Enhancing ESL students' vocabulary acquisition through a meaningful filmmaking project

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact on English learning, and in particular on vocabulary acquisition, through engaging ESL students in the filmmaking lifecycle. Twenty-three undergraduate ESL students with linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds in a large Canadian university participated in this project. Participants from 15 majors were randomly divided into five drama groups, and contributed to screenwriting, acting, production and postproduction of the film.

The project outcomes show that filmmaking is a meaningful task which captivates students’ imagination, enhances their motivation, and facilitates their interaction through compelling multi-media. They further indicate that the filmmaking based on carefully written scripts, while at the same time allowing for personal interpretation of characters, is effective in creating an optimal learning environment for students’ English acquisition, particularly vocabulary.

Keywords: Academic English language, vocabulary acquisition, filmmaking, ESL undergraduate students.

1. Introduction

Literature in both first language (L1) and second language (L2) research has mostly attributed the challenges that students encounter in learning English and academic performance to their failure in acquiring sufficient vocabulary (August & Shanahan, 2006; Stahl & Nagy, 2006; Stanovich, 1986). According to corpus research, knowledge of approximately 3000 high frequency words significantly influences students’ reading comprehension (Nation, 2001). This includes 2000 high frequency words in the General Service List (West, 1953) that account for 87% of a non-academic text and 78.1% of an academic text. Adding 570 academic word families from Coxhead’s (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) increases the coverage of academic texts to 86.1% (Nation, 2001). Other proper nouns, technical vocabulary and other low frequency words account for 13% of a non-academic text and 13.9% of an academic text. It has been widely recommended that students reach the critical level of 95% vocabulary coverage for reading comprehension (Nation, 2001).

In line with corpus research mentioned above, many studies and interventions have been conducted and developed to enhance elementary and secondary school students’ English vocabulary acquisition thus to improve their reading comprehension (e.g., Biemiller, 2008; Carlo, August, & Snow, 2005; Coxhead & Nation, 2001; Lively, Snow, & August, 2003; Nagy & Anderson, 1984). Scant literature and resources, however, are available that address ESL university students’ English vocabulary learning, particularly, within the content-based classroom context. By engaging undergraduate ELLs in the filmmaking project in a humanities course, this paper discusses our instructional experience in implementing a task-based language intervention that aimed
at supporting ELLs’ collaborative learning of English vocabulary when reading Canadian literature.

2. Literature Review

The use and production of videos by students has increasingly gained recognition for providing university and K-12 students with motivating and authentic learning experiences across disciplines (e.g., Gross, 1998; Rubin, Bresnahan & Ducas, 1996; Triggs & John, 2004). Several studies have shown that in science and mathematics classrooms, students benefited from using and generating videos as such activities enabled them to efficiently make observations, conduct research, collect data and deliver presentations (e.g., Gross, 1998; Rubin, et al., 1996). For example, Rubin and his colleagues studied how students used self-made videos to analyze the motion sequence of their own body movement.

A number of articles have pointed out the promising potential in using videos for second and foreign language learning and instruction, particularly, online video clips as the increasing capacity of the Internet provides learners with enriched and authentic language resources (Hanson-Smith, 2004). Video has become a popular medium for language teaching and learning, as well as a self-assessment tool (Gardner, 1994). Language institutions, such as the National Association of Self-Instructional Language Programs, have increased their Internet-delivered courseware incorporating both audio and video components (Dunkel, Brill, & Kohl, 2002).

Some empirical evidence also has emerged from several studies showing that the digital video production in language classrooms can engage students in open-ended explorations in an authentic learning environment. It increases students’ learning opportunities, supports their learning autonomy, and most importantly, creates a contextual situation to help students develop cultural awareness. For example, Levy and Kennedy (2004) found that video recordings of the behavior of students who learned Italian as a foreign language during their audio conferencing was effective in assisting them to visualize and subsequently correct their errors. Through teaching a Multimedia English class to Japanese university English language learners, Gromik (2008) observed that video production supported by viable video editing software provided his students with multiple opportunities to view and reflect upon their use of the target language.

Research in vocabulary acquisition also has shown that use and production of videos is more effective than other scaffolding means to support students’ word retention. For example, Al-Seghayer's study showed that

*a video clip is more effective in teaching unknown vocabulary words than a still picture. Among the suggested factors that explain such a result are that video better builds a mental image, better creates curiosity leading to increased concentration, and embodies an advantageous combination of modalities (vivid or dynamic image, sound, and printed text).* (Al-Seghayer, 2001, p. 202.)

Katchen, Morris and Savova (2005) also found that video production activities allowed students to produce videos focusing on specific morphological and phonological forms of vocabulary items and enabled students to achieve better retention of these words.

To summarize, the literature in the field provides significant insights into the implication of video use and production in language classrooms. However limited evidence is available to support its pedagogical benefits for L2 learners in acquiring vocabulary. Further studies and intervention are needed to investigate and facilitate the application of video, digital media and its learning outcomes, particularly, in content-based language classrooms. In response to such inquires, this present project invited students to take ownership of the entire video production process (Gromik, 2009), in an attempt to enhance their learning experiences and their learning of vocabulary knowledge.
3. The Filmmaking Project

3.1 Context and participants

This filmmaking project took place in the first author’s classroom at a Canadian University among 23 undergraduate ESL students from 15 majors with linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. The participants were all registered in Introduction to Canadian Language and Culture, a nine-credit content-based course designed for both international and Canadian ESL students to allow them to fulfil their writing-intensive Humanities requirement in an ESL/EAP productive learning environment. This course focuses on fostering students’ academic English skills and promoting students’ awareness of multiple aspects of Canadian society and culture. It has evolved from being largely literature-based into one with articles focused on Canadian issues; however the requirement of reading a novel remains as a key component of the course.

The Edible Woman by Margaret Atwood, the world-renowned Canadian author, was chosen for its several features. First, the novel offers cultural content in an entertaining form. In a course focused largely on multicultural “new-Canadian” viewpoints and experiences, this short novel exploring the tensions within consumer culture, personal relationships, and individual choice and responsibility provides students an “old-Canadian” perspective, embodied in the characters of Marian and the supporting cast. It describes the historic downtown core in Toronto, its epicenter at Avenue Road and Bloor, where students can actually trace the paths that the characters take around landmarks such as the Park Plaza bar and Queen’s Park Circle. Published in 1967, this novel is also a document of proto-feminism, raising in an almost cartoon-like version issues that feminists still struggle with. Most importantly, the book’s action arises from universal questions that young people face when entering the adult world: what will I do for a living? Whom will I live with? Will I have children? What is worth doing and not doing?

These themes and settings help students engage in the novel with their immediacy. However, during class discussions, it was noted that many of these students had difficulty in comprehending the novel and lacked English vocabulary, including the first 3000 words in General Service List (West, 1953). For example, in one of the paragraphs of the novel, Lang (1) said that out of 72 words there were nine words (i.e., 12.5%) that he didn’t know (see the bold unknown words in Figure 1).

“Oh, one of those,” Ainsley said, “They’re such a bore (2).” She stubbed out her cigarette in the grass.

“You know, I got the feeling that’s why he’s back,” Clara said, with something like vivacity. “Some kind of a mess with a girl; like the one that made him go over in the first place.”

“Oh,” I said, not surprised.

Ainsley gave a little cry and deposited the baby on the lawn, “It’s wet on my dress,” she said accusingly.

“Well, they do, you know,” said Clara. The baby began to howl, and I picked her up gingerly and handed her over to Clara. I was prepared to be helpful, but only up to a point.

Clara joggled the baby.” Well, you goddamned fire-hydrant ,” she said soothingly. “You spat on mummy’s
friend, didn’t you? It’ll wash out, Ainsley. But we didn’t want to put rubber pants on you in all this heat, did we, you stinking little geyser? Never believe what they tell you about maternal instinct," she added grimly to us. “I don’t see how anyone can love their children till they start to be human beings.”

Figure 1. Sample of unknown words in an excerpt of The Edible Woman.

3.2. Project phases

The project comprises two lines of tasks: drama activities and film production activities. Hence, two categories of groups were formed: the drama groups (five groups) and the production groups (two groups). Participation in the drama activities was compulsory, as it counted for 15% of the final mark of the course. The students were randomly assigned to five drama groups to work collaboratively on the joint tasks. This included reading and discussing the novel together, conducting research about its author and historical and cultural background of the novel, making decisions on selecting plots and cast, and negotiating different perspectives in interpreting characters. One of the major challenging pre-production tasks was script-writing, as they needed to adapt the novel into different scenes of plays with conversations that were informative, contextually appropriate and interesting to the target audience, given their language proficiency constraints and the limited number of students/cast in each group.

The other category of groups, production groups (including production and postproduction groups), were formed at the same time. Participants were recruited on a volunteer basis, and they were informed that their contribution in assisting production would not be counted for their course credits. Twenty positions for students were initially posted in the class and 17 students actively participated in the production group. Three more positions were added upon the requests of students during the production and postproduction. The first author of this article as the course instructor took roles as a director and producer, providing students with guidance and coordinating activities at the critical stages. The second author provided literary consultation for each drama group (see Table 1).

Table 1. Positions for the filmmaking production groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preproduction and production</th>
<th>Postproduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Director (1)</td>
<td>*Producer (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant director (1)</td>
<td>Assistant producer (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage managers (2)</td>
<td>Stage coordinator (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master cinematographer (1)</td>
<td>Post-production editors (stop motion pictures) (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinematographer (3)</td>
<td>Post-production editors (video clips) (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makeup artists (2)</td>
<td>*Post-production technical expert (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>*CD package designer (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| *Literary consultant (1)          |                                      |
| Assistant director (1)            |                                      |
| Stage coordinator (1)             |                                      |
| Photographers (2)                 | Post-production technical expert (2)   |
| Costume coordinator (1)           |                                      |
| Stage technical expert (1)        |                                      |

Note: * indicates that positions taken by the instructors and external experts.

3.2. Equipment access

Due to the very limited access (e.g., time constraints) to the university equipment, students and the instructor used their own equipment for the production. These
included one analog video camera, two digital video cameras, three digital photo cameras, a tripod and seven laptop computers. Students felt that using their own equipment allowed them more flexibility during the production as they were familiar with their own equipment. Even if there were any technical problems, they could always have the equipment with them and work on it at home or ask for help during the team meetings after class.

For the stage design and props, the students and instructor also brought their own clothes, dolls, table clothes, telephones, candles, fresh cut flowers, empty beer bottles, glasses, bottles of water, and dish trays. Due to the limited memory capacity of two digital video cameras, most videos were recorded with the analog videotape camera. This, however, caused a labor intensive task for the postproduction team to convert the analog video tapes to digital MPEG2 format and Windows Media Video (WMV) format that are compatible with iMovie program. During the process, the team worked with an external technical expert in conducting research and experimenting with four different software programs.

4. The Project Outcomes

4.1. Project structures for optimal motivation and efficient collaboration

The project was divided into three phases, which involved “complex, multi-faceted” activities (Levy & Kennedy, 2004). Its two dimensional organization structures allowed students to have optimal opportunities to contribute to the project, and interact with each other. Twenty out of 23 students (87%) in the class had one or two roles in both groups. For example, Carol played Marian in the play with her drama teammates, and she also worked in the video camera crew as a postproduction editor. As the drama and production activities progressed in parallel, the project called for a wide range of skills and talents. Almost every student found their own niche in this production in addition to their roles in the play. Even recently-arrived international ESL students who were initially quiet and hesitant to speak up in class became forthcoming and articulate in the early stages of the production.

This project not only opened up multiple opportunities for students’ active participation, but also encouraged the students to form close bonds quickly to support intense coordination and interaction. For example, to achieve a thorough comprehension of the novel, they adopted jigsaw reading strategies to help each other cope with difficult words and unfamiliar expressions. They conducted library and online research to understand and establish essential personality traits of characters involved in their scenes. Each drama group self-organized after-class group meetings, and also engaged in discussions via instant messaging, email and telephone among themselves and with the instructor. The film project transformed a daunting reading task into fun learning activities which enhance students’ motivation, creativity, peer support and critical thinking. This is vividly displayed in Carol’s words as follows:

Instructor: I know our course was very intense. Within one term, we had to finish a nine-credit full year course. There were a lot of readings and assignments. I’d like to know how you felt about the drama activities and film production.

Carol: To be honest, I didn’t finish this book. But I... because of the drama, because we had the scenes like “in the bar, in Clara’s house”, I had to read more carefully and more specifically to know who the main characters are...

Instructor: So --
Carol: So I got to know more. Because acting the characters in the book, I had to know the specific(s) about a character. I was acting as Marian, so I had to know more about her.

Instructor: You had to introduce --

Carol: I had to introduce my interpretation of Marian to all the people. I just watched the stop-motion pictures, and knowing the background music, like, make me really missing those moments (laughing).

Instructor: Missing those moments of the performances (laughing)?

Carol: Not only that day (we performed) because we have met like three times for this drama, it was really fun to discuss with them, to have the group work.

Instructor: How did you feel about reading the novel?

Carol: I really didn’t finish. I cannot really... I didn’t really know how to understand the characters before. I didn’t know why she is doing this? Why she is doing that? It is really, the character is [...] (5). I couldn’t understand the characters. It always... turned out to be boring after the middle part.

Instructor: So...

Carol: Yeah, because of the drama we had our focuses. During the practice, I was acting Marian like this. Jeena said “no, Marian should be like this”, and Elizabeth said “no, Marian should be like this”. You can see everybody has different ideas about Marian.

Instructor: Finally we agreed with each other. Finally you agreed with one interpretation about Marian.

Carol: The group work also made us close.

To conclude, this project afforded students the opportunity to express themselves through the voices of the characters, and through their digital, video and computer skills that were much needed for the production. They demonstrated unprecedented motivation in reading, discussing and script writing. The assignment required a minimum of one scene, but five drama groups voluntarily wrote two to seven scenes. The authors regard this innovative instructional method as a promising alternative approach to teaching advanced reading of Canadian literature to university ESL students. Drama-based filmmaking is profoundly different from the traditional instructional mode as it integrates ESL students with different levels of language skills in creating an on-going, interactive and reflective learning environment.

4.2. Vocabulary acquisition through productive activities

The student feedback on the project confirmed the authors’ observation: many undergraduate ESL students had difficulties in reading comprehension of The Edible Woman due to the figurative language and words in specific cultural contexts. In the following conversation, Kang indicated that he recognized less than 90% of the words in the novel. This is much lower than a minimum of 95% coverage of known words, a threshold for the reading comprehension in a given text suggested by Laufer and Nation (1999).

Instructor: How many words do you not know in the novel?

Kang: At least 10% of the words I don’t know

Instructor: You mean 10%?
Kang: Yes, over 10%.

Instructor: So it is a little bit too much (to comprehend the reading with such a high percentage of unknown words).

Kang: And I found there are a lot words (in the novel, which) we don’t really use in our conversation.

Instructor: Any other reasons...

Kang: Yes, yes, some words I know their meanings, but they seem to mean something else in the novel. I believe, about this point, ah (sighing) this is because of the culture, the cultural differences. You cannot even explain some words in Chinese. You must..., the meaning is different... even different... They carry different meanings in different period of time.

Instructor: Yeah.

Kang: So it is hard to understand.

Script writing in groups seemed effective to help students develop in-depth understanding of the register of characters’ utterance and word meanings in contexts. By working with their peers, students wrote up the dialogues that were coherent with the scene themes. They also provided clear stage direction for the cues for movement, and scene-setting elements. It was observed that during the performance, a few students were able to improvise the dialogues appropriately without the benefit of scripts. This process stimulated the ESL students’ language productivity, and affirmed Swain’s (1985) theory that comprehensible output was critical for their acquisition of new language forms. Swain indicated that when meaningful and purposeful activities require L2 learners to communicate a message to someone, they often make several attempts to achieve the goal by constantly reflecting and modifying their utterance, including pronunciation, use of words and grammatical forms. This significantly facilitates their learning in ways that not only differ from but also complement receptive language learning activities.

Through the corpus analysis of students’ scripts using Cobb’s (2006) Classic Vocabulary Profile vision 3 (please see http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/eng/), the authors examined the vocabulary coverage of the students’ scripts. The results showed the students’ scripts, as in the original novel, were non-academic texts, because there were low percentages of academic word coverage (0.71% - 1.84%), far below 10% coverage in an academic text (Nation, 2001). However, the results indicated that students used more complex vocabulary than an average non-academic English text. With an exception of the scripts written by drama group five, the first 2000 high frequency words accounted for only 80.32% to 82.8% scripts, and low frequency/difficult words (and few proper nouns) accounted for 17.83% to 15.93% scripts (see Table 2). With less than 87% first 2000 high frequency words and more than 13% low frequency words appearing in students’ scripts, their scripts were more sophisticated than an average non-academic text (Nation, 2001). Given the evaluation of their performance where the students were acting out appropriately to their characters, and fluent in their dialogues, and accurate in their word pronunciations, it is reasonable to conclude that students in the project had sufficient comprehension of vocabulary in the scripts.

Table 2. Vocabulary coverage of screen plays by five drama groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drama Groups</th>
<th>1-1000 words</th>
<th>1001-2000 words</th>
<th>Academic words</th>
<th>Off-list (6) words</th>
<th>Total words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>73.71%</td>
<td>6.61%</td>
<td>1.84%</td>
<td>17.83%</td>
<td>1301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>77.37%</td>
<td>5.63%</td>
<td>1.07%</td>
<td>15.93%</td>
<td>1971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>75.49%</td>
<td>6.53%</td>
<td>0.73%</td>
<td>17.21%</td>
<td>2313</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The feedback from the students about this project was positive. They said it was the project that nurtured their interest in reading *The Edible Woman*, which they initially found “difficult”, having “nothing to do with their life”, and “boring”. The drama and filmmaking activities have helped them put their learning into a real-life context, providing them with many collective and reflective learning opportunities. As a result, they indicated that they were confident discussing the novel and sharing their own perspectives about its themes, plots and characters with their peers. Overall, the students felt that they have made great progress in their reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This filmmaking project embraced the broad concept of task-based language learning that focused on “task authenticity, globality and integration of language and contents and involvement of all the aspects of the individual’s personality” (Ribé & Vidal, 1993, p. 3). It enabled students to establish a cohesive interaction structure within a meaningful context that captivates students’ imagination and enhances their motivation through compelling multi-media (Hanson-Smith, 2007; Gromik, 2008, 2009). The outcomes indicated filmmaking activities based on carefully written scripts allowing personal interpretation of characters and dramatization of certain themes permeated with cultural content were effective in creating an optimal environment for students’ English learning. As a result, it seemed that students were able to develop an in-depth understanding of the novel and acquired vocabulary that was difficult for them to comprehend through traditional lecturers, reading and regular classroom activities. The project showed a great potential using digital video media and drama to facilitate students’ English acquisition.

Acknowledgements

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References


(1) All the names are pseudonyms.

(2) Bold fonts indicate the words that Lang didn’t know.

(3) Twenty-two students signed consent letters, giving permission to use their images in the non-commercial CD production and upload the film on the university website upon the invitation by the program coordinator at the department (URL: [http://www.yorku.ca/laps/dll/esl/index.html](http://www.yorku.ca/laps/dll/esl/index.html)).

(4) Indicates utterance interrupted

(5) Indecipherable utterance

(6) Off-list words include technical words, proper nouns, and low frequency words.