Video Production in the Foreign Language Classroom: Some Practical Ideas

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Background

The English language teaching profession is one that consistently seizes upon and adapts new technologies to classroom use. When video players first came on the market worldwide, they were quickly assimilated as a tool for teaching students both listening comprehension and cultural knowledge. Today, most classrooms have monitors and video players available for teachers to make use of in their lesson planning and student feedback regarding the use of video clips and films in the language class is very positive.

Some teachers have also begun to implement video production in the language classroom, whereby students are empowered to use video cameras in linguistic production, not merely relying on video technology for receptive purposes. As the technology becomes cheaper and more readily available to students it seems fitting that we as teachers integrate it into our lesson and assessment planning in the same way we have been doing with video, film and computer assisted learning strategies. Students are surrounded by technology and this technology can provide interesting and novel approaches to language learning. In this short essay I want to outline some of the methods and approaches I have employed in the use of video cameras as teaching and learning tools.

Rationale

Students of different language ability levels require different approaches with video work, but most students, and teachers, find oral communication, and in particular presentations in front of an audience, a daunting and at times terrifying prospect. This is where video production can be very useful, removing some of the apprehension from the language production process. Some teachers may argue that an audience is a necessary component of a presentation and reflects more accurately situations students may find themselves in, yet for lower level students, the removal of as many anxiety factors as possible is beneficial to their progression in acclimatizing to the production of their new language. One method I use with lower level classes is the production on video of a situational, group roleplay. These roleplays are then shown to the class as a whole, allowing the audience to become a factor once more, yet the production on video relieves the students of some of the anxiety they may feel when giving live performances and accordingly they appear more relaxed and confident in their language production on video. Some teachers may argue that it creates a false and rehearsed presentation, yet all students rehearse and prepare for any presentation they need to give in front of an audience.

Sample Roleplay for Lower Level Students

As part of students' assessed work for the year, I ask them to produce a video in groups. Most students have access to a video camera and for those who don't I have one in my office which students can sign out for periods of time. My camera is a digital one, allowing students to edit their productions on the computer and add graphics and titles, which many of them do very creatively.

The assignment asks students to work together to create a dialogue or conversation on videotape. It is a chance for students to practice conversational situations in English. I give them a list of possible scenarios from which they can choose, or alternatively they are free to create their own scenario in consultation with me. I give the students scenarios that often have elements of tension or difficulty to make their productions interesting for the class to view and for them to produce. Some examples are: a young couple talking to their parents about wanting to get married; a job interview; a date; a student party; an argument. These are just a few of the possible scenarios I give them and often students do

come to me with their own ideas for a possible production.

The students need to work together on creating their dialogue and setting the tone and register of the language correctly for the scene. I also ask them to act as well as possible and use props and costume where necessary. They have a maximum of ten minutes for their recorded scenario

Video Production for Higher Level Students

I employ three main approaches to video production for my higher level classes, with each adopted enthusiastically by students. The three different approaches are, mini-documentaries, interviews and creative audience targeted advertisements.

Mini-documentary

In one class I have students form groups of three students to work on producing a mini-documentary on a topic of their choosing. They are able to select a topic that we have worked on in class during the year or an entirely new topic in which they have an interest. Generally, students select their own topics and create very interesting final products. They should create a final mini-documentary of approximately ten minutes in length, with each student being fully involved in scripting, filming and editing. Topics have been interesting and diverse, from Tokyo's youth subcultures to recycling. Interviews in Japanese, if included, need to be either translated on video or subtitles in English added after. This project forces students out into their communities and to think about issues in their daily lives. The selected viewing of their work in class is always eagerly anticipated by all students.

Interviews

This assignment asks students individually to present an interview in English on video. The video interviews should be approximately 10 minutes long and are shown and discussed in class. Each student needs to find somebody to interview who can speak English and has experienced living in two cultural environments. It is simple enough to find interviewees in larger cities as there are many individuals who have lived abroad and many foreigners living in the cities. It may be slightly more difficult to find such people in more remote areas and thus the approach may need refining for those people.

Students interview their selected person about cultural hybridness, the interviewee's personal experience in another culture to discover how the ways and values of that culture have influenced the way they think about themselves, gender issues, customs and society. This hybridness may have also led to problems for the individual. It is important to give students adequate information to avoid cultural stereotyping and the selection of open ended questions for the interviewee is very important. The students must also include a brief conclusion at the end of their videos where they state what they have learned from the experience.

Audience Targeted Advertisements

The most popular of my video tasks is one that involves students in the creative task of scripting, producing and presenting a television commercial in English on video. Students work together in small groups to select a product of their choice, real or imaginary. In class we spend time on the concept of audience and the need to consider carefully the knowledge, interests, beliefs and values etc of your target audience when you use any form of communication.

Students then create their advertisement of up to about 1 minute in length and if they desire they can also produce a print campaign to accompany the commercial. When students present their final commercial to the class they also give brief presentations on why they created the commercial in a certain way, always referring to the key concept of audience. It continually amazes me just how professional and interesting their final products are, in some instances rivaling those of the large advertising companies.

Conclusion

These are just some simple ways that video production and consumption can be included in a language class curriculum. There are an unlimited number of ways that we can use this technology to enhance the learning experience and students take to these tasks so enthusiastically that it sometimes surprises me. Any methodology that creates an atmosphere of enthusiasm for language learning is one that should be explored further and I intend to continue to explore the range of possibilities for using this technology in the language classroom.