

An Exploratory Practice Study on the Use of Film Adaptation in the Tunisian Literature Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory practice study examined the effectiveness of film adaptation in teaching a Shakespearean play, *The Merchant of Venice*, during the fall semester of 2022 at the Higher Institute of Languages, Gabès. Qualitative and quantitative data from third-year students majoring in English language, literature, and civilization, as well as teachers of English literature were collected through a questionnaire and two interviews. Questionnaire results indicated that the majority of students had a positive view of the film adaptation of the play in question, noting that it helped them overcome their anxiety when reading Shakespearean works and increased their motivation and engagement. The teachers interviewed highlighted the effectiveness of film adaptation in teaching literature, in general, and Shakespearean plays, in particular.

Keywords: exploratory practice, film adaptation, EFL, English teaching, students of English

INTRODUCTION

English Departments at Tunisian universities offer a number of subjects that support students majoring in the English language. Among these subjects is literature, where students read canonical texts written by iconic writers, including William Shakespeare. In Tunisia, Shakespeare holds a unique position as a dramatist whose texts contributed to human culture, art, and thought when addressing universal and timeless issues. Shakespeare's works have had particular influence on the development and modernization of the Tunisian theatre in the last 200 years, according to Darragi (2007). Therefore, studying Shakespearean plays has become a teaching tradition in the Arts and English Language Departments at Tunisian universities, such as the Higher Institute of Languages, Gabès, where third-year students explore Shakespeare's plays during the fall semester of their graduation year.

Despite the importance and immediacy of Shakespeare in the Tunisian consciousness (Darragi, 2007), teaching his texts results in anxiety among Tunisian EFL students as the texts are historically, culturally, socially and, most of all, linguistically remote from them. For

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instance, teaching *The Merchant of Venice* to third-year English students proved to be challenging when students were asked to comment on the complexity of the text as a tragicomedy that deals with matters of religious racism and gender inequality. The class is a semester-long course that introduces the students to key texts, features and characteristics of Elizabethan drama. This course is divided into basically two interconnected axes: the cultural and thematic aspects of the play as an example of Elizabethan drama and the linguistic and aesthetic manifestations of the Shakespearean art.

THE PUZZLE

The importance of teaching literature in an EFL class has been discussed, debated and researched since the times of the grammar translation method when literature was both the tool and purpose of teaching language. With the rise of communicative language teaching, the role of teaching literature has been further accentuated in promoting cultural understanding and awareness (Collie & Slater, 1987), enhancing learners' reading and writing skills and boosting their critical thinking (Burke & Brumfit, 2008).

In Tunisia, the teaching of literature in English departments is inspired by Collie and Slater's (1987) assertion that literature offers a varied body of written materials that deal with fundamental and enduring human issues. These issues are revealed through "reading literary texts [that help] students cope with language intended for native speakers and thus they gain additional familiarity with many different linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration and so on" (Collie & Slater, 1987, p. 6). Thus, the teaching of English literature focuses on the thematic and aesthetic aspects of the written text. As students read the text, they learn about English culture and customs, since literature depicts the lives and concerns of English people.

In today's world, globalization has greatly contributed not only to the availability of English books, but also to the cinematic adaptations of these works. Films as audio-visual modes offer a unique opportunity to overcome the linguistic sophistication and difficulty often associated with canonical works. Therefore, film adaptation may potentially help non-native students relate to the cultural and epistemological meanings contained in the original written work. By combining an analysis of the written text with watching the adapted film, students of English literature become familiar with many features of the narrative and develop different ways of connecting ideas, which would improve their writing and critical thinking skills. For these reasons, I attempted the use of film adaptation of the Shakespearean play: *The Merchant of Venice*.

In Tunisia, many studies have been conducted to test the importance of English and its development as a lingua franca, challenging the status quo of the French language, the country's second official language (Battenburg, 1997; Daoud, 2001). However, to my knowledge, there is little research on teaching English and the use of films as educational tools. Studies conducted in Saudi Arabia pointed to the struggles and challenges of teaching English literature in an EFL classroom. According to Hastings (2012), though the teaching of literature in the English Departments in the Arab world can be traced back to the 1920s, it still faces major hindrances largely due to the impact of literature courses on the Muslim-Arab identity (p. 18). This hindrance is felt in the Elizabethan drama class where students cannot dissociate from their religious and cultural background when analysing a Shakespearean play, and they are intimidated by the archaic nature of the language used. The teacher has to bring the English text closer to the student, reducing cultural, religious and linguistic barriers and reaching for the intellectual and universal concerns of the play. It is in this frame that the current study aimed to demonstrate how the use of a film adaptation of the

discussed literary text could help students overcome anxiety and boost their motivation and effective engagement in the classroom. The study was guided by three research questions:

1. Why are movies important in teaching literature?
2. Are students motivated and engaged in learning English literature when having classes animated by film adaptations of the literary text?
3. What are the challenges of using movies in a literature class?

THE DATA

Participants

Thirteen third-year students who were English majors at the Higher Institute of Languages, Gabès, and two teachers of literature at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Sousse and Sfax, participated in the study.

Data Collection

An online questionnaire was designed via Google Forms and shared online with the participants. The questionnaire asked them to reflect on their experience attending the drama course of the fall 2022, animated by a film adaptation of the play in question. Below is a table that provides an overview of the questionnaire respondents.

TABLE 1
Questionnaire Respondents

Target population	Sample size	Research setting	Sampling technique
3 rd year students in the target institute	13	English Department of the Higher Institute of Languages, Gabès	Systematic sampling

The questionnaire had two parts: 1) demographic information and engagement and motivation in the literature class in general, and 2) attitude toward its current and future use of film adaptation. The questionnaire included checkbox questions, multiple choice questions and scale items as well as open-ended questions as qualitative measures.

Two interviews were conducted to gather the perceptions of teachers of English literature about the benefits and challenges of using films to teach literature. The two interviewees were my former colleagues who had been teaching literature at universities and who also had had experience utilising films in their literature classes.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Tunisian Students' Attitude towards English Literature

Results from the questionnaire show that almost 50% of the respondents said they enjoy literature. Nine students had answers varying between enjoying and enjoying their literature classes very much.

The students' positive attitude is further confirmed with the following item on the questionnaire about their participation in class activities when attending the literature course.

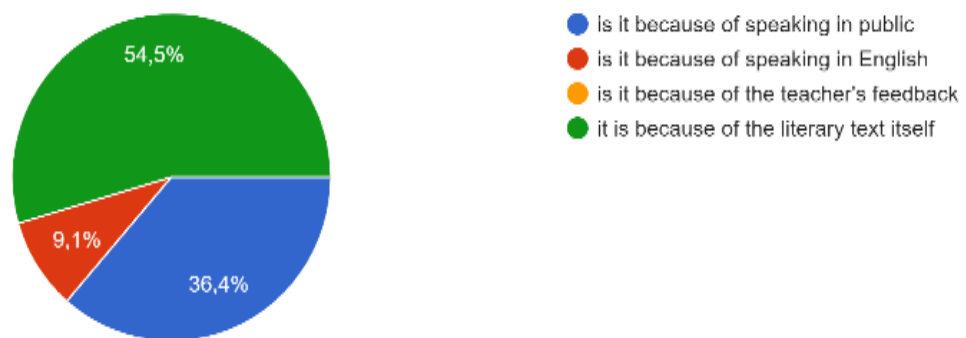
All respondents said they had participated in the class activities, including those who previously said that they did not enjoy literature.

The respondents indicating that they not only participate in the activities but also enjoy them suggests that despite its abstract nature and its call for critical thinking, literature can be an engaging subject, especially if teachers can help their students overcome their anxiety when discussing the selected literary text. When asked about their reasons for feeling anxious and stressed out while attending the literature course, over half of the students agreed on the nature of the text as being the primary cause of their uneasiness, as shown in Figure 1 below. This unease is mainly due to the fact that the texts are written in very sophisticated language, with metaphors and imagery, and not straightforward.

FIGURE 1
Text as a Main Cause of Anxiety

5. Why would you feel stressed when attending the literature class

11 réponses



It seems that the teachers of literature in Tunisia are aware of such a linguistic hindrance, which prevents students from fully enjoying and engaging the content in the literature classroom. The two teacher interviewees acknowledged their students' struggle with the literature course mainly due to their lack of comprehension of the language used in the texts. This idea can be linked to one teacher's reference to "visualizations" in film adaptations of the discussed literary work in the classroom. While the text depends on words that may be unfamiliar to some readers, films are based on visuals that bring the idea closer and more clearly to the viewer/reader. To further build on the assistance films can offer in rendering literary texts more manageable, another teacher asserted that "films play a fundamental role in the teaching of literature, especially in drama classes by exposing students to real performance of plays instead of reading them only." The adaptation of a play permits the reader to visualize the stage and the position of characters on it, which is deemed important for the students' general overview of the text. It is this awareness of the urgent need to find a suitable means to render the text visually accessible to the students that motivated this research.

Films Boosting Engagement and Motivation

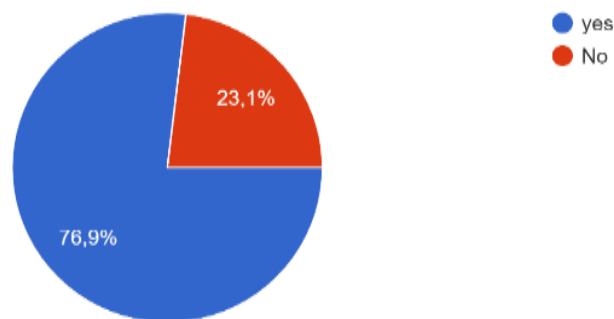
Results from the questionnaire show that 6 of the 13 students strongly supported the use of films as part of the literature class activities. The same students also strongly agreed that watching films helped them further grasp the written text. Over 50% of the respondents said that the use of films motivated them as they developed a better grasp of the text. This attitude explains the fact that almost the same number of respondents strongly agreed with the

need to use this strategy in all literature courses, including poetry, fiction and literary surveys. The respondents' answers were consistent with the answers of the teachers, who stated that the use of technology in an EFL literature class could strengthen students' engagement and motivation.

To further test the efficiency of the procedure of employing films as part of the classroom routine, a yes-no question was asked to check that such utility would motivate students to attend and engage in the classroom activities; almost 77% of the students confirmed attending the lesson and participating in the classroom activities animated by the use of film adaptation.

FIGURE 2
Respondents Watching the Film Adaptation of the Play in Question

8. Did you watch the filmic adaptation of the play
13 réponses



In response to the question, “how was the film used in the class activities?” the answers were varied but overall positive, including some approving the use and some finding it helpful to render class discussions fruitful and engaging. A respondent thus commented, “We watched then we reflected on some issues deemed important,” while another student asserted that being a visual learner, the use of the film assisted him/her in better understanding the play and hence better participating in the group as well as class discussions. Yet another respondent said, “I did not attend the lesson, but heard it was a great success.” These comments suggest to me that some of my lesson objectives were met, especially the objective of using film adaptation to lessen the linguistic difficulty of the written text.

One of the teachers interviewed noted that films bring the discussed text alive and provide students with “a genuine atmosphere of language acquisition that boosts their motivation and enthusiasm.” To foster such motivation, she added that she allowed her students to select or suggest their own preferred adaptations, thinking that this would lead to deeper engagement and better learning results. Students' engagement is one of the tell-tale benefits of implementing film adaptations to teach a canonical play such as *The Merchant of Venice*.

Participants answers to a related open-ended question on the questionnaire touched on the linguistic, cultural and thematic aspects of their learning. According to the comments made, a serious problem that confronts students when reading an Elizabethan drama such as the selected text is the literary and archaic language it uses. Such language hinders students' ability to understand the text, and thus to participate in class activities, which are mostly discussion tasks intended to develop a thorough grasp of the text.

Most of the responses to the open-ended question indicated that by watching filmed scenes each session, students were better able to develop a better grasp of the language of the text in general and relate to certain sentence structures, especially since the film version is accompanied by English subtitles, and they became familiar with key symbols and motifs that were crucial for understanding the text. One respondent, for example, said that although “the play was complex,” the film “made it easier for us to understand some vocabulary.” They went on explaining that the visual effects of the film “help reading through the gestures, movements, the tone even.” Such reading would pave the way for a better grasp of the “symbolic dimension of some motifs,” they added. Specific zoom shots in the movie accentuate the symbolic dimension of some motifs in the text that turn into key props in the movie, such as the three different caskets in the will of Portia’s father. According to the will, only the one who finds Portia’s portrait in one of these caskets can marry her. The importance of these props lies in enabling students to develop a better comprehension of concepts of usury, religious segregation, and gender subordination.

Additionally, the life-like nature of the movie helped students relate the play to their everyday life concerns and transcend its linguistic complexity. A respondent noted that the movie assisted them in remembering parts of the plot and associating scenes to key stages of the pyramidal structure of the play. Such understanding is important for a better mastery of the aesthetic and didactic dimensions of the text. In other words, when a student comprehends the linguistic and aesthetic aspects of the text, they can grasp its gist and morale and relate it to their own life. Responses to the questionnaire suggest that once students overcame their linguistic difficulties, they were capable of interpreting the text and discussing its aesthetic and didactic implications. In the words of one of the respondents, the film “helps in seeing the world from your own perspective too as the issue was universal and some scenes felt so real.” Bridging the gap between the abstract and the concrete allowed the students to move from a surface reading to a deeper one that attest to improved “critical thinking skills,” as claimed by the respondents.

What makes readers, viewers and researchers come back again and again to *The Merchant of Venice* is its central themes of friendship, racism, and prejudices—themes that prove to be timeless and universal. For instance, by fathoming how racism is featured in the text through the use of the film, the students understand that racism is not limited to skin colour or cultural background, it can be also related to religious segregation. The relationship between Shylock and Antonio exemplifies the religious tensions that marked a 16th century Venetian society. The film brings this complex matrix of power to the forefront by zooming in on the hats that the members of the Jewish community in the movie had to wear to be distinguished and stigmatized, something that it is not clearly mentioned in the text. Additionally, religious discrimination is further accentuated in the movie through cinematic techniques such as the darkening of the ghetto where the Jewish community lives. Once these elements are combined, students are more capable of grasping the theme of religious racism and relating it to their Tunisian context. This ability is what I consider an important learning objective.

Grasping the didactic dimension of the play appears to have had a decisive impact on the students’ engagement level in the classroom. I noticed a growing desire to participate in the routine activities such as regularly attending classes, performing required reading and writing tasks, participating in discussion, and answering the quizzes. As mentioned earlier, all respondents said they regularly attended the drama class and committed themselves to the class activities by working hard to learn. This effort was manifested in asking for further readings that would support their performance in exams. To the final survey question, “will you use film adaptations if you are to teach literature,” the respondents answered affirmatively.

Drawing on Fredricks et al.'s (2004) model of engagement, according to which emotional and behavioural engagements are coupled with cognitive engagement, I reviewed the students' exam papers, where some of the benefits of using film adaptations could be traced. For the exam, the students were provided with an extract from the play on which to write a commentary following some guiding questions about structure, characterization, and themes. In their answers, the students managed to adequately situate the passage in the general plot of the play. They also developed a good grasp of the characters by seeing their motives and agendas (see Appendix A). For instance, through referring to exact references in the text, the students developed a better grasp of the manipulative nature of Bassanio, who emotionally manipulates Antonio. What I also noticed was that some students' answers were weak due to their limited English proficiency, though the intended message was sound.

In sum, utilising film adaptation seemed beneficial for Tunisian students of English literature as it allowed them to overcome the linguistic barriers of a canonical text and bridge the temporal and cultural gap between themselves and a 16th century Elizabethan text. However, although setting up a stress-free literature class results in engagement and motivation, using films also brings challenges.

Challenges of Using Films to Teach English Literature

When provided with the opportunity to watch a film adaptation of the selected text, the respondents claimed their support for this tool as it helped them bring their anxiety under control and enhance their reading comprehension, boost imagination and develop critical thinking skills. This attitude was also shared by the interviewees who asserted the effectiveness of films as a pedagogical tool. However, the interviews with teachers of English literature highlighted certain challenges related to this practice. For instance, one teacher shed light on a number of factors to be considered while choosing an appropriate adaptation. A play such as *The Merchant of Venice* has been adapted to cinema on various occasions, with each conversion carrying a different vision and understanding of the play. Additionally, many adaptations are not faithful to the text in terms of characters, events, or even language. This creates a serious problem for the teacher, who has to be very attentive while making a choice. Another question is to what extent the filmmaker's vision of the story matches that of the author. As a result, teachers of English literature in the Tunisian EFL classroom who consider the use of film adaptation to animate their sessions face a serious challenge of faithfulness that may complicate the teacher's choice and further complicate the students' problems.

Another pedagogical challenge relates to the duration of class. A teacher voiced a concern during the interview about how effective it would be to use films in a drama session that is scheduled for one hour and a half per week. The teacher's concern speaks to the need to balance reading tasks, discussion opportunities, exam preparation, and watching movies. The literature session time is too limited to do all of those things.

A question that remains to be asked concerns the impact of film watching on the students' English language development. For instance, do films help students in acquiring language accuracy? When looking at the students' drama exam papers, I found that they fully understood the requirements of the exam. In terms of content, they showed a full grasp of the given extract, in terms of characterization and themes. However, in terms of language, I traced many problems, including awkward use of sentence structures, grammatical errors, and composition issues. To grade the papers, a rubric was designed to cover four aspects, which are content, language, organization and mechanics. While the students developed a certain mastery of content and mechanics, they still lagged behind in language and organization. It seems that the students did not develop other skills at the same time (see Appendix B). It

appears that films help boost the general understanding of the subject matter, but not students' linguistic performance.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This exploratory practice study aimed to explore the role of films in improving students' engagement in a literature class and their understanding of the selected text. The questionnaire and interview data showed that despite their positive attitude towards the English drama course, students experienced anxiety and stress primarily due to the linguistic complexities of a 16th century canonical script, which hindered their comprehension and therefore their interpretation. In this context, I considered the use of film adaptation, which proved beneficial as it enhanced the students' level of engagement. Their motivation level significantly impacted their performance. These findings were based not only on the analysis of the questionnaire and interview data, but also on my own classroom observation.

I would use the findings to initiate some changes in the classical teaching of literature, hoping to render it more engaging and in tune with the 21st century classroom. I would also consider sharing the findings with colleagues.

The choice of films greatly depends on motivational factors, classified by Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory as intrinsic and extrinsic. While intrinsic motivation is linked to enjoyment and satisfaction, extrinsic motivation has to do with outside factors such as rewards, incentives or fear of punishment. In this context, film adaptation of the play provided students with intrinsic motivation to learn English literature. I observed remarkable progress in students' performance both in class and in exam (see appendix A and B). The data showed growing engagement and motivation. One of the ways to raise and keep the motivation high, as suggested by Dörnyei (1994), is to "include a sociocultural component in the L2 syllabus" (p. 281), such as films, TV recordings, and music into the classroom.

Although the majority of the questionnaire respondents confirmed that the film adaptation used in the drama class of the fall semester helped them gain control over their initial anxiety when dealing with an archaic, Shakespearean text due to its sophisticated and elaborated language, the benefit seemed limited to the comprehension of the text. While they improved their reading, comprehension, speaking and critical thinking skills, their writing did not show much improvement. This observation is worth keeping in mind as I further explore the potential of film adaptation as a pedagogical strategy.

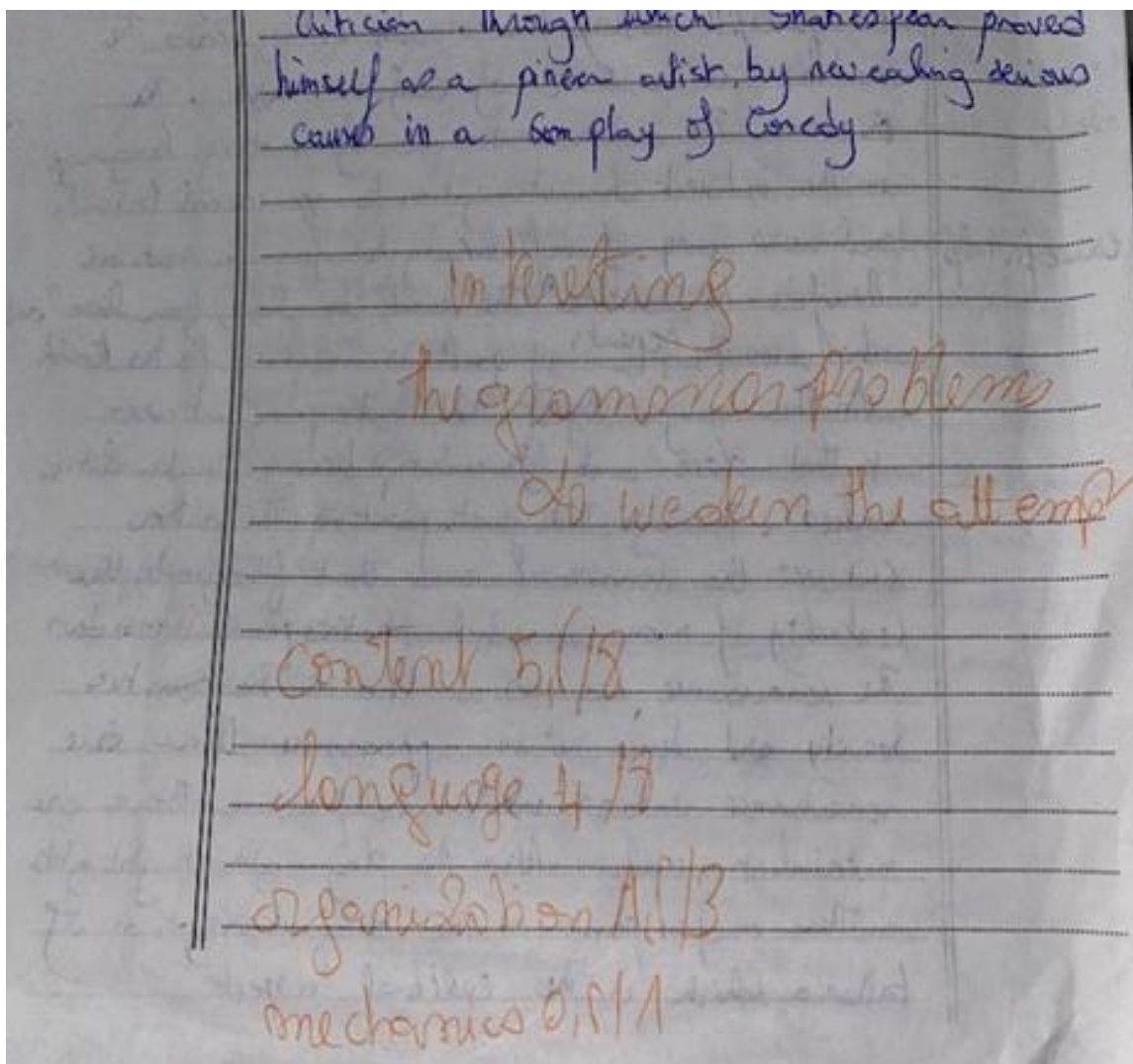
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APPENDIX A

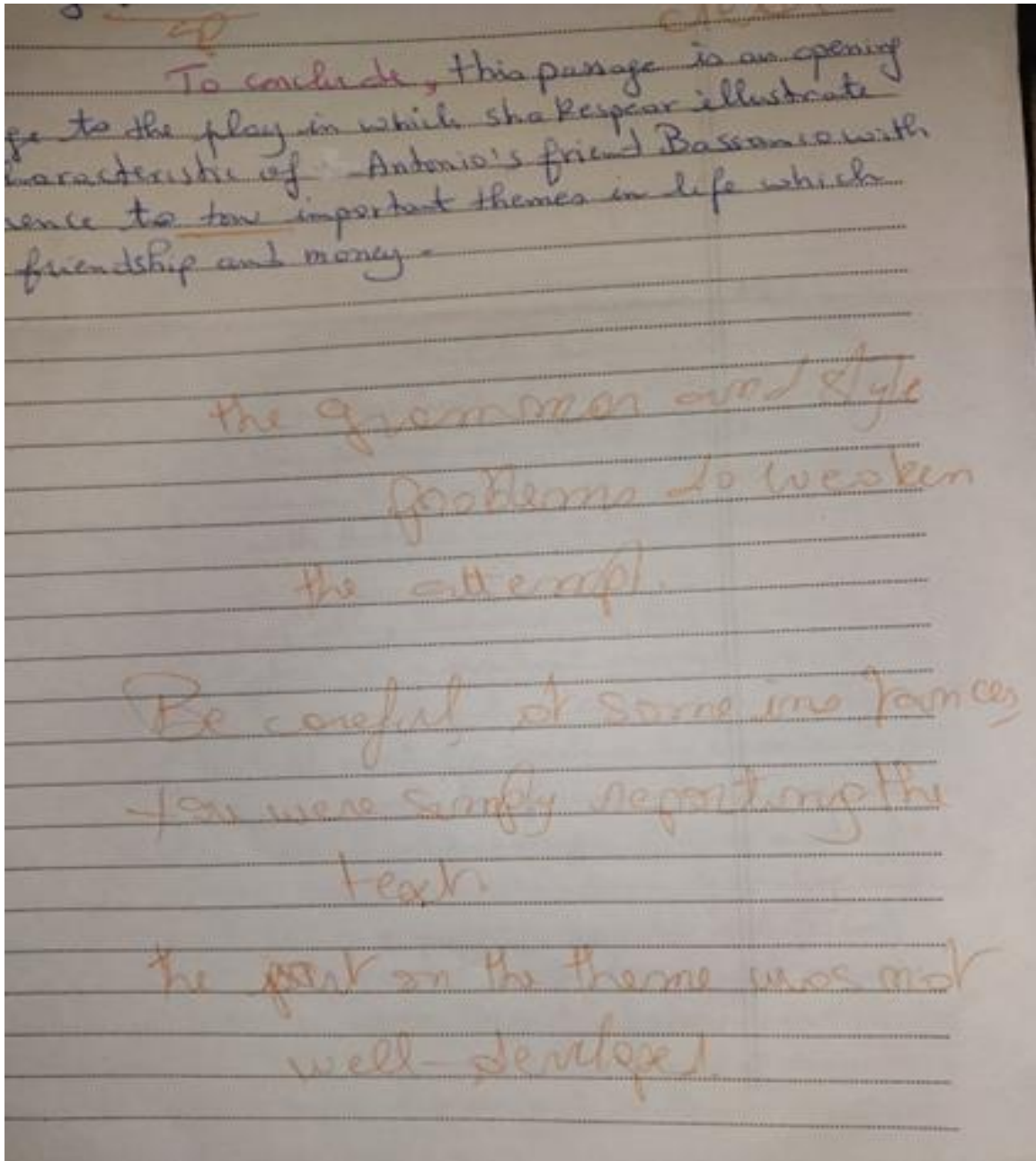
Example 1 of Teacher Feedback on Student's Exam



Note. The remarks assert the student's full grasp of the requirements of the exam as made clear through the designed rubric of assessment.

APPENDIX B

Example 2 of Teacher Feedback on Student's Exam



Note. The feedback highlights the grammar and composition problems the students still face, which invites the teacher to further explore films as pedagogical tools to enhance students' language skills.