

Student-Led Lesson: Vacation Commercials

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Introduction

For the past three years, I have worked at a school in Japan where we conduct one-on-one feedback sessions with the students at the midterm. Because I am outside the classroom during this time, speaking to students individually, it requires me to develop a lesson that the rest of the students can run by themselves. Through this process I have discovered that student-run lessons have several benefits. For one thing, during this kind of activity, the focus is off the teacher, so he or she can monitor the students' language ability. For another, autonomous lessons provide the perfect opportunity for oral testing. Too rarely do we find ourselves with an opportunity to test speaking ability, relying more often than not on written tests for assessment. In addition, it gives the students a chance to show their abilities not only to use language, but to plan, organize, and put into action a task which is given to them. It also allows them to take responsibility for their learning as well.

Materials

The one element that is essential to any autonomous lesson is a set of instructions, usually laid out in an instruction sheet developed by the teacher before the lesson. While there are a number of ways of giving instructions, e. g., orally or writing them on the board, these take time away from the activity itself. Therefore, I have found that the best and most time-efficient way to give instructions here is to hand out a sheet and ask the students to read it through before they begin. A [sample worksheet](#) for an activity on making a travel commercial follows at the end of this article.

Aside from the instruction sheet, the other materials you use will depend on the resources you have available at your school. I am fortunate enough to have a video camera available where I work. Therefore, sometimes the students make a video commercial for the vacation spot of their choice. Usually, I leave the choice of medium up to them, and they can choose to do a video commercial, an audio commercial (using a tape recorder and microphone), or a print advertisement, using pictures from magazines and newspapers. One thing to take into consideration when choosing a medium, is how much time you have and/or want to spend on this project. By far, the most time consuming medium to work with is video.

Objectives

The purpose of the activity is to have the students research, plan, and negotiate among themselves a particular project, in this case, a commercial for a vacation spot of their choice. I have done this particular activity with upper-intermediate and advanced students. However, this does not preclude using autonomous activities with lower levels. The procedure remains the same, even if the language and task changes from level to level.

Procedure

The first step is equipping the students with the information they will need in order to do the activity. This includes giving them the necessary vocabulary as well as the key concepts they will need for the topic.

Once again, the amount of time you spend on this stage will depend on how much time you have for the whole project. If you want to spend three class periods on this, for example, the students can use all or part of the first class researching the key concepts and finding out the necessary vocabulary. At this time, the students can either start out working in groups, or brainstorm the initial information together as a class. In the case of travel commercials, my students brainstormed the initial information together.

If you want to spend less time on this project, you may ask the students to research some or all of the information for homework. They bring their information to class, pool their ideas and work from there. I have found that both ways, i. e. , preparing the project in

class and preparing some of it at home, work just as well.

Next, they have to narrow the scope of their discussion. You've given them a broad topic, e. g. , "vacation spots," now they have to focus on the details of the project. Which place will they use for their travel commercial? What will be the content of their commercial? How will they use any outside aids they have brought (music, pictures, etc.)? By this stage, they should be working in groups. In order to conduct this discussion efficiently, it is useful for them to appoint a chairperson and a secretary.

Once they have done this, they need to decide which roles they will take in the activity. One example of this is to choose a role for a roleplay, e. g. , as a presenter in front of the camera, or a character enjoying his or her vacation in the commercial. Some students will inevitably feel too shy and apprehensive about appearing in the commercial, be it a video commercial or an audio commercial. Tell these students not to worry. Some people in the group will need to choose a different kind of role, i. e. , that of being responsible for getting something done, such as "director of the travel commercial" or "camera operator." It is of less importance which role they take than that all the students are involved.

One of the things I have found to be extremely helpful in doing an activity like this is to remind the students of their ultimate goal: to use English! I remind them that they are not studying advertising (in the case of making a commercial), they are studying English. Therefore, it is of no use to produce the perfect travel commercial if they have spent all their time planning, negotiating and organizing it in their native language. I have found that students generally appreciate this point and respond by working in English.

By now, the planning stage is complete. Now they need to rehearse. Note that this stage is not only necessary when making a commercial. If the students are preparing for a group discussion on environmental issues, if they are preparing for a debate about some political controversy, or if they are preparing for a presentation of their ideas to the rest of the students, they need to crystallize what it is they want to say. What is important for the teacher to remember is a) to allot time for this; and b) to make sure the students make the transition to this stage. I have seen that it is all too easy for students to get bogged down in the planning stage and never move onward without encouragement from the teacher.

The penultimate stage is the actual presentation. In the case of producing a commercial, this means recording the video or audio commercial, or assembling the print advertisement. In another kind of activity, this stage would include the actual discussion of environmental issues, or the actual debate. It is helpful here to have group chairpersons, or directors, where applicable. This is to ensure that things are getting done, and that they are being done by the students and not the teacher. It is all too tempting to jump in and take over. Remember, this is their activity.

The final stage is the evaluation. In the case of travel commercials, this means presenting the commercials to the other groups in the class, and having them evaluate the commercials. A simple feedback sheet can be prepared, such as the one which follows at the end. In the case of a group discussion, I like to ask the students how they felt the discussion went, and to give their reasons for its success or failure. If the students have had a debate, I always ask some of the students to act as judges, and at this stage, they give their feedback.

At this point, you may want to go over some language error analysis. However, this may not have been your goal in conducting an autonomous lesson. You may have wanted to assess the students' speaking skills, or interactional skills, or organizational skills. Or you may have been preparing them to take more responsibility for their learning, both in and out of class, in the future. You really need to ask yourself what your goals were, and give feedback on those goals specifically, when the activity is done.

It will be interesting to ask the students how they felt about managing their learning without your intervention. You can then negotiate with the students how much you intervene in their learning in the future. Obviously, you need not do this kind of lesson all the time, every time. But allowing the students to manage their own language learning will prove an enriching experience for both teachers and students alike.

What follows are two versions of instruction sheets which are handed out to the students. Note that the timing is different for each of them: the first one is handed out on the same day the project begins; the second one is handed out one week (or one lesson) beforehand.

Vacation Commercials

In this class, we will prepare commercials for the "ideal vacation spot" of your choice. Therefore, I would like you to think about the following.

NOTE: If you don't want to be on tape, don't worry. There are many things you can contribute to this project.

- Planning your commercial (Maximum 30 minutes)
 - Choose a chairperson.
 - Decide whether you want to do a video commercial or an audio commercial.
 - What will you say?
 - Who will say it?
 - Do you have any aids (e. g. , music, props, costumes! , etc.) that you want to use? How will you use them?
 - Rehearsing your commercial (Maximum: 30 minutes)
 - Choose a director and an assistant director. The director is someone you trust enough to make all final decisions, in case you disagree.
 - Rehearse your commercial as many times as you feel is necessary, until you are satisfied with it. Help each other work out the problems.
 - Taping your commercial (Maximum: 15-20 minutes)
 - When you are satisfied with your rehearsals, tape your commercial. You may tape this more than once, depending on the amount of time we have left.
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Vacation Commercials

In our next class, we will prepare commercials for the "ideal vacation spot" of your choice. Therefore, I would like you to think about the following for the next lesson. The more we have prepared, the less we have to organize at that time. Due to a limited amount of time, we will make radio commercials.

NOTE: If you don't want to be on tape, don't worry. There are many things you can contribute to this project.

- Homework
 - Choose a place you want to work on.
 - Choose at least two to three partners in the class that you would like to work with.
 - Bring in any aids you have (e. g. , music, background noises, etc.) that you think might be useful.
 - Start thinking about the script.
 - Planning Your Commercial
 - Choose a chairperson to organize the discussion.
 - Decide:
 - What will you say?
 - Who will say it?
 - REMEMBER: You have a lot to do today, so you may not discuss this for the entire class time.
 - Rehearsing your commercial
 - Choose a director and an assistant director. The director is someone you trust enough to make all final decisions, in case you disagree.
 - Rehearse your commercial as many times as you feel is necessary, until you are satisfied with it. Help each other work out the problems.
 - Taping your commercial (Maximum: 15-20 minutes)
 - When you are satisfied with your rehearsals, tape your commercial. You may tape this more than once, depending on the amount of time we have left.
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EvaluationSheet

- Name of vacation spot.

- Outstanding features

- Cost

- Reasons why I would/wouldn't go on this vacation

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