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Idea Sharing: Teaching Communicative English Skills through Video

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Introduction

After several years developing teaching and learning activities for tertiary, semester length courses focusing on the development of EFL communicative English skills through video, the following beliefs and applied methods for how best to achieve this practical goal have evolved. Firstly, to achieve communicative competence in English, EFL language learners do not only need linguistic knowledge but also the ability to use linguistic knowledge for authentic communication. In order to help EFL students achieve L2 communicative competence, teachers can use a variety of methods with high-tech media, such as including video clips in lessons, being one of the best methods available to achieve this in classrooms today. Video clips can greatly motivate learners by combining vivid context with linguistic knowledge. In recent years an increasing number of L2 training programs have included a “video class” as a key part of their curriculum. It is well worth noting at this point that according to Pillar and Caldwell (1997), the medium of video, “which combines visually-mediated paralinguistic behavior and contextual input with auditory-mediated verbal language, is more effective as a teaching tool than audio-tape in developing L2 communicative skills” (p.1). However, in some video classes learners are sometimes only shown a video program. At other times teachers may include occasional explanations, sharing their linguistic knowledge with students and helping them overcome some of the difficulties they may face. Poor listening

comprehension could make such classes little different from and not much better than a traditional lab based listening class. In some cases, such as those described above, the advantages of using the video medium have not been fully exploited. This paper puts forward an integrative approach that focuses on using video to develop learners' communicative skills in EFL.

Description Of the Learners

The target learners are a group of adult EFL learners aged around 30 – 35 years. Most of those learners plan to either immigrate to or study in English speaking countries (such as Britain, Australia, Canada, and the U.S.) after completing an intensive English training course. All of the learners are university graduates. Their formal English study in school commenced from the first or second year of their junior secondary school and ended at the second year of their tertiary education. They have all passed Band 4 of the [Chinese] National College English Test, which means they should know how to use about 5,000 English words and be familiar with the basic grammar of English.

Overall, these learners have mastered quite sufficient English vocabulary and grammar for daily communication, but are somewhat out of practice in their use of English with most showing signs of fossilization and even regression. Furthermore, in the 1980s and 1990s when they learned English at school, the EFL education they experienced was test-orientated, focusing only on grammar, while the development of learners' communicative competence, especially speaking competence and competence in communicating with social and cultural appropriateness, was neglected. Given the specific EFL backgrounds of these students the course was designed to mainly develop the learners' English oral communicative competence to prepare them for studying and living in abroad.

Text Choice

The scene to be learned is extracted from a well-known English teaching video series called "Family Album," designed for intermediate-level learners. The scene is an interview, which the

learners will frequently encounter in their future use of English and which involves a lot of nonverbal and cross-cultural discussions. It happens in an American town, where the School – Board election campaign is in progress. The only candidate is Carter Boswell, whose platform is to cut the expenses on school cultural programs. Ms. Ellen Steward, a middle-aged art teacher, decides to run against Boswell, maintaining that children need more cultural education. In order to inform more people of her participation and publicize her opinions, she comes to the office of the chief editor of a local newspaper, Charles Maxwell, for an interview. (See the Script in the Appendix.)

Beliefs In Designing the Classroom Activities

The design of the classroom activities to teach the scene is based on the following beliefs. Firstly, the goal of L2 education is to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence, which involves both verbal and nonverbal dimensions of communication. Both of the two dimensions are culture specific. Nonverbal aspects refer to all the “visual and non-lexical aspects of communication that do not pertain to linguistic structure or content” (Pillar & Caldwell, 1997, p.3). What is particularly evident from this video clip is that there is often more nonverbal than verbal language when people communicate. Such subtle, non-linguistic, multidimensional and spontaneous nonverbal systems are also quite likely to lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication. The author has searched the academic papers in China related to nonverbal aspects in EFL, and most of them (e.g. Liu & Li, 2006; Cheng, 2005) are theoretical discussions that unfortunately do not give any practical strategies for teaching nonverbal cultural knowledge. Therefore, some practical techniques for EFL teachers are included here in this paper.

Among all the nonverbal aspects, “speech rhythm provides a fundamental framework for all the other linguistic and paralinguistic expression” (Orton, 2001), so rhythm practice (together with the synchronized body movement) will be a fundamental activity in teaching speaking skills. Pillar & Caldwell (1997, p. 2) rightly state that explicit instructions and training on nonverbal communication have the potential to significantly

enhance “aural comprehension and oral interpersonal communicative skills and thus communicative competence.”

Secondly, video approaches in second language education can expose learners to authentic language, visualize nonverbal elements, contextualize situations and stimulate learners’ interest in learning. What is more, this curriculum design generally is based on what Nunan (2004) suggested about the task-based class activities:

- (1) the tasks are based on the authentic lives;
- (2) the activities combine both linguistic forms and functions;
- (3) the activities are organized dependently as a chain;
- (4) the activities are motivating and interesting for language learners; and,
- (5) the activities are easy to organize and operate in most language classrooms without special requirement for teaching facilities.

Guided with these beliefs, a multi-channel approach is adopted in teaching the dialogue, which is an integration of both visual and aural input, both verbal and nonverbal behaviors in the classroom development of interpersonal communicative skills, and both implicit and explicit instruction on the nonverbal elements in communication (Pillar & Caldwell, 1997).

Challenges for the Learners in Learning the Dialogue

A number of challenges for the learners, both in terms of verbal and nonverbal aspects, which need to be integrated into class teaching will be discussed and analyzed before the detailed approaches are presented.

Firstly, the major nonverbal aspects that learners’ need to become aware of include:

1. *Time*: The arrival time for an appointment varies from culture to culture. In America, punctuality is given more value than in many parts of Asia.

2. *Interaction initiation*: Ellen enters the editor's office, offers her hand first to shake hands with Mr. Maxwell, and initiates the conversation with direct self-introduction. In many Asian cultures, it often happens that the one of higher position and more power offers his/her hand and initiates a conversation.
3. *Dressing*: Dressing (including style, color, etc.) in different contexts varies from culture to culture. Ellen dresses formally: a white shirt, a white flower brooch and a well-trimmed dark-colored suit. The connotations of a white flower differ from eastern to western cultures. And a dark-colored, business-like, and masculine suit is a typical dressing for career women in western culture. In terms of Mr. Maxwell, he also wears a suit with a white shirt and a tie: a common style for western male professionals. When Ellen comes in, he is doing paper work, with his tie loose. He is hurriedly tidying up his tie as he invites Ellen in because an untidy tie is an indication of sloppiness and disrespect to visitors in all Anglo/European culture.
4. *Postures*: During the interview, Ellen sits with her feet together, a typical lady-like way of sitting while Mr. Maxwell sits with his legs crossed-a typical seating posture for males in western culture.
5. *Touching behaviors*: Mr. Maxwell slightly touches Ellen's back with his hand as he shows her the way, showing his warmth, friendliness, and gentlemanliness. However, this touching behavior between strangers, especially between different genders, is regarded as impolite in many parts of Asia.
6. *Seating arrangement*: Mr. Maxwell invites Ellen to sit in front of his table and seats himself beside her. The seating arrangement indicates Mr. Maxwell places himself in an equal and friendly position. Under similar circumstances in Asia, it is likely that a powerful person will talk to visitors from behind his/her desk.
7. *Gestures*: there is a difference between western and Asian patterns of gestures and in the rhythms synchronizing with verbal utterances. For example, Mr. Maxwell uses "beats"

(McNeill, 1992, p.15) while saying '*vote for Ellen Steward. She cares.*' He uses his forefinger pointing gesture as "cohesive" (McNeill, 1992, p.16) to synchronize with '*but*' when he says '*but I need some information.*' In addition, Mr. Maxwell shrugs while saying "*Actually, it is the only newspaper.*" As for Ellen, due to her nervousness, she sits quite stiffly, with few hand movements, but her head movements are worth paying attention to since the rhythms synchronize with the utterances.

8. Eye contact: Eye contact between the two speakers should be brought also into students' awareness. In western cultures, face-to-face communication is greatly encouraged, while in the similar situation in many parts of Asia, too much eye contact, especially from the person of lower position or between a male and female, is regarded as impolite.
9. Para-verbal aspects: Asian learners often have difficulties with intonation, stress, elision, smoothness, and other paraverbal factors. For example, learners with a Mandarin background are likely to have problems with the elision in the sentences like '*please sit **d**own,*' '*what would **y**ou like to see me about,*' '*I want **o**ur children...,*' etc. They may also have problems with the weak forms of the pronunciations such as '*but,*' '*you,*' '*to,*' '*some,*' '*for,*' etc. In addition, the following special para-verbal features are worth mentioning:
 - 1) Mr. Maxwell's sarcastic tone in: '*Well, it is news,*' '*Vote for Ellen. Steward. She cares*' and '*Not a bad slogan, but what do you care about?*'
 - 2) The lengthened '*care*' when Ellen says '*because I care*' indicates her emphasis on and pride in her care for children.
 - 3) The softened voice when Ellen says '*the music, the concert*' indicates her love for the arts subjects in the school.
 - 4) The equal word stress in '*I don't want them to grow up without cultural programs in our school*' indicates the speaker's determination.

- 5) The extra stress Ellen puts on '*reading, writing, and arithmetic*' indicates her strong objection towards Carter's policy.
- 6) The rhetorical repetition of the word '*care*' and '*want*' makes E's utterances more convincing and powerful.

Apart from the above challenges, the direct, sharp and pointed nature of the interaction should also be brought into learners' consciousness, as it demonstrates clearly the contrast between the directness of American culture and the indirectness of many Asian cultures. For example, Ellen states the reason for her visit directly; Mr. Maxwell expresses his sarcastic tone clearly when Ellen states intention to run the campaign.

With regard to the verbal knowledge that the learners need to study, the teaching will focus on how to talk about future plans (such as '*I'm planning to...*' and '*I want to...*') and some authentic oral expressions such as '*what would you like to see me about,*' '*I'd like your help...*' etc.. In general, to develop the learners' oral communicative skills, it would be significant to locate these challenges while preparing for the teaching plan and integrate these aspects into classroom activities, either implicitly or explicitly. The approaches of integration are to be discussed in the following section.

Activities to Teach the Dialogue

Taking the above-discussed challenges in learning the dialogue into consideration, the following classroom activities are suggested.

- Activity One: warming up

Warming up is an important stage in a language classroom, and it is able to reform learners as a group, re-engaging them with the target language and letting go of outside concerns (Orton, et al., 1995). A good warm-up activity can also assist in creating a relaxing and friendly atmosphere so that learners can take a more active part in classrooms. In this case, the warm-up activity also serves to tune the learners into English rhythm and creates awareness of the

synchrony between body movement and rhythm. The procedures are adapted from *Pronunciation* (Laroy, 1995, p.48):

- 1) Ask students to stand in circles of about 10 people. Ask them to take one step forward, swinging their arms from behind their backs to high in front of them, and then step back, swinging their arms down.
- 2) Say a rhyme from the same episode of 'Family Album,' accompanying it with movement. The rhyme can be adapted into a shorter one, suitable for the exercise. It can be changed into a rhyme like this: *Hey, everybody/Here's what we say/Get out your vote/Run an election game/You can make a difference/It's up to you/We need your vote if you want a better school/Clap your hands (clap hands three times)/Stamp your feet (stamp feet twice)/Mrs. Steward is running for the school board.*
- 3) The students imitate the teacher till they get the rhythm (but before they get tired).

- Activity Two: pre-discussion

The students will discuss the important aspects one needs to consider for an interview in groups. Each group will be given one of the following situations: 1) meeting a personnel manager for a job interview; 2) meeting a boy/girlfriend the first time in a restaurant; 3) meeting a person of higher position in his office to ask for a favor; and 4) meeting one of your closest friend in his/her house. Students will be informed that the aspects of initiation of a conversation, dressing, body movement, conversation distance, arrival time and any other factors that they can think of can be considered in their discussion. After the group discussion, one student from each group will present their major points followed with teachers' summing up. This pre-discussion activity will bring out the learners' pre-knowledge, and indicate what cultural aspects they are going to pay attention to while watching the video, and prepare them for the activities afterward.

- Activity Three: silent viewing

After the pre-discussion, the video will be played twice without sound. The learners are advised to think about the

following questions while watching: “where are the people, who are they, what’s happening, and what clues in the scene lead them to their conclusion.” Then a group discussion will be conducted. After the discussion, the video is played again with the sound on and the students check their prediction. A whole class discussion will be conducted afterwards on what was not correctly predicted and what lead to the incorrect prediction. The teacher will explain the cultural and nonverbal aspects involved. As a basic technique in using video in the second language classroom, silent viewing has three advantages: firstly, it can encourage class communication; secondly, it splits aural and visual stimuli, thus allowing the students to form an impression of the situation and likely language used before concentrating on the language itself; and thirdly, it encourages concentration on nonverbal features for comprehension (Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990, p.99).

- Activity Four: practice

After the silent viewing, the learners will practise the dialogue. (Since the dialogue is long, it can be divided into three or four parts in practice.) The script of the dialogue will be handed out to each learner and the verbal aspects will be worked on firstly so that the learners will not have problems with the vocabulary and expressions in the following activities. Then they will practice the pronunciation and rhythm line by line: the teacher plays the video with a pause between each line and the learners imitate it. The teacher can also ask the students to read after him/her. In order to assist students in mastering the rhythm, the learners will be taught to clap their hands or tap the desks to accompany the utterances. After the learners have mastered the pronunciation and rhythm of each line, they will be grouped into pairs to practice combining the body movements with the utterances (each two learners will take turns in different roles). The dialogue will be practiced in smaller sections at this stage with teachers playing the video in sections and students imitating. For example, the learners will firstly practice the greeting part of the scene. That part of the video will be played again so that learners can study it more closely. Then each pair will imitate the piece by themselves with the teacher’s help. When the learners finish one section, teaching will move on to the next until the dialogue is completed.

- Activity Five: rehearsal

After the learners have mastered each section of the dialogue, they will rehearse the whole scene. After each pair practices individually, two or three pairs will come to the front and perform it for the whole class. Group discussion will be conducted after the role-play.

- Activity Six: reflection on the cultural differences

Students will discuss in groups about the differences of interviews between some Asian and American cultures. During the report-back stage of the group discussion, one representative from each group presents their findings and the teacher lists the key points on the board. Then the teacher will present a conclusion about the cultural aspects involved in the scene.

- Activity Seven: making up their own dialogue

In this activity, the learners will apply the skills and expressions that they have learned into their own dialogues. Each pair will choose a similar situation and make up a dialogue by themselves, considering all the nonverbal and verbal aspects that they have learned. The teacher will give each pair suggestions and instructions in the process.

Conclusion

There are many advantages in using video when teaching L2 classes through task-based activities. Carefully prepared video based classes can make a significant contribution towards improving EFL learners' communicative competence. Activities based on multi-channel approaches, which integrate both explicit and implicit instructions, both audio and visual media, and both verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication, should be considered for use in video-based classes. More emphasis should also be put on the nonverbal system of communication (especially rhythm), which is an important part of second language speaking skill learning, but something that has often been ignored for years in EFL education. Though these activities should of course be varied according to the actual context, it is nevertheless hoped that this example can provide EFL teachers' some insight into the

importance of video-mediated teaching and an appreciation of some possible approaches for using video to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence.

The Author

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Appendix

Attachment: Video Scripts (from Family Album, 1993, pp.87-88)

Maxwell: Come in.

Ellen: Mr. Maxwell?

Maxwell: Yes, Charles Maxwell.

Ellen: My name is Ellen Steward.

Maxwell: Hello. Please, sit down. You asked to see me. What would you like to see me about?

Ellen: I'd like you help.

Maxwell: Well, I am editor of the most influential newspaper in Riverdale. Actually, it's the only newspaper. A lot of people would like my help. Do you have a story.

Ellen: I am planning to run for the school board.

Maxwell: Against Carter Boswell?

Ellen: Yes.

Maxwell: Well, that is news.

Ellen: Would you announce that I'm running?

Maxwell: Sure. But I need some information. Why will voters vote for you, Ms. Steward?

Ellen: Because I care.

Maxwell: "Vote for Ellen Steward. She cares". Not a bad slogan, but what do you care about?

Ellen: Well, I care about the children of our town. I don't want them to grow up without cultural programs in our school.

Maxwell: Do you have a plan?

Ellen: I want our children to learn more than reading, writing and arithmetic. I want to

keep up our school program: the music, the concert.

Maxwell: It's not a bad plan. But who will pay for all of this?

Ellen: We will. The citizens of Riverdale, of course. I plan to get help from the businessmen and the corporations of Riverdale.

Maxwell: That's fair enough. Exactly what do you want from me, Ellen?

Ellen: You don't know me. I can't expect you to take my side against Boswell. But I do need some publicity so that the people of our town know that I'm running for office and that I care about our children.

Maxwell: Fair enough. I certainly can print the news. And you are now making news.

