

VIDEO—BASED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Ron Wilkinson

The video-based learning activities that I am going to describe in this article were intended to augment an intermediate level language course with emphasis on spoken language skills. The activities were designed to exploit those features of video that I feel are not shared by any other teaching medium. What are these features?

Video-taped material can bring real life into the classroom and, perhaps more importantly, enables language learners to encounter authentic language being spoken in a controlled and meaningful environment (Macknight, 1981).

With video, the student can not only *hear* the speakers; he can *see* the speakers, the background situational cues, the paralinguistic features, and the non-verbal communication of the exchange.

In designing audio materials where the visual element is completely lacking, the script must contain more verbally explicit language than is usual in real life to make up for the absence of the visual cues. Willis points out that “the danger is, of course, that students get used to more than usually explicit language and find real life interaction very difficult to cope with, being less explicit” (Candlin, Charles, & Willis, 1982, p. 14).

Video, obviously, does not have this disadvantage. The language situation presented on video can be both authentic and meaningful because an important part of the overall message is conveyed by the visual image. As well, the technical features of video (freeze frame, review, and preview) provide the teacher with the control required to facilitate student analysis and comprehension of the language presented.

Let it be said, however, that no matter how authentic and meaningful the language presented on video is, it is not true to real life. In real life, a student must not only listen and understand, he must initiate language. However, because video is such a dynamic medium, well designed video-based activities can provide an effective stimulus to take students from passive listening comprehension to active oral interaction.

The activities that I am about to describe attempt to exploit the pedagogical and technical features of video and involve students in interactive viewing situations that develop both receptive and productive skills.

Procedure

A very short murder mystery was acted out on video by teachers. The resulting video drama, although short (8½ minutes) and simple (an inspector, a victim, and 3 suspects), provides the video stimulus for two hours of interactive language activity in the classroom.

The video drama is intentionally divided into short segments in serial fashion. Each segment is followed by learning activities which become increasingly more communicative as the video progresses. In this manner, students participate actively during the total viewing, not simply at the end.

Activity One: The Characters

The first is an "information retrieval" activity. The video introduces the characters that the students are going to encounter in the story. While viewing this segment, students are asked to note the name and occupation of the five characters as they are introduced. This initial notetaking exercise is a very low-level task requiring no interpretation; all the required information is explicitly stated.

Activity Two: Powers of Observation

This is a "discussion/consensus" activity. Before viewing the next scene, the class is divided into triads. They are advised to watch and listen closely because their powers of observation will be tested. After viewing the scene, the video is stopped and each triad is given a list of questions to focus on obscure aural and visual details of the scene that they have just viewed. (Example: Did the murderer have a ring on his hand? Was the murder victim wearing glasses? etc.) The purpose of this activity is not to get the correct answer, but to put the three students in each triad in a situation where they must, in the target language, discuss the questions, voice an opinion, and arrive at a team consensus.

After the groups have arrived at their answers, the teacher normally reviews the video segment at double speed, stopping at critical points, so that students can check the answers for themselves.

Activity Three: Possible Motives

This is a "view and speculate" activity. The video has shown the crime and introduced the students to the three suspects and their occupations. No motives have been presented on the screen. Once again the video is stopped. Students are asked to speculate on possible motives for each subject. Visual prods (\$, ♡) can be included to encourage them to let their imaginations run wild. The intention of this activity is to allow students to initiate language, drawing upon all relevant language that they have in their repertoire.

Activity Four: Who's Guilty?

This is a “jigsaw viewing” activity and is the most communicatively demanding activity in the package.

The video drama at this point has been designed to create an information gap. It is divided into three scenes. In each scene the video shows the inspector interviewing one of the three suspects. Prior to viewing, the class is divided into three groups. Each group only sees the interview with one of the suspects as follows: Group A — Suspect 1, Group B — Suspect 2, Group C — Suspect 3.

While Group A is viewing the interview with suspect 1, Groups B and C leave the room. Then Group B watches the interview with suspect 1 while Groups A and C are outside. Once all three groups have viewed their respective portions, the class is regrouped into triads with one member from Group A, one from Group B, and one from Group C.

The video is stopped. Students in the triad now take turns describing to each other what they had seen and heard in order that the triad can gain access to all the information and, thereby, determine the murderer.

This type of “jigsaw viewing” creates an information gap that requires each student to listen for information and then initiate language in passing that information on. Thus, both listening and speaking skills are developed. The teacher circulates from triad to triad providing assistance when called upon. However, students quickly become aware of when they are not communicating effectively and when their partners are not getting the message, often precipitating an eager (sometimes frantic) search for new words and phrases, and use of gesture and mime.

Activity Five: The Accusation

This is a “report/debate” activity. Each triad is called upon to report to the class who they have decided the murderer is and the circumstances that led to their conclusions. Debate can often arise when triads have selected different suspects as the murderer. Excellent interaction results as each triad tries to convince the others that their interpretation is the correct one.

Finally, the concluding segment of the video, in which the Inspector makes his accusation, is shown to the class. Time should be allowed after the conclusion for students to question the plot, the evidence, and the script because once again this provides an opportunity for meaningful language use.

Conclusion

If you frequently use video-based materials in the classroom, you are liable to be subjected to the following comment: "Oh no! You're not watching TV again, are you?"

This comment is based on the notion that video is solely an *entertainment* medium. In fact, I have found the video cassette recorder to be one of the most effective teaching tools at my disposal. I hope the activities described here illustrate the potential that video-based materials have for aiding comprehension and providing a springboard to more meaningful interaction.

REFERENCES

- Candlin, J., Charles, D., & Willis, J. *Video in English language teaching*. Birmingham, U.K.: Language Studies Unit, University of Aston, 1982.
- Macknight, F. *Review and analysis of present video use in EFL teaching*. M.A. Thesis, University of Wales, Cardiff, 1981.

THE AUTHOR

Ron Wilkinson is presently Unit Head at the Canadian Forces Language School, CFB St. Jean. He has taught ESL for the Public Service Language Bureau, the Department of National Defence, and Commission Scolaire Honoré Mercier. Mr. Wilkinson served as a consultant to the Government of Québec's Opération Langue Parlée programme. He is also a lecturer in basic and advanced ESL methodology for the Off Campus Program of Concordia University. He has given numerous workshops and presentations at conferences in Ontario and Québec on ESL methodology and video.