

Student-Produced Videos: Practical Tips for Memorable Productions*

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Is there anyone among us who has never wished to be an actor or actress? To have the lights shining on you as you bring to life a character heretofore unknown in the world? To see yourself on the screen in that guise, mingling real with unreal people, places, and things? And later to hear the laughter, the tears, the joy, the horror of those who like you are reacting to mere projections of light on a screen? Then, to brim long afterwards with pride and satisfaction as the royalties flood in.

There seems to be a hidden urge in each of us to dramatize; among ESL/EFL teachers the open expression of this urge may in fact be a necessary qualification for the job. But among our students it may often remain a subdued entity, guarded by fear of public humiliation. How may we as teachers tap this urge, lift it out, and create the atmosphere in which it will thrive?

One way is by introducing video production into the classroom. Video production presents a real purpose: to create a real product, a video of lasting quality and vivid memories. Acting provides a vehicle for students to look through another's eyes—to imagine and examine characters and ways of thinking quite possibly alien to their own, while video then permanently records the experience for later reflection and enjoyment. Design flexibility permits the teacher to focus

on the specific language needs of the learners. Finally, video production forces the students to take on a variety of roles: group leaders, secretaries, researchers, script-writers, actors/actresses, directors, cameramen¹ (and women). Following are some tips to help the ESL/EFL classroom video production effort reach toward these ideals. Note: the following discussion largely concerns video productions which involve planning, shooting with several takes and multiple camera angles, and post-recording editing and consolidation. However, those who produce one-take, no-edit videos with students may still find points of interest herein.

Teacher Preparation

It is imperative that the teacher be experienced in video production. Even amateur production experience with a home video camera and family or friends as subjects is valuable.

The teacher should locate and become familiar with all of the available equipment for

¹In the author's experience, the students have never been given the role of either the director or cameraman. By taking these roles himself, the teacher was integrated into the whole production process, ensuring purposeful (not merely academic) interaction between teacher and student. Furthermore, the teacher has an excuse to intervene and 'direct' the students toward a successful production.

*Published 1996, *TESOL Video News*, 7[2]: 3ff.

the production: camera(s), recorders, microphones, lights, videotapes, audio mixer, video editor, graphics and titling equipment, monitors, sound systems, etc. (obviously, the only necessary items are a camera, and a VCR and monitor for later playback, but the more equipment that is available, the more 'professional' the product may look—thus boosting the students' pride and satisfaction).

The teacher must be prepared to censor inappropriate topics or language according to the sensitivities of the institution, the teacher, the (other) students, or the audience(s). The teacher should also be prepared to explain why censoring was necessary and further offer a suitable revision.

Student Preparation

Grouping students for project work may sometimes be a tedious, if not risky, business. Some considerations in grouping that are relevant to video-production are as follows.

1. Freetime: It will be very useful if all member of a group have at least a few hours of weekly free-time in common.
2. Video production experience: If feasible, it may be best to ensure that every group has at least one member with video production experience.
3. Size: If groups are too large, they risk becoming internally unmanageable and several students may merely float along on the efforts of a few. Furthermore, in the video itself, too many characters means too little focus on each. On the other hand, if groups are too small, then students will have to take on too many roles and responsibilities and do few (or none) of them well. The size may also depend on whether students will take on

technical responsibilities (directing, operating camers, etc.).²

Many students will have little concept of what they may do for a video project. Examples of former video projects whould be shown (and perhaps studied) to spark student creativity.

Plenty of time will be needed for brainstorming, researching, visualizing, script writing, teacher counseling, and script rewriting. A good stew requires long slow simmering over low heat: such is the case with student-produced videos...

Preparation and production will be far more efficient if students chart their story on paper with the script, actions, drawings, camera operations, graphics, sound effects, background music, etc. clearly outlined. The more detailed the chart, the easier production will be.³

One key element of any good dramatic presentation is the persuasive portrayal of a character. Students will need coaching to explore their characters. It is not enough to know their characters only as well as the audience. They must know their characters intimately. They should know how their character looks, talks and walks. They must know how their character thinks about many things: "How does your character see the world?" "Is he/she a pessimist or an optimist?" "How would your character react to a difficult or sensitive situation?" It is not important whether such questions are directly relevant to a group's video. But such questions prepare the student to portray the

²In projects where the technical responsibilities are reserved for the teacher, the author suggests groups of three to six students. Four is optimal. Six is acceptable if the class is unusually large. Three is useful if the class has an odd number of students (i.e., 21 students: three groups of four and three of three).

³In the author's experience the best projects have always been the ones which were well-planned with detailed charts.

whole character. Some activities which may be useful to help students explore their characters are listed below.

1. Walking: Encourage students to imagine their character's walk, practice it and demonstrate it for the class. Others in the class should try to describe the character based on their walk.
2. Role-plays: Use various role-play games or activities in which students must be true to their characters.
3. Creative Writing: Have students write a story (independent of the group's story) including their character.

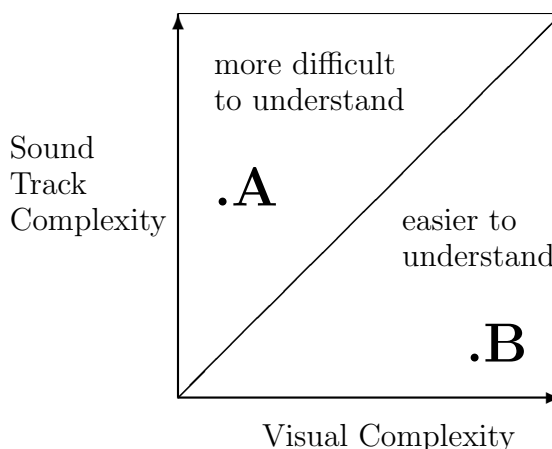
Few students will realize the need to act even when they are not speaking or not in the foreground. Thus, rehearsal becomes extremely necessary. Sufficient time (perhaps almost as much time as for writing and rewriting) should be planned for rehearsal. Some rehearsal time should be reserved for a dress rehearsal before the camera. Students will greatly benefit from this experience—when the real recording time comes they will have already experienced the emotions of "opening night anxiety" and will be better able to control themselves.

During preparation and production

Groups should be encouraged to keep a proper balance between the audio and visual elements of their video. If we relate the complexity of these two elements as in Figure 1 we can soon see how to balance these concerns. Take, for example, two videos; A and B. Video A has a very complex story with many characters and prolonged dialogs, but its visual element is very simple, say, twelve stone-faced men seated around a table from

beginning to end in an otherwise empty room with no clue as to time or place. This video will surely be very difficult for an audience to understand. On the other hand, video B has a simple, straightforward story, with a high degree of visual complexity; the location is real and fitting to the story, the character's actions are sufficiently exaggerated, costumes give clues as to age, sex, social class, character, etc., real props are used, setting is clearly defined, etc. This video will be far more easily understood by an audience at their first viewing.

Figure 1: Complexity in Video Production



The students should keep the teacher informed regularly of changes to their plan and the teacher should regularly check the students' progress and reflect on whether their plans are feasible considering the conditions of production: equipment, location, time, personnel, etc.

During the recording session, one virtue must remain everpresent: patience. Retakes will be necessary as a result of both students and teacher mistakes, outside interruptions such as public address systems, or even such acts of God as electricity outages. Patience will prove a valuable resource during this potentially stressful time.

Although the teacher is to act as an experienced adviser, the teacher should not go too far beyond what the students have visualized, planned, developed and created; if the students say the sequence of events is M followed by B, do not change it, even though it lacks coherence. If students do not prepare background music, then don't use any. The purpose of this is to preserve the claim that this is the students' product, their creation.

Of course, teacher self-restraint should not silence the teacher from judiciously coaching (or coaxing) the students towards a more successful video, but even such advisement should be inspired by the students' work.⁴

Technical Advice

Although student-produced videos are clearly amateur productions, the more professionally they can be done the better. Simple things like an external microphone held close to the speaker but just out of view or one bright light really add to the video's quality. Furthermore, if equipment permits, superimposed graphics and titles, and background music, or sound effects also improve appearance and make the finished product that much more attractive.

The camera operator should be energetic—some "climbing" may be necessary to get the best angle—and experienced. For the amateur video camera operator there are many

⁴To illustrate, the author once experienced the following moment of student-inspired creativity: while practicing for a scene in which a baseball batter demonstrated his unusual technique, the bat came perilously close to the camera lens. Everyone reacted with fear of what might have happened. The teacher felt inspired to include such a scene in the actual video; from the camera's point of view, the batter appeared to shatter the lens (the effect was accomplished with "cracked" graphics and the sound of breaking glass) while everyone in the background reacted with horror. On screen, it was a persuasive sight...

good texts which include tips (see *Video in Language Teaching* by Jack Lonergan, 1984) on basic camera techniques.

For the purposes of post-recording editing it will be best to use professional-quality tapes throughout the production. They are expensive, but well worth it for the preservation of picture integrity during editing. On the other hand, do not over-edit: a good quality master recording may reach the third generation (that is, two copies: the master is the first generation) before it begins to lose its quality.

In Hollywood, it is well-known that even when taping is finished, production is not. The same will be true in a student-produced video (unless you plan to shoot a one-scene story in one long take thus having nothing to edit...). The post-recording process is often as stressful as the recording. Whether the teacher or the students do the editing and mixing, it is a time-consuming activity. Plenty of time should be scheduled between the end of shooting and screening of the final product.

"Opening Night"

The students have worked hard to prepare their video. And the teacher has worked hard to guide them towards a successful production. When the time comes to watch the finished product, do it up right! Have a party! Tell the students to bring snacks and drinks. Perhaps even decorate the room. Tell everyone to dress in their finest clothing and invite plenty of guests (other teachers, students, parents, administrators, the head of the institution, etc.). Before the showing begins have an opening ceremony with a toast. Afterward, invite some guests to comment. Make sure the students feel the glory of being a star, and above all, always affirm that the video is the students' creation. This is the main

point: to build the students' self-confidence by giving them an experience speaking English which makes them look better than they ever could have imagined.⁵

Focus on Language

One may wonder where the language practice is in this method. Indeed, it seems much more like a video production course than an ESL/EFL course. The language practice must be designed according to the students' needs and abilities. Ideally, it would be wonderful if the entire process were done in English. But realistically, this may only be possible with advanced students. Less-than-advanced students are unable to communicate effectively at the planning stages since it requires a great deal of abstract expression. With such students, other aspects of language or communication may be emphasized.

Great attention can (and probably should be) given to non-verbal and paralinguistic expression in English (of course, a prerequisite to this is the requirement that most or all characters be native English speakers). It should be stressed that although students are writing a script, it will be reproduced orally: oral discourse cannot be forgotten.

Students should be encouraged to study authentic samples of the genre they are emulating (drama, news, commercials, etc.), exercising their receptive competence of that genre and then solidifying it through their own reproduction on video. With beginning students it may be best for the teacher to take a more active directorial role in order

to increase meaningful (not merely obligatory) communication between the students and teacher and thereby decrease the temptation for students to engage in useless chatter. Language is an integral part of video production. With some teacher foresight, various elements of the target language may be integrated into the production process.

Producing videos with students is a lot of work; it takes a lot of time, there are always some production hassles and students need help at every step of the process. But when that finished product appears on screen, and everyone laughs at each others' jokes, is moved by smooth performances, and applauds at the end of every groups' work, every minute spent in production suddenly becomes an investment turned to gold and a memory of lasting value.

⁵A significant number of the author's students express that they are camera-shy and don't want to appear in the video. However, in contrast to this, the author contends that students feel great pride in seeing themselves on screen, speaking English and looking like a talented actor. Also, this feeling of pride is longer lived than the anxiety associated with shame which is likely to dissipate soon after the video party.