

Film Making and Language Learning

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Abstract: Theodosakos in *The Director in the Classroom: How Filmmaking Inspires Learning* argues that filmmaking “enables students to explore any curriculum subject through the active process of making a film about it” (p. 30). Furthermore, while Simkins (2007), David Nunan (2004), emphasize the tendency to teach language through group based projects, Joyce, etal (2000) establish the essentiality of such group based projects on developing and enhancing communication skills. In my paper I will examine the impact of film making activities on English Language learning in classes of mine over a period of few years where most students were hesitant to produce language effectively at the onset of the course. The paper will view the cons and pros of film making activities with emphasis on the potential advantages it carries for the learner in terms of enhancing learner’s pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, awareness of language structures and sound language production.

Key Words: Language acquisition, cinema, scriptwriting

Introduction

The best possible kind of input required for language acquisition and learning has been at the center of arguments and research by so many scholars (Krashen, 1987; Pinker 1994; Morgan 1986; Ingram 1989). For instance Stephen Krashen proposes that language “*Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language.*” (1987: 6) Krashen maintains further that “*The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situation.*” (1988: 7)

Most educators would agree that the following input items enhance both acquisition and learning:

- Input should be comprehensible introduced with simple vocabulary and clear instructions in standard language
- Input should be interesting

Such optimal input helps reduce the so called “Affective Filter” and enhance students’ ability at language acquisition and production. Krashen maintains “Low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can combine to 'raise' the affective filter and form a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. In other words, when the filter is 'up' it impedes language acquisition. On the other hand, positive affect is necessary, but not sufficient on its own, for acquisition to take place.” (1988: 68)

Film Making

The term sounds daunting and interesting at the same time. Daunting because it requires well prepared teachers and students willing to take the challenge involved in such an activity. Interesting because it involves plenty of what is needed to learn and produce language in new environments: collaborativity (teamwork), creativity, art, performance and multimedia usage.

My story with teaching English via movie making started few years ago in a beginner’s class in the English department where I was working then. I observed that students were timid and reluctant to produce English language effectively as they were conscious of the processes of both acquisition and production. What strikes me about the class is the fact that most of the students were well versed in a very passive way of the language structure. They all know in theory the various verb forms; they know the basic sentence structure and know well about the various irregularities that come up with English. The problem we faced in the class was that students would not talk in English and when they do so they do it horribly with the basic structural rules violated.

It was then that I decided to resort to the old-new method of using drama in teaching to simulate a somewhat natural atmosphere for language acquisition and production. In order to make the activity as natural and spontaneous as possible, I introduced students first to computer software that helps generate a screen script and guide the students step by step to generate characters’ descriptions and needed objects’ details.

The software I chose for this task is called CELTX. It is easily available for download online and is usually offered for free. Introducing the students to the software is not that difficult for both teacher and student. Furthermore, the activity of introducing the students to the software constitutes a natural environment for enhancing students' acquisition of program related jargon and helping a lot in lowering the so called affective filter that inhibits language learning and production.

Key Features of CELTX

The software is neither made for English language teaching nor for teaching creative writing. What it does is simply to guide the students, help organize the student's ideas and help leading the students to include what is needed for a script in a very natural and stimulating environment.

For instance as the students begin to write, the software makes them aware of six basic elements needed for the script: Scene Heading, Action, Character, Dialogue, Parenthetical, Transition. It is observed that these elements in the program create the control environment needed by the learners to help them start and finish their scripts. These also function as subtle and constant instructor reminding the students and guiding them to accomplish their desired task in the standard format without them having to waste time thinking of the structure of the script. In this respect the software spares the students the time needed for structuring the activity in favor of focusing on the creative and linguistic sides of the activity.

As a professional teacher whose aim is to instruct and lead his students to learning rather than drilling those in the conventional manner CEKTX through its modules that explore in details aspects of character and objects included in the script helps students generate the language needed to fulfill the requirements of their scripts using the maximum language they can afford. The Character Module for instance requires that the students describe a given character in the following terms: Name, Actor, Description, Media (image), Age, Hair, Eyes, Height, Weight, Distinguishing Features, Key Character Traits, Principal Function, Goal, Plan to Achieve Goal, Family Background, Habits, Vices, Education, Personality, Likes, and Dislikes. Another module that guides the students to detail the Scene Heading requires students to generate text describing the scene under the following headings: Description, the central event of the scene, the effect of the event on the plot, the characters in the scene, the setting of the scene, time of the scene, the mood of the scene, the protagonist, the antagonist, the goal of the protagonist, the goal of the antagonist, the way the antagonist achieves her goal, the way the protagonist achieves her goal.

In short such modules by breaking down the process of perceiving a scene, character, or event into its multiple components help the language learners approach a full scene step at a time, thus making language production easier and systematic.

Scenario Writing

Theodosakos in *The Director in the Classroom: How Filmmaking Inspires Learning* argues that filmmaking "enables students to explore any curriculum subject through the active process of making a film about it" (2009:30). As far as language learning is concerned, the first step to film making lies in writing its script. Making a film involves creating it from an idea and turning the idea into a producible script. The students are given CELTX and are asked to generate a short script made of as many scenes needed to tell a simple story. As the students already learnt while experimenting with the software that the basic components of a script are the scene heading, the action, the character and the dialogue; each proceeds in generating a script in accordance with the dictates of the software and the student's creative imagination.

It is observed that students receive the activity of creating a script with some reluctance and fears of failing their teacher and themselves. But like all activities that require multitasking and collaborative presence, teacher's proper instructions and constant encouragement dispel students' misgivings and before the elapse of the first few weeks in the course the students get really indulged in the activity and begin to enjoy it.

The role of the teacher at this junction is to keep checking students' projects and provide feedback in terms of suggestions and language corrections when needed. Also students are encouraged to edit each others projects as it is a wise practice to split the class into several groups of fives or sixes as such groups will have to relay on each other when they move from the individual process of writing scripts to managing and filming them.

Camera and Collaborative Learning

While Simkins (2007), David Nunan (2004), emphasize the tendency among educators to teach language through group based projects; Joyce, Weil, and Calhoun (2000) establish the essentiality of such group based projects on developing and enhancing communication skills. Such

findings come true when students engage each other in performing their and each others scripts. This part of the activity engages the two basic skills of filming , and language acquisition and production as the students practice:

- what they learnt about simple filming techniques and camera angles
- language as they memorize/improvise and act their roles in English
- language while negotiating with their partners in the processes of writing, editing, producing and filming

Once the scripts are written and activities are shared among students involved, the teacher encourages students to read about the basic techniques of camera shots and angles. It is preferable that teachers point their students to simple texts in English that elaborate on such activities to make sure that the students acquire additional jargon related to camera and its manipulation in filming. Terms such as long shot, establishing shot, medium shot and close up shot among several others will keep recurring all the time and will become part of the jargon of the students.

In short filming as a multitasked activity provides learners with motivation, self-confidence, low level of anxiety and contributes more effectively to language acquisition, retention and production.

Computer Editing

To make the film aesthetically presentable it needs editing by computer software. The market is saturated with such movie editing programs, the simplest and most accessible among which is Windows Movie Maker. This software is part of Windows with the exception of Windows 7 and can be downloaded for free from Microsoft Windows site if not available on one's computer.

By asking the students to familiarize themselves with the software before coming to edit their films students will find themselves again learning a computer skill and language, too. Going through the help files and accessing various additional e-files on how to run and use the program act as a language teacher in quite a natural condition. The internet is replete with sites like You Tube and E-how that show help videos in English on almost any conceivable topic.

Such editing programs enable students to add the various shots taken earlier in order or at random and place them in the time sequence they should be in. The program enables the student to edit and cut unwanted scenes, add and delete music and sound effects and furthermore add titles, captions and subtitles.

By asking the students to include as many effects as the program and the capacity of the students' permit, the students are likely to get more engaged in the film, its language and its meta-language in real and natural environment. After all Krashen rightly maintains that "language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill." (1987:6)

Conclusion

A lot has been said about the effectiveness of media and multimedia in language acquisition and learning. While Clark (1983) contends that there is little or no evidence to show the positive effects of multimedia on language acquisition and production, educators such as Liu (1995), Johnston (1995), Borrás (1994), Garza (1991), Vanderplank (1988), Salomon (1979) among others accentuated the various functionality of multimedia in helping learners cope with language learning and language production. Though most of those educators worked on the effect of watching films with or without subtitling in the target language, very little has been said on the advantages of utilizing film making and script editing software in enhancing language acquisition and production. Theodosakos (2009), for instance, advocated the potentiality of teaching any subject matter in the curricula via simulating film making and direction in the classroom. The over all observation of educators and language teachers who wrote on collaborative learning is that film and multimedia usage in the language classroom show increased percentage of language acquisition and production in comparison to classroom practices where conventional methods persisted in teaching.

My empirical observations over the years showed me reluctant and timid students with poor performance records in previous courses and classes taught in less interactive ways produce promising scripts coupled with eloquent and impressing dialogues and performances. Naturally, for the activity to yield effective results, it always requires a dedicated student equipped with perseverance and desire to learn. From my observation, the activities of script writing, filming, and film editing have always triggered the learner's desire for language acquisition and production.

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