

Digital Video in the Language Classroom

Mark Shrosbree

Tokai University, Japan

Introduction

Video-based methodologies are well-established in second language teaching. Perhaps most common is the use of video as an alternative to more traditional cassette tape and CD listening comprehension activities. Video allows learners to see the context of the discourse and the speaker's body language as well as other visual aids to comprehension. It is thus hard to question Stempleski's (1987) assertion that video aids learners' comprehension of English. Another use of video is to record student projects, such as role plays, documentaries and TV commercials (Brooke, 2003). As video technology becomes more accessible and editing on computers simpler, such projects are becoming increasingly attractive for the language classroom. Video also offers several other possibilities for language learning. One interesting use of video is to document and assess students' productive performance of a second language. Video naturally lends itself to the assessment of presentations and public speaking, but it can also be applied to pairwork and group discussion tasks. Furthermore, to help students develop their speaking skills, teachers can make 'model videos' which visually demonstrate what students are expected to do in an oral task. Finally, digital video technology allows teachers to manipulate authentic video, which can be edited, subtitled and simplified to make it more suitable for language learners. With relatively inexpensive equipment, and easily acquired skills, teachers and learners can employ a wide range of effective and motivating video methodologies. This paper will outline the practical aspects of choosing hardware, the basics of using video editing software and a range of methodological applications for the language classroom.

Background

There is an obvious appeal to using video in the language classroom. Instead of the rather unnatural task of listening to a disembodied voice emanating from an audio player, learners are able to see the speaker and elements of the surrounding environment. Video is thus a "multi-sensory medium" (Swaffar & Vlatten, 1997). Research suggests that these multiple clues help language learners to understand a particular

discourse as well as to improve their long-term listening comprehension skills (Herron *et al.*, 1995). Video-based instruction also appears to improve aspects of learners' oral production, particularly their "confidence in speech" (Weyers, 1999). A further benefit of video is that it can simply provide a welcome break from the rigors of more traditional study. Moreover, with digital video technology, it is now a relatively straightforward process for teachers to produce their own videos which are specifically aimed at one group of learners, bearing in mind their language needs and interests. Such teacher-made videos can provide positive models of target language, graded to the learner's proficiency, and thus offer a rich source of comprehensible input. Less obviously, teacher-made videos can also provide negative models, which students can analyse and use to improve their awareness of common pitfalls and errors when communicating in a second language.

Video technology can also be used to document students' language production, both to enhance the validity and reliability of language assessment, and to provide motivating and rewarding tasks with a clear, meaningful purpose and a concrete finished product (Biegel, 1998). Furthermore, students can observe their own current English oral proficiency (Shinohara, 1997), and thus discover areas they need to improve.

Hardware

Although there is now a wide and potentially confusing array of digital video equipment available, fortunately the simplest equipment is often the most suitable.

Video Camera

There are various choices of video camera, including standard and high definition video. There are also various choices of recording media, including Mini-DV tape, DVD, hard-drive and Flash memory cards. The following specifications are considered suitable for methodologies described in this paper:

1. Standard definition camera: Standard definition video files are smaller than high-definition video (HDV) and require less system resources to edit.
2. Mini-DV tape media: Mini-DV tape is an inexpensive, removable media, which can store up to 120 minutes of video in long play (LP) mode.
3. External microphone socket: An external microphone provides better audio quality, which is essential for assessment purposes.

Other Camera Hardware

1. Tripod: A basic, sturdy aluminium tripod is sufficient.
2. External microphone: A high-quality, battery-powered microphone is important, especially for assessment where the student might not be speaking loudly or clearly.
3. Microphone stand: A small desktop stand is recommended.
4. Microphone extension lead: This allows the video camera to be placed far away from the speaker, which can reduce nerves; it is also valuable when recording presentations.

Computer Hardware

Most personal desktop computers (and many notebook computers) are now shipped ready for video editing. The video camera is connected to the computer via a 1394 ('Firewire') connection or USB 2.0 (in the case of newer hard drive cameras). If the computer does not have a built-in Firewire adapter, one can be bought cheaply. In terms of performance, the main requisites are sufficient memory (1GB or more of RAM is recommended) and storage capacity (1 minute of good quality compressed video saved at a bit rate of 2.1Mbps requires around 14Mb of disk space).

Computer Software

Although there are many video editing applications available, this paper illustrates the video editing process using Microsoft *Movie Maker*. This software is bundled free with Windows XP and Vista, and is thus widely available, particularly in computer labs. It is also easy to learn and the quality of finished videos is more than adequate for language learning purposes.

Pedagogy

Broadly speaking, there are three types of videos for language teaching purposes: assessment videos, teacher-made videos, and student-made videos. Within each of these categories, there are numerous possibilities; these will be described below as a range of video methodologies:

i. Assessment Videos

Methodology 1: Video Pairwork Assessment

Although there appears to have been little research into the assessment of oral performance through video-recorded pairwork, this is one of the most appealing applications of video technology. A Video Pairwork Assessment methodology has been developed at Tokai University as an alternative to the more familiar teacher-student interview test, which may not always elicit the student's best performance. In contrast, the pairwork test offers a range of advantages for the learner:

- a. The student speaks to a peer (symmetric discourse), rather than a teacher/assessor (asymmetric discourse). This is important as teachers tend to be in a position of power and control in foreign language classrooms (Stubbs, 1983). In Japan, this asymmetry may be particularly strong, as the normal relationship between student and teacher has been described as one of 'polite distance' (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 586). The experience at Tokai University supports this, as students generally appear to perform better in pairwork tests than in interview tests.
- b. Students are able to practise for the test each class meeting, as pairwork is central to communicative methodologies; it would be impractical to practise teacher-student interviews every class.
- c. Students who perform poorly in the pairwork test can be offered a retake; again, this is not so practical with interview tests.

In brief, video pairwork testing involves placing the video camera, tripod and external microphone in an empty classroom. Students go to the room in pairs, sit down face to face near the microphone, and then hold an open, unplanned conversation for 6 or 7 minutes. At the end of this time, the next pair takes their place, and this continues until all students have held a conversation. The video camera is left running for the duration of the test, and then the resultant video is later watched and assessed by the teacher. There seem to be several clear advantages with this kind of assessment:

- a. Validity of assessment of peer pairwork conversation promises to be higher than for interview tests, as it assesses what students have been doing throughout the course, and involves an activity which they are likely to encounter in the future (an unplanned conversation with a peer).
- b. Reliability is also higher in a video-recorded test than in a real-time test, as the teacher can watch the video more than once, check for grading 'drift' from the first to last speakers, and also check from one year to the next.
- c. Pairwork tests seems to offer very positive washback, as 'studying for the test' actually involves practising conversation skills.
- d. Video assessment may be less stressful for the teacher than real-time assessment, as it is possible to take breaks when tired.
- e. There is a permanent record of the student's performance.

A further advantage of video pairwork testing is that practice tests are easy to conduct, and offer students the chance to watch their own performance. One way to distribute test videos to students is to capture the videos to a computer and then upload them to the Internet (see *Distributing Video* below). Students then watch their videos and assess their own performance. For a detailed explanation of pairwork assessment, see: < www.shros.org/digitalvideo/>.

Methodology 2: Presentation Assessment

Student presentations and speeches are very amenable to video assessment. By recording the presentation, the teacher is able to compare in-class rating with subsequent rating of the presentation videos. If a one-week time lapse is allowed between the two ratings, the teacher can appraise the reliability of his/her rating. As with the pairwork testing, video of the presentation can be uploaded to a class homepage and self-evaluated by the student.

Methodology 3: Practice tests

Video also allows students to rehearse for a test or presentation. When the video camera is turned on in front of rehearsing students, they are likely to take the practice much more seriously.

ii. Teacher-Made Videos

Methodology 1: 'Model Videos'

Video allows teachers to prepare clear models of what students are expected to do in classroom activities. Although pairwork is a very common communicative teaching methodology, it is often hard for students to know what is expected of them. To address this problem, teachers at Tokai University created video clips of themselves acting out a variety of pairwork skits. These skits show typical problems found in pairwork (negative models) as well as successful interactions (positive models). To create these model videos, the teachers involved in the project observed their classes and collected typical mistakes, such as 'one-word answers' and 'inappropriate questions', and then wrote a basic script for the video clips. Two teachers then performed the skits in front of the camera. The video clips were edited and transferred to VHS for showing in class. Worksheets were also prepared to accompany the video clips (see <www.shros.org/digitalvideo/> for examples). After watching the videos and analysing the weaknesses demonstrated in each clip, students could conduct their own (hopefully improved!) pairwork conversations. Similar model videos have also been produced for other oral activities, such as presentations and discussions.

Methodology 2: Comprehension Activities

Experienced teachers are very good at modifying their speech to aid the comprehension of their students. Teachers can exploit this experience by making their own simple videos, which offer a rich source of comprehensible input for students. One simple activity is to ask a number of teachers two or three questions, and then have students compare the teachers' answers. At Tokai, short videos were prepared for a cultural comparison class. Foreign teachers were asked questions such as 'What do you like most about living in Japan?', and 'What do you find difficult here?', and Japanese teachers who lived abroad were asked 'What did you like most about living abroad', and 'What did you find difficult there?' The video was edited and worksheets were made. The activity was successful as it provided useful comprehensible input, and offered students the added incentive of learning something new about their teachers.

Methodology 3: Content Instruction

Video can also play a valuable role in content-based instruction (CBI). A problem with CBI is that authentic content is often too difficult for language learners. Digital technology allows teachers to manipulate video in order to make it more suitable for their students. It also allows teachers to capture short video clips from the internet, and show them in class (note: copyright restrictions may apply).

One easy way to make video suitable for a group of learners is to choose something they can relate to, and then edit it to a manageable length. Even a thirty-second news clip can effectively introduce a topic, without overwhelming students. Such video clips can also be embedded in a *PowerPoint* presentation, which allows the teacher to visually display background information and vocabulary prior to showing the video clip.

There are two other useful ways video can be manipulated using *Movie Maker*. First, the audio can be cut or muted and replaced with a simplified teacher commentary. News and documentary clips are particularly amenable to such manipulation. Second, the titling function can be used to add subtitles or key words to video.

iii. Student-Made Videos

Methodology 1: Student Videos

One of the attractions of digital video is that it allows students to work in groups to make an impressive finished product. In order for the project to be a success, it is advisable to start early in the semester, and allot enough class time for planning and completing the project. A typical schedule would involve four class periods for planning the video, working on language aspects, learning how to edit, and finally showing the finished videos. Provided video cameras can be lent out, students generally shoot the video and finish off the editing for homework. As video projects can be quite challenging for students and teacher alike, a simple theme is best. In an Oral Communication class at Tokai University, the most successful themes were 'Aspects of Campus Life' (see Shinohara (1997) for details of a similar project) and introductions to favourite places around campus (see Brooke (2003) and Biegel (1998) for further suggestions).

One problem with student video projects is that they can require a large amount of time. A simple 5-minute video can involve a considerable amount of filming and editing work when students' time might better be spent learning English. For this reason, it is suggested teacher plan the projects carefully (for sample handouts, see <www.shros.org/digital-video/>), and keep the finished video short (a 2-minute video for the first project). It is also important for the teacher to ensure that students focus on the English language aspects of the video (on-camera speaking and commentary), rather than visual aspects.

Methodology 2: Movie Slideshows

A simple alternative to student-made videos is the idea of 'Movie Slideshows'. Students use digital still cameras or mobile phone cameras to take photographs on a theme, such as 'My Hometown'. They then use *Movie Maker* to produce a photographic slideshow, complete with English commentary and music soundtrack. These slideshows can even be uploaded to *YouTube.com*, and students can receive feedback from around the world (a search on *YouTube.com* for 'EFL slideshow' will reveal a large number of such slideshows). For an excellent explanation of ESL slideshows, see the ESL/EFL Slideshow Exchange Project <<http://www.deepmoat.com/moodle/>>.

Methodology 3: Audio-only Projects

It is also possible for students to use video technology for audio-only products, such as radio shows. The BBC radio show 'Desert Island Discs' is particularly suited to this (see <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/factual/desertislanddiscs.shtml>>). Students interview each other about the eight records they would take with them to a desert island, giving the his-

tory of their relationship with each record. If no other digital audio recording equipment is available, a video camera can be used to record just the audio, and then *Movie Maker* can be used for editing. When used in an Oral Communication class at Tokai University, this activity was very popular, and produced some excellent spoken discourse.

Capturing, Editing and Distributing Video

Capturing Video

The first step after shooting video is to 'capture' it to a computer. If the computer is running Windows XP or Vista, the camera just needs to be connected to the *Firewire* port with the appropriate cable, and a menu will pop up offering *Movie Maker*. It is a simple matter to follow the steps and capture the video to the computer. The only real decision is on the quality and file size of the captured video. The following three choices are suitable for classroom videos:

- DV-AVI(NTSC) – highest quality uncompressed file; particularly suitable for making videos which will be projected onto a large screen.
- 2.1 Mbps – compressed WMV file; suitable for showing on a TV monitor.
- 512 Mbps – compressed WMV file; suitable for publishing online (high-speed LAN).

Editing Video

Windows *Movie Maker* is particularly suitable for all the editing purposes described in this paper as it is simple, quick to learn and widely available. The software interface employs a 3-step menu which allows the user to undertake the following tasks:

Capture Video

- Capture from video device (camera)
- Import video (from computer hard drive)
- Import pictures (still images)
- Import audio and music

Edit Movie

- Add video effects (such as slow motion)
- Add video transitions (such as fading between clips)
- Add titles and credits

Finish Movie

- Save to my computer (export finished video to computer hard drive)



Figure 1. Windows Movie Maker interface (Japanese)

There are two views to make editing simple: 'Timeline' (especially useful for cutting video and audio), and 'Storyboard' (useful for adding transitions). Another useful feature is the ability to add a narration directly into the timeline. Once the video is finished, it can be exported to the computer in a range of file sizes / quality choices.

Distributing Video

Finished videos can be stored on a computer hard drive, copied to removable media (such as CD-ROM, flash memory) or uploaded to the internet. If a class homepage is available, uploading to the Internet is often the easiest way for the teacher to distribute video, particularly when the teacher wants students to self-evaluate their production of the target language. Smart FTP software is a good choice for uploading video files to a website as it is free for academic purposes and allows a large number of files to be uploaded by simple drag and drop.

Conclusion

This paper has described pedagogical applications of digital video for the language classroom, together with an overview of the technical considerations. Thanks to the development of digital video and computer technology, there are now numerous ways that teachers can use video to help their students learn a second language. Perhaps the most valuable pedagogical application of video is 'video pairwork assessment', which allows students to

be assessed through the familiar communicative activity of pairwork with a classmate, and also permits self-evaluation. Digital video also allows teachers to make high-quality teaching materials, which are tailored towards a particular group of learners. Of particular interest here are the 'model videos' which visually demonstrate unfamiliar classroom activities, as well as offer learners the chance to analyse common errors and weaknesses. Students can also take control of the video camera and create their own videos. These student-produced video projects can be a highly motivating part of a language course.

Digital video has come a long way in a very short time. Just a few years ago even the highest performance desktop computers struggled to deal with the large files and large memory requirements of video editing software, which itself was difficult to learn and complicated to use. Student video projects were often interrupted by crashing software and lost data. This has all changed now, as even basic laptop computers can comfortably edit video files using video editing software which is included with the operating system. Furthermore, mobile phone cameras can capture high quality still images, and even reasonable quality video. Since many mobile phones have flash memory slots, the data can be transferred directly to a computer. However, it is important to recognise that the wide range of possibilities offered by new technology can actually discourage teachers from trying to use these technologies in class. It is thus necessary for teachers to be selective and choose applications which have a good balance of time and effort relative to the rewards. Video pairwork assessment is a particularly good application of digital video, as it offers a wide range of benefits to individual learners (even in large classes) for a relatively small outlay of teacher time. Similarly, teacher-made videos, especially 'Model Videos', offer benefits and many years of use for a modest outlay of teacher time and effort. In contrast, student-made videos may not always offer sufficient rewards to justify the time spent on the project.

Finally, recent developments with the Internet have opened up a range of opportunities and challenges for the language teacher. The popularity of video sharing websites, such as *YouTube.com*, and blogs has provided a potential international audience for students. It is now possible for students to display their videos online, and to receive genuine feedback from people around the world. This could be particularly motivating for learners in an EFL setting, as it provides opportunities for authentic communication in English.

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(Endnotes)

- I The author conducted both interview tests and pairwork tests with one group of students. Most students appeared more relaxed and performed better in the pairwork test than the interview test.