

Student-Produced Video: Two Approaches

Student-produced video has been an exciting option in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes since the invention of the video camera. As a learner-centered project-based activity, video production introduces students to skills—in this case writing, directing, acting in, and editing a movie. This in turn stimulates interest in the language and requires students to interact in activities that involve problem solving and higher order thinking in the second language.

Numerous sources report on how a film project can enhance English language learning, including fluency, pronunciation, and speaking skills (Carkin 2004; Hardison and Sonchaeng 2005), non-verbal communication (Dickson 1989), cultural awareness (Gareis 2000; Gersten and Tlustý 1998; Heathcote and Bolton 1998; Isbell 1999), group cooperation (Elgar 2002), and student motivation (Dodson 2000; Heath 1996; Heldenbrand 2003; Stern 1980). In addition, teachers can use the scripts from

a video project to develop different levels of reading, writing, listening, and speaking instructional materials (Wessels 1991, 235).

This article examines two different types of video projects that were conducted in a short-term intensive English program for college students in Japan. Both projects involved eight students with access to one digital video camera and one computer; however, in the first project, pairs of students produced a total of four short films, while in the second project, the entire group made one longer film together. The advantages and disadvantages of these two very different approaches will be described in this article.

Practical considerations of a video project

Despite the benefits of video projects, until recently many schools and programs were not able to implement video production in EFL/ESL classes due to time and cost considerations. With cameras and editing suites costing thousands of dollars and even

short videos requiring weeks of painstaking, tedious work, filmmaking projects were beyond the reach of all but a privileged few.

Fortunately, advances in digital video technology and editing software have made video projects more affordable and easier to use. Lightweight, powerful cameras now retail for a fraction of their previous cost, and user-friendly, time-efficient video editing software is included free in the current Microsoft and Apple Macintosh operating systems. Video as a form of expression and communication is exploding on the Internet through video sharing sites like YouTube, multimodal communication sites like Skype, MSN, and Yahoo, and through the use of video-based blogs, or *vlogs*. Filmmaking is now within the reach of many EFL/ESL programs; the only question that remains is how to best exploit its possibilities.

Getting started: A crash course in video production

These two projects were designed by two instructors with similar technical skills regarding video production. Since the instructors were unfamiliar with more recent video cameras and had little experience with video editing, they quickly educated themselves in video production. Working together, they both familiarized themselves with the video cameras by shooting several test scenes. Next came the seemingly more daunting task of editing. To prepare themselves, the instructors reviewed two of the more popular pieces of free video editing software: Microsoft's Movie Maker (included in the XP and Vista operating systems) and Apple's iMovie (included in the OSX operating system). They were surprised to find out just how easy the two programs were to use, particularly iMovie. In order to edit their sample film with iMovie, the instructors connected their digital video camera to a Macintosh via a firewire cable. The computer then imported their video automatically. It broke the video into "clips"—the segments of video that were created every time the instructors pressed "pause" during filming. In iMovie, the clips appeared on the right side of the screen in the order in which they were filmed. Using the mouse, the instructors dragged the individual clips to a tool bar at the bottom. From there, they were able to watch each clip and determine

how much of the scene they wanted to keep. Cutting, or editing clips, was as easy as moving the mouse. The instructors found they could move around and arrange the clips in any order they wanted. They could also add transitions like "fade," sound effects like "thunder," and video effects like "lightning."

Without ever having used the software before, the two instructors were able to learn it well enough to edit their sample three-minute video in two and a half hours. After they were finished, they were confident that this was something students could learn and do during the short period of the course. The two instructors then turned to designing their own individual class projects.

Video Project 1: Four short films

For this project, four pairs of students were tasked with producing a three-minute film about an ethical dilemma concerning the use of science and technology. On the first day, students were shown a sample film produced by the instructor. The instructor then gave them a brief introduction to the iMovie software by showing them how he had edited the sample film. Finally, the students were given the following four rules:

1. Each pair must write, direct, and edit their movie themselves.
2. Each student must act in at least one movie produced by another pair.
3. Each movie must involve at least three characters.
4. Each movie must include some kind of debate on the ethical dilemma in question.

The instructor matched these rules with two general objectives and one specific language objective:

- *General objective 1:* Each student should use as much English as possible.
- *General objective 2:* Students should learn as much about the filmmaking process as possible.

Rules 1 to 3 were aimed at meeting these two objectives, as all students had to be involved in writing the script for their movie, reading the scripts for other movies, speaking while acting and directing, and listening while

being directed or working with their partner. In addition, each student had to learn how to operate a video camera and use the required editing software successfully. Rule 4 was used to reach the specific objective:

- *Specific language objective:* Students should learn and practice various types of debating language.

After they were introduced to the project and given some examples of ethical dilemmas that might make interesting short films, students formed pairs and brainstormed ideas. So long as they followed the four rules, each pair was free to choose any type of movie, whether it was a drama, a news report, an interview, or something else entirely. The instructor pointed out that each type of movie has its own advantages and disadvantages, so far as the creators are concerned. In a drama, for example, imagination can be given free reign, and complex ideas can be discussed metaphorically using simple language. However, dramas also require careful thought and planning to make them believable and interesting. News reports and interviews, on the other hand, are often more straightforward and simpler to produce, but they can be dull.

After considering various possibilities, two of the pairs came up with ideas quickly; the other two pairs needed more assistance and examples from the instructor. Finally, each pair decided on a topic and wrote up a brief summary of one of the following proposed videos: (1) the ethics of cloning, (2) robot work versus human work, (3) electronic surveillance, and (4) electric cars. The cloning video was designed as a news report, while the others were short dramatic pieces.

The next step was for each pair to collaborate on writing the script for their film. Everyone was expected to read all the scripts, and drafts were posted online so students could read them and make comments. Revisions were made and the final drafts were produced before students began filming. Students were also expected to read a short handout on the iMovie editing software in order to get a better idea of the program's capabilities.

The students then reread the final scripts and negotiated as a group about which students would take which acting roles. They were also given a one-hour tutorial on camera

operation and the basics of iMovie. It turned out that students needed very little instruction regarding camera operation, as most of them were familiar with the difference between "pause" and "stop" and with how to insert and eject tapes, replace batteries, and set up a tripod. However, since none of the students had used iMovie before, the instructor spent most of one class period showing his sample film again and explaining in more detail the steps he used to edit his project: connecting the camera to the computer, dragging clips to the tool bar, cutting unwanted footage, and adding transitions, effects, or music.

Finally, the instructor printed out a shooting schedule for each student. As there was only one camera and one computer available for the entire group, careful coordination was necessary to give each pair equal time to make their film. When one pair was filming, the other pairs acted in that pair's film, rehearsed for an upcoming film, or edited their own film. Each pair had approximately three hours to film their project and three hours to edit it. The amount of time for rehearsal varied, depending on each day's schedule.

With pairs filming, acting, rehearsing, and editing all at the same time, the instructor's role was limited. Students who were filming or rehearsing were more or less left to their own devices. While the instructor tried to check in with each pair regularly, most of his time was spent helping the students who were editing, as this was the part of the filmmaking process in which the instructor felt the students were most likely to fall behind schedule. This turned out, in fact, to be correct. Once the students became involved in the editing process, they invariably became perfectionists, each of them wanting a cut or transition or effect to be exactly right. The instructor often had to remind them of the schedule or show them how to accomplish an editing goal in a more efficient way. Despite this problem, all four films were finished ahead of schedule. On the last day they were shown to the other participants in the intensive English course.

Video Project 2: One long film

Rather than creating four separate videos in pairs, all eight students in this project worked together to create one video. Although the objectives were largely the same

as Video Project 1, this project resulted in a very different learning experience. On the first day of the course, the eight students received some thought questions on the scientific/ethical theme of the relationship between animals and humans. As a homework assignment that day, the students were each asked to think of one or two specific stories that could be the focus of the drama. As this was a whole-group project, the final selection would need to be negotiated by the group, which was a key difference between this project and Video Project 1.

Negotiation to select a story for the video took place the following day, with each student writing one or two ideas on a whiteboard. Through a gradual process of anonymous voting and elimination, the group eventually decided to work on one short story that contrasted the lives of a domesticated pig and a wild boar. Another area of negotiation concerned student responsibilities regarding the filmmaking process. Unlike Video Project 1, the students in this group had to specialize; there couldn't be eight directors, for example. Some sort of division of labor was necessary, and the instructor suggested that pairs of students choose among the following four key jobs:

- *Directors* would explain the theme, characters, and overall story.
- *Writers* would develop the script and stage directions.
- *Costume designers* would design costumes and purchase materials.
- *Set and sound designers* would design sets, purchase materials, and find or create appropriate sound effects and music.

Two students volunteered for each of the jobs. While most of the volunteering went smoothly, there were two students at the end who had not volunteered for any role, with only one costume design job and one writer job remaining. The students cited a lack of confidence, especially for script writing, as their reason for not volunteering. Eventually, after holding a group discussion without the instructor present, one of the students chose a writing role and the other chose costume design. As with Video Project 1, each student had certain tasks to carry out regarding the

project. However, the tasks each student carried out were limited to the job they had volunteered for. The writers worked on the script, for example, and the costume designers planned the costumes.

The instructor set deadlines for each task. To create effective lines of communication with one another, all group members maintained contact and added content through a free online *wiki* created especially for the project. (A *wiki* is a collaborative website that allows all users with the password to write and edit content on the site. With a *wiki*, a text can be created and changed by a group of people, and it is always easily accessible by simply going to the website address and logging in. See Creative Commons [2007] for information on how to set up a *wiki*.)

While major decisions about the process of creating the drama were left to the students, the instructor became very involved in tasks that required the students to produce English. The two writers produced an understandable but ungrammatical script; since the instructor felt it was important for the script to have perfectly grammatical English, he made corrections. In addition, the instructor edited the script by adding a few lines to some of the smaller speaking parts to make certain all roles had a certain level of challenge for the students.

After students read through the final script that was posted on the *wiki*, they chose their speaking roles, which required another round of negotiation. While there were eight parts in the drama script, one for each of the students, the roles were unequal. Four roles were substantial, while four roles had much less dialogue. Discussion on role selection was led by both of the directors. There were more volunteers for the short roles (five) than there were for the long roles (three). In the end, one student accepted a longer role after encouragement from others, and students began studying their lines.

In contrast to Video Project 1, the instructor and students in Video Project 2 spent almost all of their time together. During line rehearsal and drama practice, the instructor involved all students in practicing their own and other students' lines. One of the major objectives was to improve how students presented themselves as speakers. Therefore, dur-

ing the drama practice, the instructor spent considerable time advising students on their pronunciation, including the use of intonation and stress, and on the coordination of body movement with spoken language.

Students also worked on building the set and creating the costumes from the materials they had brought. Filming did not begin until the second to last day of the program. At this point, students with smaller acting roles volunteered to do the camerawork and video editing. These students also chose the filming locations for each of the five scenes in the video. The instructor's main task was that of an English counselor. The final thirteen-minute film was shown to the other participants in the intensive English course on the final day of the program.

Positive and negative aspects of the two approaches

Having students make several films in pairs or one film as a group had separate positive and negative aspects. One positive aspect of the Video Project 1 approach was that each student had the opportunity to learn more about each major aspect of filmmaking. Another advantage was that each student had the opportunity to work on multiple English skills. A negative aspect of this approach was that the instructor was unable to work closely with students who were rehearsing intonation and pronunciation. Therefore, in each of the final four films, the student actors are at times difficult to understand. Had the instructor been more available during filming, he could have worked with the actors on individual problems. Another disadvantage of this approach was that there was little time to create sets or costumes.

For Video Project 2, the positive and negative aspects were basically reversed. A positive aspect of this approach was that the instructor and students were consistently spending time together. This was especially useful and enabled students to practice their pronunciation, intonation, and body movements for the drama. Instructor feedback was immediate and constant. This showed in the final video product.

Negative aspects of this approach were both the division of labor for the video production and the unequal length of speaking roles. The division of labor led to some students not

being involved at all in certain tasks. Some students learned nothing about video editing; others did nothing to create costumes; and others were not involved in writing the script. Since students did not learn the same skills, the learning was unequal. From another perspective, this was not entirely negative because students were free to specialize in activities they preferred.

The unequal quantity of speaking roles in Video Project 2 seems a disservice to language learners. Four students had longer speaking roles while four students had shorter roles, which meant that some students received more English practice than others. Some students had to memorize many more lines, and therefore acquired more vocabulary, grammatical structures, and paralinguistic skills than other students. This was somewhat offset by the fact that students were always practicing together. Also, offering shorter roles was reasonable because some students were quite anxious about performing in front of the camera. Dodson (2000) notes the fact that students' individual differences may affect their participation in dramatic activities. In a language program, it seems a reasonable rule to follow is to not "[write] in any 'stars'" when creating dramas (Wilhelm and Leverett 1998, 34).

Finally, Video Project 2 proved to be an efficient way to produce a film; there was accountability because the successful completion of each task was essential for the overall drama production, and all students had the chance to be a leader while working on their task.

Conclusion

The recent convergence of advances in technology and lower-priced equipment makes video creation in the EFL/ESL classroom very feasible and an excellent way to learn content and language. When used for project-based learning in EFL/ESL classrooms, video production can be a motivating and self-empowering activity because learners can practice and see themselves using the new language. Obviously, students with the ability to express themselves through video will acquire important communicative and technical skills for the 21st century.

The first video project examined here led to equal training for all students on all tasks,

while the second led to specialization in different aspects of production with a stronger focus on language and speaking skills. In both approaches, the participants used English to complete complex activities and learn important technological content. Both approaches are viable means of exploiting the power of video for language learning.

We hope that this brief look at two projects will broaden the conversation about how student-produced video, with all of its new applications and innovations, can be organized to encourage development and participation among second language learners.

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ANSWERS TO *THE LIGHTER SIDE* SEATTLE CROSSWORD PUZZLE

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|-------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Down | 1. Space Needle | 2. Coffee |
| | 3. Farmers | 4. Earthquake |
| | 5. Historic | 7. Rainy |
| | 6. Airplane | 8. Water |
| | 11. Bicycle | 9. Sports |
| | 12. Umbrella | 10. Library |
| | 13. Forest | 14. Volcano |
| | | 15. Boats |
| | | 16. Train |