

Foreign Language Learning and the Cultivation of National Consciousness in the Age of Intelligence—A Case Study Through the Appreciation of *The Wild Robot**

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This study examines how foreign language education in the artificial intelligence (AI) era could assist the cultivation of national consciousness through a technology-enhanced pedagogy of film appreciation. Using *The Wild Robot* as a case study, we argue that cinematic narratives serve as cultural mirrors, offering immersive, reflective, and affective sites for intercultural learning. We propose a three-layered pedagogical framework—progressing from semiotic decoding, through narrative and value comparison, to creative identity construction—that integrates intelligent tools to develop both communicative competence and an agentic sense of belonging. The approach exemplifies a humanistic turn in language teaching, aiming to form “rooted global communicators” who can engage in cross-civilization dialogue with cultural confidence and critical awareness.

Keywords: foreign language learning, cultivation of national consciousness, *The Wild Robot*

Introduction

In the current era where artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the educational ecosystem, foreign language teaching stands at a critical juncture: On the one hand, intelligent tools provide unprecedented technological support for language acquisition; on the other hand, the cultural flows of the digital age pose new challenges to learners’ cultural identity (Zajda, Davidovitch, & Majhanovich, 2022). How to organically integrate the development of linguistic competence with the fostering of national consciousness in AI-enhanced foreign language classrooms has thus become a vital issue in contemporary foreign language education (Wang & Wei, 2022). This study employs English film appreciation as a pathway for language learning, guiding students to focus on language skill development while maintaining international horizons and home culture as mutually constitutive perspectives (Yang, 2022). The present paper proposes a three-tier, AI-enhanced model of cinematic literacy that includes symbolic decoding, cross-cultural comparison, and identity construction, demonstrating how foreign-language classrooms can cultivate both communicative competence and national consciousness in the intelligence era.

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The Film as Cultural Mirror: Why Cinematic Literacy Matters

The Wild Robot is an animated feature produced by DreamWorks in 2024. It narrates the journey of the robot Roz from conflict to symbiosis with a natural island ecosystem. While its surface narrative is an adventure story, its deeper layers encompass multiple themes such as cultural adaptation, identity construction, and community ethics. As a resource for foreign language teaching, film appreciation holds three unique values.

First, an authentic field for cultural immersion. The core strength of cinematic art lies in its ability to construct a highly coherent and detailed narrative field, thereby creating a culturally immersive environment with a strong sense of “presence” for foreign language learners. It is not a mere replica of reality but rather distills and amplifies the core elements of intercultural communication. Within this world, the robot Roz, as a cultural intruder, undergoes the entire process of learning animal language, interpreting nonverbal signals, and understanding and ultimately adhering to the laws of the natural ecosystem. This process constitutes a micro-model of cross-cultural adaptation, allowing learners to observe directly how an intelligent agent progresses through a complete cycle, from culture shock and language acquisition to behavioral adjustment, value internalization, and identity reconstruction. The film translates abstract adaptation theories, such as the stages of cultural learning, the complexities of semiotic interpretation, and the mutual change required for the “other” to integrate into a community. This enables learners to find a balance between emotional engagement and cognitive detachment, thereby gaining a deeper understanding that the essence of cross-cultural competence is not merely linguistic translation but a complex system of practices concerning perception, understanding, and active survival within new meaning.

Second, a risk-free arena for discussion. By projecting real-world civilizational tensions onto a fictional fable, it converts conflicts into safely debatable allegory. The clash between mechanical and natural civilizations encodes the deeper antagonism of technological rationality versus ecological ethics, modernist progress versus traditional belonging. This “safe distance” lowers psychological defenses, enabling students to discuss the values with the target language. Debating whether Roz should return to the factory or remain on the island, for instance, inevitably foregrounds the limits of technological development, the reciprocal duties of individual and community, and the material-cum-symbolic dimensions of “home”. This scenario-based critical practice not only hones students’ ability to discern, negotiate, and integrate diverse values in cross-cultural contexts but also guides them, through understanding other cultures and reflecting on their own, to gradually shape an open yet agentic national identity within an international perspective.

Third, a medium for generating emotional resonance. National consciousness is not downloaded but felt. It germinates in emotional arousal, ripens through lived experience, and crystallizes into rational allegiance. Emotion is the most durable adhesive of cultural and national attachment. Roz’s metamorphosis from utilitarian machine to guardian of the island, culminating in her storm-night rescue of animal habitats and eventual self-sacrifice for communal survival, activates universal moral sentiments: the imperative to protect, the sublime of devotion, and the ache for belonging. These scenes convert abstract virtues into shared feelings.

A Three-Layered Appreciation Framework Empowered by Intelligent Technology

Based on *The Wild Robot*, we can construct a three-layered appreciation pedagogy framework empowered by intelligent technology.

The first layer is semiotic decoding and cultural perception. Using AI text analysis tools to conduct semantic network analysis of the film's dialogue reveals the cultural logic behind language. For example: comparing and analyzing the shift in how the animals initially refer to Roz using terms like "monster" or "tin can" to later terms like "friend" or "guardian", exploring the linguistic construction of the "other" into "one of us"; conducting multi-modal analysis to connect visual symbols in the film (e.g. Roz modifying nests with mechanical parts) with concepts like "innovation" and "fusion" in different cultures. At this layer, students understand cultural connotations through linguistic forms, developing initial cultural sensitivity.

The second layer involves narrative analysis and value comparison. The dual plotlines, Roz's personal growth and the transformation of the animal community, could be analyzed. This guides students to compare how "self-actualization" in individualistic narratives negotiates with collective survival needs. Where can the film's eco-community intersect with the Chinese *wan-wu-yi-ti* (all-as-one) cosmology? Through the comparison, students can work with international partners on cross-cultural narrative comparison projects, clarifying their own cultural stance.

The third layer is meaning generation and identity construction. This is important for cultivating national consciousness. Based on the analyses from the previous two layers, creative activities could be conducted. For instance, using generative AI to create "derivative narratives" of the film—how might character relationships and conflict resolution differ if the story were set within a Chinese cultural context? In this process, learners are not passively receiving cultural information but actively participating in meaning construction, deepening their understanding of their own cultural roots through cross-cultural comparison.

Transcending Instrumental Rationality: The Humanistic Return of Foreign Language Education in the Intelligent Era

In *The Wild Robot*, Roz's ultimate choice to creatively integrate the knowledge of mechanical civilization with the principles of natural wisdom does not represent a mere compromise, but rather the birth of a new ethical framework. It precisely metaphors the ideal orientation that foreign language education should pursue in the intelligent era: Technology should neither displace humanistic cultivation nor be treated as an object of humanist suspicion; rather, deep humanistic concern must steer, shape, and elevate technological use so that it serves the integral development of the person.

This reorientation unfolds along three dimensions of pedagogical transformation. First, from skill acquisition to meaning-making. When learners recognize that language is not merely a symbolic system for information but the sedimented carrier of memory, affect, and value, linguistic study moves beyond instrumental rationality. Second, simulated immersion to anchored identity. Within AI-generated cross-cultural environments, success of education is measured by the learner's capacity to declare, "who I am" and "where I come from" with clarity and conviction—proof that technological illusion has strengthened, not dissolved, cultural subjectivity. Finally, from story retelling to value interpretation. The ultimate goal for the learners is not only to deploy fluent English to recount China's modernization but also to explicate the distinct value choices, developmental logics, and ethical stakes that animate it, thereby entering the global negotiation of meaning.

Through films such as *The Wild Robot*, we can allow foreign-language education to re-anchor its coordinates amid technological turbulence. Its mission is to form "rooted global communicators"—speakers who command international norms while remaining civilization interlocutors, fluent in both the art of communication and the ethics of dialogue.

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