFL teachers have been provided with diverse theoretical and practical guidelines on the implementation of cinema (RQ1), that both EFL instructors and learners have positive perceptions on the educational use of films (RQ2), and that working on cinema impacts EFL students' learning positively and holistically (RQ3). Furthermore, the results obtained corroborate English teachers' commonly reported concerns on the full exploitation of films owing to their limited understanding of this matter.

In light of EFL instructors' and students' favorable opinions and the multifaceted positive impact of this resource on the students' learning processes, a more comprehensive introduction of cinema into EFL formal instruction should be promoted. One way of doing this might be complementing and reinforcing the pedagogical guidelines on the use of films teachers are offered. Since it has been shown that neither researchers nor teachers have reached clear agreements concerning the proper implementation of cinema in the EFL classroom due to the dearth of empirical evidence, an important line of development in this field involves the empirical validation of these pedagogical guidelines.

Other research gaps have been identified, which need to be addressed in order to continue shedding light on the value of cinema for TEFL. No doubt, there is a need for further research on teacher perception, which includes pre-tests to check the factors which encourage (or discourage) them when it comes to using films in EFL teaching–learning processes. Using alternative instruments such as focal groups when examining teacher and learner opinion would be revealing too. As for the impact of film-based EFL instruction on students' learning, introducing quantitative or mixed-approach research designs is a logical line of expansion in the field, as is using other instruments like surveys or focal groups to gather these data. All this might help to better interpret the reported benefits of film-based EFL lessons as more fine-grained trends might be defined.

When conducting these studies, it is important researchers describe in more detail the classroom intervention they conduct and exploit cinema beyond film screenings. Scholars should also tap into the benefits of the film-based approach which have not been examined yet (understanding of emotions and portrayal of non-trivial topics) and focus on underexplored educational contexts (high school and primary school). In geographical terms, research should be carried out in American and European instructional contexts, where the role of films in the EFL class has been barely examined, and in Africa and Oceania, where no references to this end are available to date.

Despite providing significant findings on this topic, there are some limitations that should be taken into account for future systematic reviews on the use of cinema for TEFL. This study was carried out in five databases, and only journal papers written in English and published in open access journals were considered for the selection. Therefore, future research could analyze a larger number of databases, or other databases which have not been examined yet in this respect, and include in the study sample other types of documents such as books or dissertations written in different languages and/or dealing with different foreign languages. Moreover, articles that delved into the implementation of films together with other audio-visual materials, methodologies, or textual modalities were excluded, and, therefore, could be studied in future systematic reviews. Finally, further research directions that might be adopted in the field of cinema-based TEFL include: examining the students' parents' views on the use of cinema in the EFL class, defining tighter film selection criteria, coming up with pools of materials in which activities for films are classified by age or content, designing assessment tools to check EFL learners' progress after implementing the film-based approach, or exploring differences in students' rate of agreement concerning the effectiveness of various textual modalities (musical, literary, and cinematic texts) when it comes to enhancing their language competence.

Abbreviations
TEFL   Teaching of English as a foreign language
EFL   English as a foreign language
L1   First language
DU   Didactic unit

Supplementary Information

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Additional file 1: Table 1. Coding scheme.

Author contributions
The authors ESA, PAFM, FMH have made substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work and to the acquisition, analysis and interpretation of the data gathered. ESA and PAFM have drafted the work and substantively revised it. Finally, the authors ESA, PAFM, FMH have approved all the versions of the manuscript, including the submitted version; and they have agreed both to be personally accountable for the author's own contributions and to ensure that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work, even ones in which the author was not personally involved, are appropriately investigated, resolved, and the resolution documented in the literature. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials
The dataset supporting the conclusions of this article is included within the article (and its additional file).

Declarations

Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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