USING VIDEOS OF STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM TO ENHANCE LEARNER AUTONOMY

by **Phyllis Wachob**

American University in Cairo, Egypt

pwachob @ aucegypt.edu

Abstract

Although the technology of digital videos is available, many classroom EFL teachers are unsure of what they can do with videos. This paper will present some reasons why teachers should consider using videos of student performance based on ideas of motivation and learner autonomy. Three activities are presented with checklists and protocols that can be implemented in classrooms. These activities are based on using technology, but integrate skills such as: reflection, evaluation, critique, listening, speaking and writing. These critical skills, along with higher levels of motivation, are prerequisites to learner autonomy. Some considerations about how to prepare students before, during and after videotaping as well as some hints on how to videotape are also included. Technology is not a substitute for teaching, nor does it stand alone as a technique, but when integrated into other classroom practices can help promote learner autonomy.

Introduction

Videotaping student performances is easy and practical these days. Teachers of EAP or Business English teach presentation skills and supervisors of teaching practicums often videotape their student teachers. The low cost of cameras, ease of downloading and easy storage mean that classroom teachers can now do this with their own or their institutions' digital video cameras. Even mobile telephones have video capabilities. But what can be done with the videos? This article describes ways in which technology can be used to enhance teaching specifically in the realm of learner autonomy. Previously teachers watched and evaluated students as they engaged in presentations or in the teaching practicum. This meant that the teachers were doing the evaluation, but with easy to use videos, students can the see the performance as the instructor sees it and evaluate themselves. This leads to more critical thinking skills, higher motivation and learner autonomy.

This paper discusses the rationale of using videos and gives practical suggestions for activities that can be used. Also included are some comments on preparing students and preparations for videotaping.

Why video?

Those who report resistance to new technology often cite the notion that technology itself does not make teaching better and often complicates the process by breaking down or being complicated to use. However, videotapes of student performances can be used in ways not available before and contribute to learning by engendering learner autonomy. Also motivation can be enhanced through peer feedback, especially in group projects used in activities, and this also enhances learning.

Autonomy and motivation are seen as inextricably entwined and the question of 'which comes first' has been explored in relationship to self-access centers in Hong Kong (Spratt, Humphries & Chan, 2000). The authors concluded that it was not always possible to tell which came first, but that learner autonomy was definitely an important goal. "However, one way to encourage autonomy may be to develop students' motivation to learn" (p. 263). Alum (2006) uses other motivational theories (such as Ryan and Deci and Warschauer) to show how the tool (computer) itself is tied to motivation. The stimulus and immediate feedback of the screen and visual/auditory signals is of itself motivating. Apple (2007) takes up this idea in his PowerPoint group projects and emphasizes the motivational effectiveness of using CALL because of the challenges and opportunities to achieve student goals, thus promoting confidence and autonomy. Although he based his comments on feedback in writing, Rollinsen (2005) pointed out the value of peer feedback in general and how it can be structured for maximum effect. Revision and collaboration are two strong elements as long as students are prepared and trained. He also emphasized the benefits of reflection for the reviewer as well as for the one reviewed.

Curriculum design to promote leaner autonomy, as reported by Cotterall (2000), includes feedback and reflection that revolves back to input. In her model of the language learning process (p. 113), motivation is depicted as an outside, static influence in the

process. However, if Spratt et al. (2000) had made a diagram, they might have incorporated motivation into a more fluid model.

Along with feedback protocols which have been developed by critical friendship advocates (Cushman, 1998; Costa and Kallick, 1993; Hirsch, 2004; NSRF, n.d.) the concepts of autonomy and motivation that are integral to the language learning process, need to be taken into account when designing activities and are linked to the medium of CALL itself. Many teachers might question the value of making videos of students' work. The technology used in classrooms, mandated in some cases, is often used as a simple substitute for an activity without utilizing the unique qualities and possibilities of technological advances. But with new technology, there are new opportunities for opening doors on enhancing teaching practices. The unique chance to record without expensive recording studios and make videos readily available quickly means that students can use these records of performances to evaluate themselves, to seize the opportunity to make their personal presence felt in the classroom (Pennycook, 1997) and to become more autonomous in their practices.

Teachers need to view technology not as a toy, but as a powerful teaching tool that has become available. Enhancing possibilities of reflective practice both for English as Second or Foreign Language students, but also for our student teachers, is motivating and leads to greater learner autonomy. Students can even use their phones to make videos of themselves or classmates, thus empowering themselves in their use of English. Thus the questions posed are: What are some kinds of activities that can be implemented and how can teachers use them to enhance teaching, specifically critical thinking skills, motivation and ultimately learner autonomy?

Activities

Three activities that the author has successfully used with both undergraduate as well as graduate students will be described below; all of them can be used with the same method of videotaping.

Activity One: Watch the video for self-evaluation using a rubric or checklist.

Presentation skills are often taught in EAP classes or English for Special Purposes, especially Business English. Students need to know what criteria will be used to assess their performance and the attached presentation checklist (Appendix) is one example of a possible rubric or grading scheme to let students know which categories are important. If students are totally new to giving presentations, then the teacher might need to explain the various components by demonstrating and explaining the items. The checklist can be modified for different levels of students.

Watching the video

As soon as the videos become available for students to view, they can be assigned the task of viewing the presentation critically. Using the checklist, they view the video several times which helps students to concentrate on various components of the presentation. This method that isolates aspects of the performance for more in-depth analysis can also help with the affective problems of reviewing one's own performance.

Students watch the video several times. The first time can just be a simple viewing, looking at the performance holistically. The second time the video can be watched more carefully looking closely at the Language Control and Content and Organization sections of the checklist. The students rate themselves on those items, listening and watching critically. The third viewing is not watched, but only listened to. Not looking at the screen or closing the eyes helps to isolate the verbal features. The fourth viewing is done with the sound off as students rate themselves on the Nonverbal section of the checklist for body language. A final viewing can be done in the company of a 'critical friend' (see Activity Two below).

Critiquing the performance

The next stage is to ask the students to put their critiques in writing. This can be a writing assignment that can be used to assess the students' critical thinking skills as well as their writing. Critiques can be in the form of a review. Students might look at movie or TV reviews, restaurant reviews or other forms of reviews for examples. They can use this as an opportunity to go to Internet sites and look at this particular genre of writing. The first part of a review is a description of the event, place or thing that is being reviewed.

Students can write about the purpose, scope and note when and where the performance took place. They can mention non-debatable or easily verifiable components; such as if the presentation was within the time limits or was organized. The next part is the evaluation that typically comes in two sections. The first section is what is good about the performance. Students can point to particularly well-executed elements they noticed in the video. The next section points to those areas that need work. Students should be encouraged to be specific about what elements did not work well and analyze the result of the poor performance. An example is to notice that the presenter was reading notes with the head down with the result that the audience became disengaged and bored. The last part is the challenge for the future. Students can suggest ways in which to improve the performance and again, specific suggestions are better than general ones. For example, students can suggest that they practice the presentation for a roommate or family member before they give the presentation in class in order to 1) reduce anxiety or 2) check the timing. Or they might issue a challenge that they practice pronouncing difficult words ten times each in order to give a smoother delivery. The challenge should be practical and one that students are able to accomplish at their level of development.

Activity Two: Watch peers' videos and give feedback using a protocol
An alternative to self-evaluation is to have the students' classmates or critical friends do the critique. This can be done in conjunction with a student's self critique as this is an opportunity for a student to get a reality check on the student's self perceptions. It is important not to be too hard or too easy, as the goal of the self-critique activity is self-awareness and reflection. If a trusted colleague can help in this reality check, the affective factors can be smoothed over.

Students can choose or be assigned a fellow student's video to watch and critique. In the case of a student being nervous, the critique of a classmate could be given directly to the teacher if students are uncomfortable with peer critique. After students have become acclimated to being critical, they can use 'critical friendship' groups or circles to work cooperatively in critiquing and then offering suggestions. Students need to be self-confident and open to peer critique, but even young or beginner learners can benefit from a supportive group of 'critical friends'.

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> After students watch the video, using the checklist, they can give feedback using the following protocol.

A Sample Protocol for Critical Friendship

Presenter comments: 1-2 minutes. The student who has done the presentation makes a few comments, giving a self-critique or identifying specific problems with the presentation.

Warm feedback: 2-3 minutes. The critical friend (or friends) uses comments made on the checklist to identify good aspects of the presentation. The presenter does not speak, but listens and takes notes.

Cool feedback: 2-3 minutes. The critical friend (or friends) identifies aspects of the presentation that could have been done better. As during the warm feedback stage, the presenter only listens.

Challenge: 2 minutes. The friend(s) and the presenter review the comments and together formulate a challenge of aspects to target for future presentations.

> Because of the delicate nature of this kind of feedback, students need to pay close attention to the language of critique. Using positive formulations, hedging, reiterating positive aspects while giving cool feedback and acknowledgement of the possible affective problems, mean that comments will be taken in the spirit given. Student presenters can write up the peer critique for themselves or for their friends as a writing exercise. The basis of this critique is the video, so students can view the presentation again and again to verify their judgments.

Activity Three: Watch pre and post instruction videos for improvement

This activity can be done alone or with critical friends. Once again, using the presentation checklist as a rubric, the student watches two or three videos taken at different times to evaluate progress. They can write this as an essay or as part of a portfolio exercise in improvement in presentation skills.

> This pre and post video exercise is particularly useful for student teachers doing a teaching practicum. As an observer can only focus on a few items at a time, many aspects of a student teacher's performance may go unnoticed. In conjunction with a university

supervisor or mentor, the student teacher can watch for improvements in such things as wait time, organizing and giving directions and annoying habits that are not readily apparent to the student teacher. Again these videos can be used as a prompt for a reflective essay as a self-critique. They can also be a prompt for a critical friendship circle when student teachers meet in a group to exchange experiences where they also use the protocol outlined above.

A note for all activities is that students need to be prepared with checklists, protocols and instructions for use before they are given the videos. These activities should be integrated into the course as they use a wide variety of skills such as listening, speaking, writing as well as drawing on critical thinking skills. They are meant as motivating activities that lead to learner autonomy.

Preparing for Taping

Choosing a camera depends on budget and may not be within the control of classroom teachers. However, the smaller is the better in some ways in that a small tripod can be used or the camera can be balanced on a stack of books, whereas larger cameras can seem much more intrusive and are bulky to carry to and from the classroom. A small camera can literally be slipped into a pocket and a credit card sized camera is so small as to be forgotten more readily than one 'in-your-face'. Battery use can also be an issue if planning to do a lot of videotaping in one day or at one time so having a second battery if the plan is to use the camera heavily is important.

Before taping

Knowing before taping what will be done with the results will mean not wasting the teacher's or the students' time. (See above for activities.) Taping short presentations rather than whole classes means that everyone concentrates on putting the best foot forward and preparing for the day. Letting students prepare for their big day by making it a special occasion and allowing them to 'dress for success' for the day helps to prepare for nervousness and ways to control it. Students can be encouraged to work with new technologies such as PowerPoint or slide shows (Apple, 2007) for self-reliance and autonomy. Although electronic shows seem ubiquitous, it should be pointed out that

student presentations should be <u>supported</u> by technology, not <u>driven</u> by it. If there is time, teachers can plan one practice taping session before using the camera to record an assessment event. Students may feel happier to know that they had the opportunity to try out something new before they are given a grade on it.

Checking the equipment before going to the classroom or venue may seem to be an obvious piece of advice, but even experienced teachers need to be reminded to check to make sure the batteries are charged, the memory cards are cleared of the last taping session and that all the equipment needed (tripod, cords, stop watch etc.) are at hand. Also, the person who is videotaping needs to know how to use that particular camera. (This is also a reason to buy a new camera as the latest models require two or three steps, rather than elaborate controls of older cameras.)

During taping

Students should be prepared for what they will be doing during or after the videotaping. (See activities above.) Other students who may have to sit and wait their turn to present may be given the assignment of Activity Two so they will have something to do while others in the class give presentations. This means that all students are engaged in the activity as either a presenter or as a listener. Also teachers might consider asking a student to take control of the camera. This can awaken interest in the process for those students who have knowledge and/or interest. Letting them take over the filming duties also lets them add some more technological skills to their skill set.

Placing the camera at head height or higher means that the resulting video will be more natural. A tall tripod or a stand is preferable to setting the camera on a table. Using a tripod that has a swivel capacity also means that as the presenter moves around, the person taping can follow the presenter. If the camera has to be placed on a pile of books, a small 'push' can move the camera swiftly and gently in the right direction. Holding the camera in the hands can give a feeling of 'reality' to the taping, but the quality will be poor. Make sure the light is in front of the presenter, not coming from behind. The one videotaping should choose a place in front of the window instead of facing the window. Also, making sure that if the presenter is also using a slide show, s/he needs to know that light also needs to be on the face of the presenter. Turning down the lights so that the

audience can see the screen also means that they cannot see the face of the presenter. Presenters should choose carefully when creating shows so they have slides with high contrast text and clear, simple photos or illustrations.

Before beginning to tape, let presenters know that the cameraman is ready and let them indicate when they are ready. A prearranged hand signal works well. Timekeepers should be unobtrusive, so a sign out of range of the camera rather than a bell or having someone call out the time frames makes for a smoother, seamless video. Listeners should be careful to be quiet unless invited to participate. Talking over a presenter can be picked up by the microphone and drown out or make the presenter difficult to hear on the final tape. Teachers may need to remind the rest of the class that taping takes priority. A way to minimize student boredom is to ask the class to participate as camera persons, timers or critics.

After taping

The above steps may appear simple and make teachers feel proud of using technology. But it is what teachers do after the taping is over that makes it all worthwhile. Downloading the video onto a computer or website is relatively easy. Students may be anxious, so if possible, teachers should download the tape as soon as possible. Immediate posting onto the class website before going home means students can see themselves the evening of their performance and can get immediate feedback. If the class does not have a website, or if students want privacy, they can copy their performances onto a flash drive or the teacher can even email the file if it is not too big.

Conclusion

It is important to note that simply videotaping students for the fun of it or to allow them to see themselves on the little screen (or even the big screen) is limited unless teachers use this as part of a learning experience. The activities described can be the basis for teachers to provide opportunities for students, and the skills training necessary to take advantage of those opportunities, to help their students towards autonomy. Teachers can help with motivation by using technology as a 'carrot', dangling the computer as a tool that is fun and engaging to use. Lamb (2004) warns "that simply using it [technology]

does not mean that our learners are learning autonomously" (p.5). However, when students are allowed the time and space, to activate their critical thinking skills and to create their own evaluations, they are closer to embracing autonomous learning. Using videos in and out of the classroom is one way to achieve this.

Appendix 1. Presentation Checklist

Rate the numbered items using the marking scheme below

Never	Mostly, but…	At all times
Absent		No mistakes
Highly distracting		No omissions
Inadequate		The best ever

1	2	3	4	5

Components	1	2	3	4	5
1. Language Control					
Pronunciation is correct					
Grammar is correct					
Sentences are well-constructed and complete					
2. Content and Organization					
Information is relevant and useful					
Opening is strong and clear					
Overall structure is clear (advance organizer)					
Sequencing is clearly signaled					
Visuals are appropriate and correct					
Closing is clear and strong					
Time limits are observed					
3. Verbal features					
Articulation and pronunciation are clear					
Volume is appropriate for the space					
Pauses are used effectively					
Delivery is smooth and distracters are minimal					
Voice is confident and enthusiastic					

Volume, pitch and speed are varied for emphasis					
4. Nonverbal features					
Posture is confident, poised and professional					
Eye contact with audience is meaningful and engaging					
Gestures and movements are purposeful and natural					
Facial expression is animated and interested					
Visuals are clear and engaging					
Dress and personal presentation are appropriate for the occasion					

Comments:

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