

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Teaching History using Feature Films: The Ghanaian Experience

Dugba Ransford Tei\*<sup>1</sup> | Lawrence Baffoe-Arthur<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>Saviour Senior High School  
Oseim, Ghana<sup>2</sup>Mfantsiman Girls Senior High School  
Saltpond, Ghana**Correspondence**

\*Corresponding Author.

Email: dugba.tei@gmail.com

**Abstract**

This study examines the experiences of lecturers in using feature films to teach history in the University of Cape Coast. The study specifically sought to find out the availability of historical feature films for teaching history, the criteria regarding how historical feature films are used by lecturers in teaching history and the effects of historical feature films on teaching history. The study employed descriptive research design. In all, four (4) lecturers formed the sample size for the study. The instrument used to collect data was semi-structured interview guide. The study found out that the University did not have a film library where lecturers could visit to access films for teaching. It was also revealed that most history lecturers in the university followed a wide range of guidelines whenever they use films to teach. Lastly, it was revealed that feature films usage had positive effects on the teaching and learning of history. Based on the results, it was suggested that there is the need for all stakeholders in the various universities to contribute in putting measures in place to ensure that there is the establishment of film libraries where lecturers could visit to access films for their instructional practices.

**KEYWORDS:**

feature films, historical empathy, modern teaching technologies

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The 21st-century era has portrayed the usage of media and digital tools as one of the crucial skills that each individual and educator must possess. Ananiadou & Claro (2009), stressing one of the flagship reports of the OECD in the 21st century, emphasized the usefulness of audio-visuals and the digital media landscape as an effective teaching and learning material. Historical researchers such as Ferrer (2015) postulate that historical movies have become the new norm in shaping the instructional models of teaching about the past. In the past two decades, scholars in developed countries such as countries like Australia (Donnelly, 2018); Canada (Boutonnet, 2013); France (Héry-Vielpeau, 2013); and the USA (Marcus, Metzger, Paxton, & Stoddard, 2010) have extensively researched on the usage of films (feature films, documentary, short-history clips, video games, docudramas) and their significance in the educational settings. Feature films became popular in the 1900s. There emerged a symbiotic relationship between movies and historical narratives. Hence, history provided good sources of materials that the directors, producers, and actors needed to present a slice of time and place in interpreting the past (Kathryn, G Donnelly, 2010; Landsberg, 2015).

Studies (Aggarwal, 2009; Akram & Malik, 2012; Elijah, 2014) have attempted to determine the importance of teaching using audio-visual aids. These studies revealed that lecturers mainly implement these films in the classroom through a combination of 'trial and error,' professional experience, and knowledge of the learning styles of their students. Donnelly (2010; 2014a) adds that teaching History with Film provides a mechanism of narrative engagement and a vehicle for teaching a deep understanding of historical knowledge and the nature of the discipline. Pinhey (2002) postulated that using historical films in the classroom

does not give much information like the textbook. However, filming in history classes helps enhance creative thinking ability. The students' critical thinking is very advanced because students can view film critically and with a specific context.

Contemporary digital media have replaced the over-reliance on printed teaching and learning materials. Educational institutions have extensively patronized such digital media in their teaching space. A recent study conducted by Debra Donnelly (2020) in New South Wales, Australia, observed that history educators have become more demanding of using films to get across their historical theories and facts. The author further asserts that teachers view films as a potent pedagogical tool in arousing the historical consciousness among learners and proposes several mechanisms needed to ensure the implementation of modern teaching audio-visuals such as film, virtual reality simulations, and online museums in history education. The study also revealed seeming striking interconnectivity between history films and historical empathy.

Again, the incorporation of films in modern teaching has been very potent in this era due to the influx of information communication technology, providing an engaging path for instructors and learners to enrich classroom activities. Bruti (2016) postulated that using films in teaching specifically to students of different language backgrounds creates a pragmatic way to develop cross-cultural competencies and strong classroom interactions. Wu (2016) added that using audio-visual media platforms in teaching connects with culturally responsive pedagogies.

Instructors and learners (audience) who usually uses films as instructional media argue that there has been a virtual reality or an experienced reality that films/movies provide. The emergence of technology-created film-making tools such as green screens and computer-generated imagery tools has ushered historical films into a potential interpretation and pedagogical tool in education (Azmi, 2021).

The study can contribute to the existing body of knowledge in identifying the problems involved in using modern technologies to teach history at all levels of education. Additionally, with the growing allegations about bringing out graduates who cannot intellectually and practically connect historical events, this study can help with strategies to improve history educators' performance and instructional knowledge. Although studies on the use of film in the classroom have been conducted in several western countries: Germany (Wehen, 2012); France (Briand, 2005); China (Zhang, Yuan, He, 2020), Sweden (Hultkrantz, 2014, 2016); Ghana (Boadu et al., 2014); Canada (Ryan, Henderson & Aagaard, 2021); Australia (Donnelly, 2018); Britain (Blake & Cain, 2011; Xu et al., 2022) and the USA (Lisa Gilbert, 2019). However, over the past five years (2018 – 2022), no related studies have been done on the topic in Ghana. As such, the study seeks to address such a gap and answer the following research questions, (1) how do teachers/educators access historical feature films for teaching history?; (2) how do lecturers use historical feature films in teaching history? and; (3) what are the effects of historical feature films on history teaching?

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 | The concept of 'Teaching'

Tamakloe, Amedahe & Atta (2005) described teaching as imparting knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to learners in a situation. The teacher acts as a guide, a counselor, and a motivator. This means that teaching and learning go together. When a teacher teaches it, it is expected that the learners should be learning what is being taught. Here, two complementary roles are played side by side, namely, the role of the teacher and that of the learner (Farrant, 1980, as cited in Tamakloe et al., 2005). In this sense, Farrant (1980) adds that a lesson that is considered to have to be taught has been learned. Therefore, teaching and learning are the two sides of a coin because education does not happen without a learner.

To a large extent, the success of teaching and learning depends on the learner's readiness or preparedness to learn. Rajagopalan (2019) defined teaching as the ability to impart knowledge to a group of people or show the way to something or a process. Teaching is the transmission of ideas, knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings to someone to bring about a certain change in that person. The teaching goal can be achieved when the teacher and the learner agree and participate in the learning process.

Further, teaching improves interpersonal relationships between people as they interact to exchange ideas (Durbin, 2002). Through teaching, people acquire the skills to be responsible individuals, gain employment, and lead a fulfilled life. Teaching is also the wheel on which knowledge is passed on from one generation to another (Akinpelu, 1991). And lastly, teaching and learning are aspects of education which is important in developing individual's knowledge, skills and values (Terano, 2018)

## 2.2 | Feature Films

The Associated Press (2003) defined feature film as any type (also called a movie or motion picture) with a long-running time to be considered the principal or sole film to fill a program. Feature films are primarily between 70 and 210 minutes long. In addition, Rosenstone (1995) defined feature film as the primary, full-length film in a cinema program that included a short film and often a newsreel. Therefore, it is realized that feature films are characterized by a peculiar rule which stresses the film's length. With this rule, there is the inference that any video or film showing a span of fewer than 70 minutes cannot be regarded as a feature film.

Grushka (2010) examined that Feature films became popular in the 1900s. As such, there emerged a symbiotic relationship between movies and historical narratives. History provided good sources of material, of which the films needed to present a slice of time and place in defiance of temporal laws. Öztaú (2008) added that the relationship between the film's usage in the history classroom was a mutual one since the history subject provided a rich source of materials for filmmakers while these films provided a vehicle through which peoples' events and past were showcased. Donnelly (2010) investigated the usage of modern technologies in the teaching and learning sessions and found that new technologies and images are altering how the world is encountered and understood in a world where communication is immediate and international. Knowledge is now being explored and built-in an image-rich environment influenced by a broad range of media and social networking.

Contemporarily, the school environment cannot be separated from the cultural background, mainly affected by the technological developments in the information era. Therefore, in this era, films are as influential as history educators. As Russell (2010) reported, adolescents spend over three hours a day watching television and videos. In this respect, modern-day teachers have strategically begun to use films as an instructional tool for history education in the 21st century. When films are used as an instructional tool in history education, students can have a chance to see the theories and concepts in action. They comprehend the historical events and ideas from a vivid perspective as if they leap from the screen.

Marcus et al. (2010) investigated and empirically evaluated that teaching history with films provides a fresh, engaging, and straightforward overview of students' understanding. They are teaching with film to enhance social studies instruction effectively. Hence, movies can effectively support the development of students' historical film literacy through topics such as using film to develop historical empathy and interpretive skills and explore controversial issues. Students need to think critically about the past and reassess preconceived notions about history by developing these skills.

Walker (2006) examined that the teacher's relationship during classroom lessons must be to explain to students the significant contents of films being watched in a classroom. This teacher's activity tends to elicit a high response from the students. Again, when films are used as an instructional tool compared to the traditional approach, students become more active, thinking, constructing, or solving rather than memorizing information. He added that popular films are cultural products; they give students a chance to connect to the historical era the movie takes place. Documentaries and historical films are typically treated as factual statements in history teaching. Dahar & Faize (2011) claimed that using films in the classroom is part of a more significant pedagogical shift that enlarges the very notion of literacy and the range of skills required for future citizens. Their empirical review ascertained that films provided a broader perspective as scenes from these films offer a comparative understanding and extensive insight for both educators and students.

### 2.2.1 | Availability of Films in Teaching

As a contemporary multimodal classroom instructive model, films tend to be used in a plethora of academic fields – as such, their relevance cannot be understated. According to Hanna (2019), using films in teaching has been pedagogically significant as it helps students empathize, connect, reflect, and theorize on their classroom learnings.

Providing narratives and imagery protocols in classroom works promotes excellent dynamics in such classrooms irrespective of the subject matter. These audio-visual accounts or reports can help improve students, especially in mathematical classes. It creates many mechanisms that make realistic imagery of problem-solving skills and emotional and contextual understanding for learners to explore diverse ideas (Averill, 2018).

Aina (2013) conducted a study on “Instructional Materials and Improvisation in the Classroom” in Kwara State Lower Secondary Schools. He collected the data using the questionnaire technique from 64 respondents. The findings revealed that instructional materials such as videos were not primarily available in the classroom due to the teachers' neglect of their usefulness in teaching. Teachers primarily relied on textbooks because of the unavailability of funds due to the expensiveness of videos. The study concluded that teachers needed to look for other means of providing the required teaching and learning materials, especially films, to cope with teaching and learning demands.

### 2.3 | Effects of Films in History Education

Over the past few decades, there has been a growing patronization of movies/films in history teaching due to such media's significant roles in the classroom. In his book titled "Teaching History with Film," Stoddard (2018) established that films had become a contemporary instructional medium. He added that such press acts as an intriguing tool in history teaching that stimulates and drives learners' historical thinking and enables teachers to teach controversial or challenging history topics. Again, educators who teach in schools found mainly in black communities in America usually employ student-produced historical films to support their student learning – as it arouses historical inquiry and empathy.

Further, Gilbert (2019) conducted a qualitative interview study. She used the 'Assassin's Creed,' a narrative video game with a historical setting to ascertain its possible impacts on students' classroom learning and interest. Her study revealed that students/respondents argued that the video game offered immediate access to history and triggered a sense of historical connectivity in their activity. Also, the respondents were able to reflect and theorize about the video games' historical correctness. Nonetheless, the study stressed the lack of critical engagement such video games had and should be looked into.

In history education, films have been regarded as a helpful tool that educators and learners use to bridge the abstractness gap that historical events pose. According to Marcus et al. (2018), films tend to aesthetically create a visualization of past events, people, and facts. The authors point out that films used in the history classroom enable learners to visualize the context of abstract even of or far-reaching events that were difficult to comprehend. According to Marcus et al. (2018), et al. films increase and motivate students' interest in the history class. However, the authors cautioned that teachers who use such films as pedagogical tools must constantly remind themselves and their students that these films are still interpretations of the past events and not the actual events and people.

### 2.4 | Empirical Studies on the Effects of Using Films in Teaching Other Courses (Subjects)

Liu (2019) conducted a study using classroom observation notes, students' in-class oral assessments, and post-class reflective reports to explain how science-fiction films could enrich the multi-literacy skills of students in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Her study revealed that meticulously selected films such as *I am Legend* and *Blade Runner* served as a better instructional pedagogy for developing EFL students' literacies – as these films positively exposed these students to Western ideologies. Again, her study established that films promoted EFL students' critical thinking and analytic skills as they posed higher-order questions to be solved using such source materials.

Moreover, a case study was conducted by Yilmaz (2020) to determine the effects of using films to teach Turkish as a foreign language. He employed the document analysis method to obtain information on his research. His study revealed that using audio-visual materials to teach foreign languages developed students' communicative abilities, increasing the learners' intercultural understanding. As such, Yilmaz (2020) concluded that films chosen should be rich in formulaic expressions, idioms, proverbs, and foreign cultural elements – as it improves students' holistic academic performances.

In their discursive paper, "Using documentary films to teach nurses about gender and the vulnerabilities facing older men with advanced dementia," Bartlett, Jøranson & Breievne (2020) argued that films are an effective way of teaching nursing students and nurses about health and illness – in that films engage learners emotionally and expose them to practically new trends by looking through patient's eyes. Also, the authors found that films enabled deep health discussions and improved the communicative skills of nurses. Finally, their review of the various short health documentary films on older men with advanced dementia uncovered an untapped teaching resource for care educators/nurses.

Lastly, a study conducted by Thaíla Soares da Costa Picanço et al. (2019) on the topic "Films as an Educational Resource in the Teaching of Humanistic Attitudes to Medicine Students." Their study obtained qualitative and quantitative data from 107 medical students from the Federal University of Amapá. It was revealed that the incorporation of audio-visuals (cinema/film-*s*/feature films) in the instructional methodologies of undergraduate medical students has been an effective tool in the teaching of humanistic attitudes during medical training and should be systematically inserted into the pre-clinical years of medicine courses as a balancing resource in developing their affective skills.

## 3 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

The study aims to examine the experiences and the use of feature films in teaching history among university lecturers. Initially, the research design covered population, sample size, and sampling technique. The instrument used for data collection was a

semi-structured interview guide. A semi-structured interview guide was deemed appropriate because it allows respondents some flexibility in expressing their opinions. Whiting (2008) confirmed this by contending that a semi-structured interview guide will allow respondents some flexibility as it can be adjusted to meet diverse situations. The lecturers of the University of Cape Coast constitute the population for this study.

In this study, a sample size comprised of four (4) history lecturers who incorporates feature films in their teaching is taken. Munhall and Boyd (1993) indicated that, for qualitative research finding to be saturated, a population of 10 can have a sample size ranging from 4 to 10 (which must not be below four and exceed 10). The data elicited through the semi-structured interview was analyzed using the research questions as the main themes.

## **4 | ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS OF INTERVIEW RESULTS**

This section presents the results of the research questions. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The results are presented as follows:

### **4.1 | How do teachers/educators get access to historical films to teach history?**

This research objective sought to determine the availability of film use in teaching History. When asked whether feature films are made available for history teaching, most of the respondents indicated feature films are not made visibly available at the library.

However, there are a limited number of copies at the main library. This is evident from a comment made by one of the participants: “the answer is certainly no. However, there is a section in the main university library that has been named audiovisuals section where a limited copy of films could be accessed”. This implies that the lecturers improvise alternative means of getting films. This piece of information reflects the earlier findings of Aina (2013) that educational institutions mostly lack available funds to establish film libraries. Hence, teachers need to look for other means of providing the required teaching and learning materials, especially films, to cope with the classroom demands of teaching and learning. Similarly, Warmington, Van Gorp, & Grosvenor (2011), researching the acquisition of films, revealed that teachers who use films, especially documentary films, acquire them freely from online sources such as YouTube and other internet-based products. They argued that teachers are barely exposed to a plethora of appropriate film sources for their students. Hence, these available sources are predominantly critiqued, analyzed, and screened by teachers before they incorporate them into the classroom.

Other studies (Donnelly, 2006; Marcus & Stoddard, 2007) support the study findings by claiming that due to the growing audience of the use of modern technologies in teaching and their unavailability in most educational institutions, most educators personally purchase and make use of a wide variety of audiovisual products, including movies, documentary films, and docudramas. Nonetheless, 20th-century research done by Scherer (1983) in America posited that lecturers mainly procure necessary films from the university’s film library for their classroom teaching. This suggests that the university should make appropriate movies available for the lecturer to use in education.

### **4.2 | How do lecturers use historical feature films in teaching history at the university?**

This research objective sought to determine the criteria for using feature films in teaching History at the University. Five themes were involved in the analysis. These themes will be discussed, with quotes presented to illustrate each piece. Data gathered from the interview with lecturers revealed that although there are no well-established guidelines guiding how they are to use films to teach in the classroom. This was primarily due to the inability of the university to create a functioned film library in the school. However, almost all the lecturers interviewed agreed that indeed whenever they used films to teach, there were certain principles they followed personally. Two quotes illustrate this: “There’s no way I view films to my students without taking into consideration certain key principles”; “before I view a film with my students, I looked at the film’s ethical appropriateness to know whether that films do not have explicit sex scenes as well as violence content.” The results imply that most lecturers consider the appropriateness of film contents and specific ethical issues. This confirms the position of Knobel & Lankshear (2007) that specific general guidelines are followed when students are viewing films. These include; the particular linguistic level of students, the high quality of movies, appropriate speech delivery, clear picture and sound, and the appropriateness of content (films with explicit sex, gratuitous violence, and constant cursing should be avoided).

Further, the finding suggests that most lecturers frequently view films before they are shown in the classroom to their students. For instance, one lecturer commented: “I view any film before I show it to my students to authenticate its appropriateness because I don’t want any professional misconduct.” This might be because lecturers mostly want to reconcile these films with known historical facts and figures to authenticate them before using them in the classroom. This finding concurs with Marcus, Metzger, Paxton, & Stoddard’s (2018) research. Their study discussed instructors’ potential issues when incorporating history films into their classroom lessons and film selections. Marcus et al. (2018) argue that teachers become constrained by the appropriateness of films to be used in their history classroom due to the students’ diverse backgrounds. Hence, teachers mostly need to have considerable knowledge of selected films. The objectives set by teachers before introducing films must be positioned to suit students academically. Additionally, Akyeampong & Lewin (2002) found that the input characteristics and qualities of the type of films used in history education are essential indicators of the quality of teachers.

### 4.3 | What are the effects of historical feature films on teaching in the University?

This research objective sought to find out the effects of feature films on the teaching of history at the University of Cape Coast. From the interviews, lecturers established that films impact their instructional practices. All four (4) teachers interviewed mentioned that the usage of films gives more evidence of their subject matters, making teaching stress-free. Additionally, they indicated that film’s incorporation in the classroom helped them select appropriate assessment techniques based on the needs of students. One lecturer orated: “Films activate and bring to life what you are teaching to students... I think that, to a large extent, films are cardinal elements that stimulate students’ remembrance of certain abstract historical concepts and themes”. This confirms the study by Lialikhova (2014) that feature films as a widely recognized pedagogical tool that provides concrete and illustrative examples of important concepts and can improve students’ understanding of course material and their satisfaction with the History courses.

Again, the respondents acknowledged that when feature films are used in the classroom, it stimulates students learning experiences. As a respondent opined: “Whenever I view the film in my classroom, students seem to have a kind of all-inclusiveness in the classroom... one time, I remember a student told me that films tend to provide some sort of a welcoming relief since all that are taught are mostly theoretical and in abstract”. This result implies that films provide specific add-ons to classroom instructions. The finding is in concurrence with the study by Lialikhova (2014). The study found that feature films provide most learners with a low-stress learning environment, which is essential. In addition, all lecturers believed that the use of films in the classroom has always been a fascinating and educative activity.

Films are an effective tool for enhancing student learning and understanding. One of the remarks made by a respondent was: “I term the usage of films in History classroom as ‘History made alive,’ as students’ can perceive specific historical themes and thereby creating a conducive avenue for students’ holistic development.” The implication was that feature films are as important an instructional material as any other teaching and learning resource. They revealed that there must be purposeful interactions between the lecturer, the student, and the film to have cohesive film experiences. They described the importance of using a shared learning experience regarding film usage in the classroom as the foundation for increasing students’ engagement and cognitive understanding of History lessons. The finding that films are practical tools for improving student knowledge and experience agrees with the study results by Derelioglu & Evren-Saar (2010). Derelioglu & Evren-Saar (2010) claimed that films as an educational tool are vital to classroom events. As evident, viewing films have been linked to increasing students’ interest in the topic, integrating course material, and improving students’ understanding and perceptions of History courses and their historical knowledge.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aims to investigate the usage of films in history education. Specifically, the study focused on the availability of feature films in teaching, the criteria for using feature films, and the effects of feature films in teaching history. The data from the interviews revealed that the University did not have a film library where lecturers could visit to access certain historical films for their classroom teaching. Hence, through lecturers’ researchers get access to movies for teaching history. The findings also showed that lecturers’ quest to use films to teach specific historical themes incorporate certain guidelines in directing their film usage. These include; ethical matters involving historical films, lecturers’ personally viewing movies before their use in the

classroom, and collaborating with different departmental lecturers, mainly when films of similar topics can be found in those departments. Finally, it was found that feature film usage in the classroom influenced history lecturers' instructional practices.

There is the need for all stakeholders to contribute to putting measures in place to ensure the establishment of a well-functioning film library where lecturers can visit to access films for their classroom instructional practices. This would ensure that history lecturers move away from the old-fashioned models of using textbooks since facts are now being explored and built in an image-rich environment influenced by a broad range of media and social networking. There must be proper intensification in the supervision on the adequate adherence to guidelines relating to the use of films in history teaching. Also, instructors need to be encouraged to engage in collaborative interactions, giving them a critical understanding of the usage of films in education. Lastly, there is an urgent need for the organization of regular seminars on the effectiveness of films/movies in modern classroom instructional periods.

## 6 | LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There was also the likelihood of the issue of self-reporting of the data as the researchers gathered and managed the data themselves. Another limitation was accessing participants. It was also difficult to generalize the findings. Generalizing the results may only be appropriate in tertiary institutions with very close characteristics to the University of Cape Coast.

The following recommendations for further studies are provided to further extend the literature on the experiences lecturers go through when using feature films to teach history. A more comprehensive study on the same topic should be conducted on a larger sample size across other tertiary institutions to generalize the findings for the whole country.

Further research should look at the impact of using films to teach controversial topics. This will help ascertain the symbiotic relationship between movies and historical narratives (History).

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