

Student-Produced Video Journals

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Motivating and actively involving Japanese university students in college English courses that focus on speaking can be challenging for even the most skilled ESL teacher. One major difficulty is that Japanese students have had little opportunity to speak English with their peers or native English speakers during high school. In previous educational experiences, most Japanese college students have neither had fluency practice, nor have they had practice preparing and giving oral presentations in English. To overcome the hesitancy of Japanese in speaking tasks, and to motivate them to actively participate in speaking activities, the use of student-produced video journals is proposed. In other words, throughout the term every student in the course records each individual speaking assignment and group production on a video-cassette. This cassette then becomes a video portfolio of the student's speaking progress from the beginning to the end of the term and a permanent record of his or her class experience. These video journals can be the basis for an ESL speaking course in a college setting. After an overview of the benefits, the author will describe the steps in preparing students for the production of video journals, the equipment needed, a model syllabus and the methods for evaluating student performance.

One advantage of video journals is the motivational factor of using immediate video play-back followed by peer review techniques for the respective speaking tasks. Students are motivated to do their best when they know that their peers will be evaluating them both orally and in writing. Since peers can be much more critical and direct than the teacher might normally be, students know they must do their best to win their praise. Peer approval is important at any age, but especially so for young adults. Nothing is more rewarding than to be praised by classmates or more disappointing than to be criticized by them.

In addition, having the students react to the presentation along with the teacher widens the intended audience, thus making the communication more authentic and meaningful. The presentation becomes not just another assignment to please the teacher, but one in which the student must appeal to a larger group of individuals, as usually happens in oral presentations that occur outside the language classroom. The video play-back gives the presenter the opportunity for self-evaluation together with immediate peer evaluation. As a result, the student can immediately realize his or her strengths and weaknesses. It takes courage to view one's weaknesses on videotape in front of peers; therefore, the student is highly motivated to prepare in order to do the best work possible.

Student video productions encourage both cooperation building and individual accountability. Much of the work in video journals can be done as homework assignments where students work together in pairs or small groups to film the final take of each production. A great deal of peer-tutoring goes on during this process. Peer suggestions for voice projection, the use of emotion, and body language are common. Individual accountability is also fostered in that students have assigned roles to play in

each production. These could be self-assigned or teacher-assigned depending on the production; however, each student knows that he or she is responsible for part of the outcome. Self-reflection is also a key element in video journals as each student is continually asked to view, review and analyze aspects of his or her performance, such as grammar, organization or non-verbal communication skills.

Video journals also promote the important skills of speaking fluency and confidence that should be objectives in any college English speaking course. The preparation of each oral presentation or video production involves a great deal of speaking practice. Fluency gradually develops from the initial practice to the final filming. By reviewing each production, students can actually see their progress and thus gain confidence.

Finally, Japanese young people readily relate to the medium of video and see it as a form of entertainment that they are very familiar with. They have grown up watching television and videos on VCRs as well as playing many video games. Since the use of student video production is not normally used in Japanese high schools, producing a video journal is a creative and enjoyable educational experience for them.

A VHS or 8mm camera connected to a VCR and TV monitor are the basic pieces of equipment needed. For every speaking task, each student brings to class a video cassette to record his/her own presentation. To ensure audience participation and individual accountability, the other students are assigned tasks. For example, with a class size of ten to twelve students, one is the timer, another the camera person, and a third is a note taker who will provide a brief summary of each presentation. A few of the other students are assigned to ask different types of questions after the oral task, for example, elaboration, clarification and opinion. Still others may be asked to paraphrase or restate these inquiries. The remaining students can be asked to take notes on grammar mistakes and present several errors with corrections to the class. For larger classes, students may need to be divided, with one half of the class presenting and videotaping, while the other half is preparing for the next video production in pairs or small groups.

The individual tasks are rotated with each speech. Japanese students are group-oriented and respond well when working in teams. Therefore, after the first few presentations, they will readily assign themselves these roles, allowing the teacher to act more as a facilitator than a director. By having a definite role to play in the production, whether it be camera person or note taker, the students are thoroughly involved and focused on the assignment. They become engaged in the experience and are active participants rather than passive observers. Being active participants and interacting with group members should be important objectives in speaking courses.

Meeting course objectives requires a carefully prepared syllabus that provides for a gradual progression in the length of student tasks and in the complexity of accompanying skills. During the opening weeks of the course, a multitude of various warm-up activities should be used in order to relax students and to reduce student fears in speaking before others. Mime and drama techniques, too, can make students aware of the importance of body movement and gestures in oral presentations.

In the beginning of the course, instructors should plan to introduce Japanese students to short impromptu speeches. For instance, a one-minute impromptu self-introduction speech is difficult enough for students' initial exposure to speaking before classmates while being video recorded.

The second assignment could be a two-minute narrative speech that concentrates on eye contact with the audience and basic organizational skills in presenting a speech. Next, students might be given a choice of six personal experience topics as the basis for a three-minute impromptu speech in which good posture and gestures are stressed. Facial expressions and the effective use of audiovisual aids could be emphasized subsequently in a prepared three to five-minute demonstration. In this way, there is a progressive increase in task time and skills to master.

At this point in the syllabus, the instructor might plan to involve students in various situations demanding spontaneous and prepared language use by assigning a five to six-minute interview. Prepared language in the form of greetings, introductions and question openers can be introduced in the interview. Standard listener expressions and gestures to indicate attentiveness and to encourage the speaker should also be incorporated. Spontaneous language should be combined with the use of emotions, such as interest or surprise, to make the interview more natural. Finally, correct pronunciation and intonation can be worked on during the interview and reviewed in the video play-back.

In the second half of the course, the syllabus provides for longer impromptu speeches of four minutes in length, five to seven minute verbal summaries, free-topic speeches, as well as group skits and mini-dramas. The emphasis here is on combining and refining the various skills introduced during the first half of the course. As a culminating activity, a fifty-minute debate could be assigned demanding the integration of all the skills that students have developed throughout the course. At the end of the course, the students have their VHS tape, a video portfolio that demonstrates their speaking progress from that first, nervous one-minute speech to a formal opening statement in a debate. Progress is evident and students gain confidence and a sense of accomplishment. As an optional group project in the syllabus, students could edit together a class journal that contains their best efforts. It also could be a memorable record of their joint learning experience.

Of course, a crucial aspect of any syllabus is the question of evaluation. A syllabus that relies on student-produced videos is no exception. Peer and self-evaluation are conducted from the initial assignment to the final assignment. After the speaker has completed his/her presentation and the note taker and questioners have completed their tasks, peer-feed-back forms are distributed to the entire class, including the speaker. The camera person then plays back the speech for a minute or two to the class. Complete playbacks, especially for the longer five to seven-minute presentations, are usually neither necessary nor desirable since the presenter can review the entire speech after class at his or her own pace and evaluate pronunciation and grammar. The play-back in class serves to refresh the students' memory of content, organization, and voice quality, and to focus their attention on non-verbal elements. During playback, each class member writes comments by giving at least one good point and one suggestion for improvement to the speaker. Simultaneously, the presenter has the valuable opportunity to immediately self-evaluate the performance.

Due to the primary methods of peer and self-evaluation, teacher grading becomes of secondary importance. The teacher might provide written comments and suggestions at the same time as peer feedback is given or may choose to merely summarize peer comments orally during the class session, giving more extensive feedback later either in conferencing or in written form. Since peers have been involved in the entire task and have been introduced to speaking skills gradually, they have become aware of what constitutes a good speech and know how to effectively evaluate their own speeches and those of their peers.

What results from producing video journals is a highly interactive group endeavor. The students become motivated to be attentive and active collaborators in each presentation. The acquisition of definite roles increases their interest in the success of each speech. Due to video playback, students are able to evaluate themselves and others, and to receive valuable suggestions from peers. Moreover, the best aspect of video journal production is the inherent enjoyment for all concerned.

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