



## Video Production in Foreign Language Classes – Some Didactic Issues

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### 1. Language as an activity

Today most language teachers aim to apply a communicative approach to their teaching by making communicative competence the goal of their teaching and by acknowledging the interdependence of language and communication. In other words, foreign language teaching today makes a point that language is an activity and that this activity should be visible in the foreign language classes.

This point is also corroborated in the results of a survey conducted by the DIVIS team among foreign language teachers in several European countries. One part of the questionnaire was about the participants teaching background. The aim of this part of the survey was among other things to find out what kind of language activities the teachers normally design for their classes, and what kind of activities they find to be most successful in the foreign language classes.

The participants listed all together around 110 different activities that they interpret as being the most usual or the most successful language activities. Subsequently the activities were classified into two main groups: 1) activities that could be considered to be “active or productive” and 2) activities that could be considered to be “passive or receptive”. The result of this classification shows us that a great majority or almost 75 % of the participant language teachers consider “the active or productive activities” to be the most successful and that they mostly design this type of language activities for their own language classes. One can interpret this result as a verification of that communicative language teaching generally has a great impact on foreign language teaching and that it is a common aim to get students *to use* the foreign language in the classroom largely through communicative activities such as games, role play and problem solving tasks.

### 2. Video production and principles for teaching a foreign language

Letting students work with video production can be seen as a good example of a communicative activity that can involve e.g. different problem solving tasks and role playing. Also, it provides a setting for using the target language in an ‘authentic’ and meaningful way. Often the target language is not visible in the students’ surroundings and the only place they hear and have the opportunity to speak and use the language is in the classroom. Today, however, this may not apply as much to English, because English has developed into being the ‘Lingua Franca’ of the Western World and is therefore a visible language in

all modern medias, but when it comes to learning languages such as German, French, Spanish, the Nordic languages and other languages as a foreign language, the target language may be “hidden” and not very accessible for the student. Therefore it is often a very important principle for language teaching to establish a visible and authentic setting for the use of the foreign language in the classroom. Letting students work with video production is one of the ways of honoring this principle.

Another main principle for modern language teaching is that students should be given an opportunity to learn to express their ideas and opinions on different matters. When working with video production students will usually be given this opportunity either by using a script for the video production or if more advanced learners are involved there is also the opportunity to let the students improvise and use the target language themselves. Also, in video production the language learner is given a choice not only about what to say, but also how to say it and how to present a point of view. This is an important principle for teaching a foreign language and can be applied to all communication.

Video production can in other words be a powerful tool for the teacher to make the students’ usage of the foreign language visible in the classroom. This doesn’t imply that the outcome of the students’ efforts is without errors. In fact, there is a great probability that the finished product is full of language errors that can even sometimes make it a little difficult for the viewers to fully understand the message of the final product. However, today, errors are tolerated and seen as a natural outcome of the development of communication skills in a foreign language. The general point of view is that students’ should learn from their mistakes in order to be able to develop their interlanguage – that is the language the learners have within themselves and is neither their mother tongue nor the target language, but a third language with its own grammar, its own lexicon and so on.

Making a video can also be an activity that stimulates communicative interaction between the students and thus encourages cooperative relationships among students in foreign language classes. In that way language learning is not only a matter for the individual but also a matter for the group. In other words, working with a video production students contribute to a joint group work and are therefore responsible for the group and not only him or herself.

### **3. Video production is content-based and a part of the process**

Using video production in language classes can be understood as a content-based instruction. The special contribution of the content-based instruction is that it integrates the learning of a language with the learning of some other content, in our context “how to make a video production”. From this point of view, it would then be of importance that all manuals and other materials about video making should be available in the target language. In that way, students would find it necessary to read the instructions on video making in the target language.

Language activities should also always be understood as a process that students have to go through. One cannot expect a student to go out and use a foreign language in different situations without proper preparation. If we want the students to take part in a project or theme on e.g. music festivals or family activities it is important to prepare the students, give them the necessary vocabulary and structures and a valid instruction, including preparation and rehearsals. This could include a pre-preparation, using practice material on similar topics for instance. Without this, students will quickly be lost on how and

when they have finished the project and the language quality will leave a lot to be desired. Because of the necessity of preparing the foreign language students the subject they are going to deal with in order to establish some continuity in their language learning activities, it is proposed that the time should be divided into several sessions covering the various tasks and themes.

Making a video can be understood as a study task and a problem-solving activity that should be undertaken during a study session consisting of at least two or more lessons depending on the subject for the video. As such video production can be looked upon as a task-based project that aims to provide learners with a natural and meaningful context for language use. As learners work to complete the video task, they have enough opportunity to interact and make decisions on how to finish the task. Such interaction should ideally be done in the target language and it is thought to facilitate language acquisition as learners have to work to understand each other and to express themselves. However, making a video product can be technically rather complicated and only very advanced learners would probably be able to communicate properly about the process of video making in the target language. Therefore the quality of the foreign language and the diction must be supported in different ways.

It is important to ensure that the use of the foreign language is present and visible in the preparatory work with the script for the planned video production. In other words it is in this part of the students' work one makes certain that the students' video contains the necessary amount of language and that the students work with **both** language and pictures. The risk is that students make a video with lot of effects and music but only with very little language, more a music video than a dramatized video. Arguably, this could lead to the production of written language rather than to verbal communication. There is nothing wrong with that, but if the preparation phase includes preparation for the oral communication, ie the video, in the form of rehearsals, this will be a better exercise and will lead to a better quality of the final production.

It is therefore suggested that learners follow a task-based learning model when working with a video production. Such a model follows three steps:

- Preparatory stage or pre-task.
- Doing the task or during the task
- Presentation and evaluation of the task or post-task

#### 4. Preparatory work – pre-task

In the preparatory stage it is suggested that the learners are 1) introduced to the equipment if they have not handled video equipment before and 2) define the subject for the video production. A video project can be created as a production involving the class as a whole. However, it can be difficult to involve a whole class in one big production. It is often better to divide the class into smaller production groups if one has the necessary equipment (e.g. access to more than one video camera and more than one computer).

The preparatory work also includes allocation of individual responsibilities for the class or for the group members. Most video productions demand some kind of research on a subject, but exactly how this research is done and what needs to be researched of course depends on what kind of video production

the class or group wants to make. For example, if the class wants to make an introduction of their school to peers in another school they probably would need to make research on the history of their school, facts on student population, faculty etc. If they want to make a video-story based on a short story the research involves other parts such as location, the use of visuals, producing dialogs and so on and so forth.

An essential part of the preparatory work is developing a script for the video production. The script should be written in the target language (that is the foreign language) and it is of great importance that the whole production team is involved in the script making. Just for that reason it is a good idea not to have big production teams. A production team of 4 – 6 persons is preferable. To ensure that the students' script work is targeted it is a good idea to produce checklists and even tables, diagrams and forms that can make it easier for them to outline a script. Scripts can be more or less complicated depending on the students' age and their language abilities.

There are many games and techniques which can be used to help a group of students start thinking of ideas to be presented on video and develop particular themes or stories. These games or introductory activities often enable the whole group to participate in the planning of the video rather than leaving it to the more dominant or articulate members of the class. A simple one, suitable for both younger and older groups, is to play "written" *Consequences*, a game in which the participants build up stories by alternating the writing. This can e.g. be done by using computers if the teacher has access to the computer room in the school. Each student or two students together start to write a story on a computer. After a few minutes (for example 10 minutes) the students circulate to the next computer and keep on writing on the story that his or her peers have started. In that way ideas to a succession of storylines can be developed in a rather short time. The storylines are then presented and the class or group can choose which one or ones they like the best and which one they will develop further. Alternatively, this game can be done by passing a token around in the group (such as a cup or ashtray) and whoever is holding it adds a bit to the story. The exercise should of course be done in the target language.

Another useful game is the so-called *clapping game*. This is an effective way of reducing inhibitions in a group and starting to work on a theme. The idea is to get each person to say something in turn, and to keep the pace up by having the rest of the group clap twice between turns. The teacher could begin by going around the group saying something very trivial, e.g. what everyone had for breakfast and then move on to something closer to the theme the group wants to develop. If, for example, the theme is unemployment with a group of teenagers, one can begin by having them say what jobs they wanted when they were kids. In this way real life experiences can be included to form a story. Anecdotes gained in this way can be further developed by asking two of the group to go into the middle of the circle while others invent dialogue for them, one sentence at a time, going round the circle.

Yet another way of helping students to develop a story is the *photograph game*. Choose an image from an advert, a movie still, a magazine or newspaper. Ask the students to reconstruct the image to resemble the original image as closely as possible. Then ask them to make up a story which explains the events leading up to the moment shown in the image or what happened next.

An important part of outlining a script is working with dialogues. For that part it may be of some help if the students have been introduced to common idiomatic phrases that are useable in the particular theme they are supposed to working with beforehand. This is where, with teenagers or learners at intermediate level, one could also use a “one prepared before” support (an existing sketch or one written for the purpose), which the learners could read as a drama exercise beforehand and then use this to extract phrases for their own creation. This would not only improve their pronunciation but also prompt more ideas for their own scripts.

In the preparatory phase it is also necessary to make decision on where and how the recording should take place. If it is not “on-location” there can be a need for collecting visuals and make a “studio”. Also decisions should be made on the division of work. This includes among other things decisions on who should take care of the technical part of the recording and who will be acting in front of the camera.

When decisions have been reached on where the recording shall take place, what the role of each group member is in the video production and the script has been produced it is time to record the video.

## 5. Recording - during the task

The recording procedures will include some preparation. It is necessary to try out the technical matters such as the sound, adjust the setting for the video camera etc.

An important part of the recording procedures is the rehearsal, where the participants try out the instructions made in the script e.g. the dialogues, the gestures etc. This part of the video task is important because rehearsal and repetition can improve both the language and the production in a number of ways, for example, complexity increases, proposition are expressed more clearly and the learners become more fluent. Some of the ideas in the script may need to be regulated and changed when tried out in reality. In that case it is necessary for the group to make decisions concerning this.

When the equipment and the camera have been prepared and adjusted and the participants have finished rehearsing, the recording can start. When using digital video one does not have to be very strict about cutting and editing during the recording procedure. In fact, it is possible to record as much as you want and then edit it later on. On the other hand it is possible to avoid too much editing after the recording stage and that should be kept in mind by having some level of “production control”. It is a good idea to encourage learners to plan for a number of short sequences to improve the pace of the final program. In fact it is always sensible to plan the sequences as much as possible in detail. Minimising the editing procedure is a good idea and this can easily be done by reducing mistakes when you record. Otherwise the editing process can be very long and pointless.

When the recording is finished the students should import the material to a computer containing an editing program such as Windows Movie Maker. In most editing programs there is the possibility to import the material into a storyboard with a timeline where it is possible to build the movie with simple drag-and-drop. It is also possible to delete bad shots and include only the best scenes. In most editing programs it is also possible to add still pictures into the video, music and other audio materials. Also, it is possible to apply different kinds of effects such as transitions and the editor can then add titles and credits to the final product.

Editing video recordings can be a very time consuming activity, for example, if there isn't a script. However, the editing process can in many ways compensate for many of the problems that arise during the recording, and editing can be a good tool to make the 'plot', the 'story' or the 'red thread' in the video production more visible and stronger. On the other hand the time used in editing, which is always far longer than the filming itself, often take much longer than estimated. When editing, students also tend to have very high technical ambitions, because they often have role models from professional made movies. This can intentionally or unintentionally result in technical perfect video productions without very much content and speech. That is why 'production control' often is considered to be a major issue in order to secure a balance between content, speech and technical features.

Editing the video requires some important decision-making. Questions will probably arise on what scenes should be included or deleted. Also, effects and the choice of e.g. music and other sound effects can be a matter of discussion within the group. However, it is important that the spoken language in the video is prominent and that the final product is not drowned by too many other effects.

When the editing is finished and the final product is ready for reviewing it should be published in a sharable format such as avi, wma or another similar format.

## 6. Presentation and evaluation or post-task

The post-task have the pedagogic goals of providing an opportunity to present the video task and to encourage reflection on how the video production was performed. Furthermore the goal is to encourage attention to language and linguistic form, in particular to those forms that proved problematic to the learners when they performed the video task.

The video can be presented to the class, to peers from other classes and even made public on e.g. YouTube. However, making a video production available on public sites involves permission from all the students involved and also it is worth reflecting on whether the video is of such a quality that it has a place on a public forum.

The students can be asked to present a report on how they did the video and on what and why they decided to do as they did. This kind of reflection encourages students to look critically at their own work and even give them some tools to make better products in the future. Let us say that if there are 3 or 4 presentations in one class there is also the opportunity to let the other groups or students make an evaluation of each presentation. This can be done by making an evaluation sheet where students evaluate by filling in crosses in adequate fields, for example, " I liked the video as a whole  The video was OK but I think it could have been a little better" etc. Also there could be room for comments. The evaluation sheets could be gathered and provide the basis for further discussions on video productions.

Because the video production is a part of a foreign language class it is also strongly recommended that students are invited to focus on language and form. Making a video can be seen as a tool to get students to use the target language in class and as a tool to develop fluency and promoting the use of communication strategies on many levels. Focusing on language in the post-task stage can be one way

of countering the danger that students will develop fluency at the expense of accuracy. That is why it is meaningful at this point to focus on the students' language errors.

However, the question is: which aspects should be considered? The answer to this question is fairly obvious; teachers should select words, phrases or sentences that the students use incorrectly while performing in the video or expressions and structures that they fail to use at all. In other words, teachers should seek to address errors or language gaps in students' language knowledge. Consideration also needs to be given to how many language elements a teacher should try to address. Should focus be placed on a single aspect and treat it intensively or a number of aspects that are treated extensively? Both approaches are warranted and depending on the age of the students, the level the students are and of course the subject of the video. This is also the time for the teacher to either expand on the vocabulary, idioms, structures or pronunciation elements mentioned above or to use reinforcement techniques /exercises-games to "make them stick". Without this, much of the gain from the creative activity risks being both very short-lived and restricted.

## 7. Types of video presentation

The description of working with video production in the different task phases here above is not specific but of a rather general nature. The aim is not to make a concise guide on what is needed to be done in different phases of a video task but rather to point out some of the most important didactic and pedagogical issues when using video in foreign language classes. Exactly how each of the described phases will be formed is naturally also dependent on what type of video production the students are making. It is therefore clear that if making a short presentation the pre-task will be quite different than if the students are making a dramatization of a short story. Here below is a list of common types of video presentations presented, going from the simplest form of presentation to the more complicated.

### 7.1 Photo story

A photo story is a digital story made by collecting pictures and compiling them in a way that make a coherent story. A photo story can easily be made by using PowerPoint from Microsoft or another PowerPoint program. Students are invited to create a story using pictures. The pictures can then be imported into a PowerPoint show and the students can work further with the pictures by adding titles, text bubbles and other features. Also, PowerPoint enables the users to include narration, so it would be an easy option for the students to include narration with the photo story.

Microsoft has developed a powerful tool for making photo stories, the Photo Story 3. This program can empower students to create stories and projects, via photo slideshows that include interesting transitions, motion, narration and even music. Students can then easily save the video file to a computer, CD or Web and share it around the classroom.

### 7.2 Short presentations

The learners prepare short statements on appropriate topics such as "Introducing themselves", what they like/dislike, what they did over the weekend etc. Simple presentations would probably take about 30 seconds each. At more advanced levels the presentations can require more analytical or reflective skills, relating to articles on current affairs issues, to the critique of a film or book. Such presentation might last one to three minutes. When using video media it is important to stress that the learners

should not read directly from prepared scripts. It is much better if the learners are able to speak continuously without a script and using only consulting notes.

### 7.3 Discussions or interviews

Most students find it motivating to discuss or make interviews on topics of different kinds relating to their own world. The topics for such discussions or interviews are virtually infinite. However, it seems a good thing for the teacher to be fairly prescriptive in terms of topic, structure and roles, if time is not to be wasted with groups arguing over what they are to do and how, rather than the content. At higher levels, such topics can be provided by their curricula in Modern Foreign languages. Depending on the time available and learners' level, the teacher should allow time for preparation.

### 7.4 Role play

When using role play at lower levels these should be based on scenes that have already been viewed or a text that has been studied. This is done to ensure that the students have sufficient vocabulary to use during the role-play. Also there is then a sound basis in terms of the "plot" and the "characters". The class can then be divided into groups, with each group set the same task or with a number of different tasks being allocated.

### 7.5 Sketches

When working with more advanced learners, it is possible to have more of the content and organisation to be decided by the groups and the learners' themselves. Learners can be encouraged to develop sketches, perhaps taken from television programmes. Experience shows that it usually proves necessary to scale down the more ambitious ideas because of time and the amount of equipment and props. However, it is a constant source of surprise how learners respond to the creative potential of the medium.

### 7.6 Mini-documentaries

Making a documentary on i.e. the school, the neighborhood of the school, our town is a very ambitious and time consuming activity. Therefore it is necessary that such an activity is considered relevant for the rest of the course. However, the preparation of short documentaries can be both a linguistically valuable and motivating exercise.

### 7.7 Dramatisations

Short dramatisations are a good activity for more advanced learners. These can be based on short stories or on news items. Dramatisations like this can of course be done without consolidating them on video, but it seems to be more motivating for students when dramatizations are recorded. Also here it is advisable to work from a task-based angle. As mentioned before, they could also practice with "existing material" in order to boost their language skills before entering the production phase. Before the task is carried out it is necessary for the students to get familiar with the text in question. Also they should at this point decide how they can portray the content of the text using video. During the task or the production the students record the production. Here it is important to be realistic about what can be achieved. Depending on the time available, the age and the level of the students, group members can either develop the whole script, or they can work from notes and improvise. After the task has been finished it is also important to analyze and comment on the final product.

## 7.8 Other forms of recordings

Today, digital video cameras are quite easy to use and it is also easy to transfer digital video to a computer. This is often done through a USB connection. Most computers which are equipped with i.e. Microsoft Office package also have a video editor installed i.e. Window Movie Maker. If not, it is possible to obtain such editing programs over the internet for free. This makes it easy to make semi-professional on-location recordings. Such recordings are a very useful addition to a visit abroad in connection with an exchange program for instance, or even as a news video to be prepared about the school and the region for a partner school in another region of the country or abroad.

The active use of video has proved to be more and more successful in language classes in Europe. Most learners are usually motivated and enjoy producing different kinds of projects. Seen from a pedagogical point of view it is nevertheless important to be aware that the video productions made by students should not be too complicated and ambitious. In fact, a common and useful rule for all video production is as follows: the simpler, the better.

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