STUDENT VIDEO PROJECT AS A MEANS TO PRACTICE CONSTRUCTIVIST PEDAGOGY IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract: This article describes a video project in which learners of the Russian language at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) were involved in making their own digital video in the target language. The activity is viewed from the constructivist perspective of education, in which an active construction of knowledge by the learners, the social nature of learning, the authenticity of the learning situation, and the ability of the students to determine their own learning goals are prioritised. This paper gives a brief overview of two student-produced videos and reports the learners' perceptions of the benefits of the project. It concludes that involving language learners in a video-making activity offers a feasible way to integrate technology into language curriculum and to infuse constructivist pedagogical strategies into foreign language teaching. Although this study was done in the context of Russian language teaching and learning, the activity described can be implemented with learners of various languages at different levels of proficiency.

Keywords: language pedagogy, constructivist assumptions in education, student video, students' perceptions

Abstrak: Artikel ini menghuraikan tentang satu projek pembinaan video digital pembelajaran bahasa Rusia oleh pelajar di Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Aktiviti tersebut telah dilihat dalam perspektif konstruktivisme dalam pendidikan. Dalam perspektif tersebut keutamaan telah diberi terhadap pembinaan pengetahuan secara aktif oleh pelajar, tabiat pembelajaran sosial, keaslian situasi pembelajaran, dan kebolehan pelajar menentukan matlamat pembelajaran. Artikel ini memberi gambaran keseluruhan tentang dua orang pelajar yang telah menerbit video tersebut dan laporan persepsi pelajar tentang kebaikan projek. Artikel ini juga merumuskan bahawa penglibatan pelajar dalam projek ini memungkinkan pengintegrasian teknologi dalam kurikulum pengajaran bahasa dan memasukkan strategi pedagogi konstruktivisme dalam pengajaran bahasa asing. Walaupun kajian ini memberi penumpuan dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa Rusia tetapi aktiviti yang telah diterangkan dapat diimplimentasi dalam pembelajaran pelbagai bahasa pada peringkat profisiensi yang berlainan.

Kata kunci: pedagogi bahasa, andaian konstruktivisme dalam pendidikan, video pelajar, persepsi pelajar

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing realisation among education policy-makers and practitioners that rapid developments in information and communication technologies (ICT) and the ubiquitous presence of computers in everyday life affect the way we teach and learn. During this era of unprecedented technological advance, sophisticated technologies can "provide powerful organizational, computational, and visualization tools to support learning" (Windschitl, 2002: 135). For example, the Internet allows students instant access to all kinds of information, tools, and ideas. It can even "transport" them to classrooms and lecture halls in distant parts of the world. With this connection, pertinent questions that may arise among foreign language educators are: What does the teaching and learning of foreign languages mean during this age of rapid technological progress? How do we organise the teaching process to consider the realities of the world outside university auditoriums?

Clearly, we need to re-think the ways in which we organise the proceedings in our classrooms so that a learning experience becomes more meaningful, relevant, and enriching for the learners. The learning situation can be meaningful when it is rooted in a "real world context" and when it promotes the development of skills that are necessary for "effective living in contemporary society" (Kearney & Schuck, 2004: 2). One of the ways to achieve this is through adopting a constructivist approach to education that has been associated with progressive pedagogy, that can be adapted to the interests and needs of the learners (see Windschitl, 2002), and that can offer a variety of ways to incorporate technology into the teaching and learning process.

This qualitative study describes a video project implemented by twenty-four students learning the Russian language at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). It views the activity from a constructivist perspective of education, which includes active construction of knowledge by the learners, their intensive interaction during the learning process, an ability to determine their own learning goals, and the authenticity of the learning situation. The learners' perceptions of the relevance and value of the video project are examined in this article with the aim to determine whether this pedagogical approach was relevant and beneficial to the learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What Constitutes Constructivist Pedagogy?

Elements of the constructivist approach towards teaching and learning can be found in the writings of Piaget (1971), Dewey (1960), and Vygotsky (1978).

There is a vigorous on-going debate regarding which forms or versions of constructivism are more "correct" (see Phillips, 1995). To reflect the intricacies and complexities of a wider philosophical debates, constructivist pedagogy remains "less a model than a descriptor for instructional strategies" (Windschitl, 2002: 136).

However, various and often clashing opinions as to what constitutes constructivism in education do have some points of convergence. Among them are "the necessity for active participation by the learner" in the learning process and "the recognition … of the social nature of learning" (Phillips, 1995: 11). The former requires that learners re-activate the knowledge they have received previously in new learning situations while the latter demands social interaction and the exchange of ideas about subject matter among the students (Loyens, Rikers, & Schmidt, 2007). The other two elements attributed to constructivist practice in education are self-regulated learning, which includes the learners' ability "to organize, plan and monitor most aspects of learning", and the presence of authentic learning situations, which necessitate the incorporation of "real-life" activities in the teaching and learning process in order to expose the students to "complex, ill-structured problems" similar to the situations they may face outside the classroom (Loyens, Rikers, & Schmidt, 2007: 180–181).

How Can the Use of Digital Video Promote Constructivist Pedagogy?

Educationalists recognise the immense potential for the development of constructivist pedagogical practice that the incorporation of technology into the teaching and learning process offers. Studies on the use of technology in education carried out in various educational contexts and involving different types of learners and subject matters attest to a great potential that this approach has to introduce innovative teaching and learning modalities (Hernández-Ramos, 2006), to provide learning experiences that are similar to students' life experiences (Potter, 2005), and to "support, extend, or change pedagogy and curriculum outcomes" (Kearney & Schuck, 2004: 1).

The convergence of technology and pedagogy has often been viewed from the constructivist perspective (Jonassen, Howland, Moore, & Marra, 2003). Among various technological tools at the disposal of teachers and learners, digital video has been identified as especially beneficial for promoting active and creative learning (Loveless, 2002) and for stimulating social interaction among learners (Goldfarb, 2002). Additionally, being engaged in a video project encourages students to assume a greater responsibility of their learning while providing a rich, memorable and authentic learning experience (Kearney & Schuck, 2006).

Application of Video in the Foreign Language Classroom

For the most part, video has been employed in the language classroom as a "static" resource, similar to printed sources (Gardner, 1994). Studies on the use of video in teaching foreign languages have generally focused on viewing a movie in the target language and building activities around it, such as reading and translating the subtitles or the movie's transcript, taking notes, or doing various exercises (Lin, 2001, 2002; Stewart & Pertusa, 2004), and so on. Watching foreign films has been considered a good way to enhance learners' cultural literacy (Rose, 1997; Wood, 1997). However, the potential for a more dynamic application of video in the foreign language classroom, such as involving the learners in the video production, has not yet been sufficiently explored.

A search of literature on student-produced videos revealed that such studies are very scarce. Among the available articles, some offer practical ideas about ways to organise video-making projects (Brooke, 2003; Gardner, 1994) while others focus on the benefits that can be accrued by the learners from being involved in this activity. Among these benefits are the following. The process of making a video in the target language provides an interesting and enjoyable learning experience (Coleman, 1992) that can help the learners to activate the language skills acquired during the language course, providing an excellent foundation for communicative activities (Pearson, 1990). Furthermore, producing their own video encourages the learners to use "real world" language in "real life" situations (Secules, Herron & Tomasello, 1992), stimulates a greater student participation in the learning activities (Phillips, 1982), and enhances the learners' autonomy and confidence (Charge & Giblin, 1988; Gardner, 1994).

Although some of the benefits of video-making projects (e.g., learner-centredness, application of the communicative approach with its emphasis on meaning-making, class activities that demand collaboration between the learners, and autonomous learning) clearly relate to constructivist pedagogical practices, very few of the previous studies have explicitly adopted a constructivist perspective to link the video production by the language learners with the process of language teaching and learning. One such study was conducted by Gardner (1994), who described the process of creating a documentary video on the eating facilities inside the University of Hong Kong campus by 15 undergraduate students learning English and positioned the video project within a "self-access learning" framework that relates to a constructivist requirement for self-regulated learning.

METHODS

This study was carried out in ethnographic manner in which the researcher was also the teacher and the project advisor. Initiation of the video project was dictated by classroom needs, such as the need to make learning the language a more enjoyable and relevant experience for the students. However, participation in this activity was voluntary. This means that the students could choose whether to prepare and present a written report on some aspect of Russian culture, which was a familiar task for them, or to make their own video in the target language on any topic they had learned during the language program.

Participants

Twenty-four second-year students, out of a total of sixty-six in the class, decided to make their own video. The students were in their fourth – and final – semester of the language program. They formed teams of 5 to 7 persons; each team worked on their video project for the duration of the semester.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data included observations of the students' work progress, conversations and discussions with them at various stages of the project implementation, the artefacts made by the students, and the students' answers to questionnaires containing open-ended questions. This study carried out a qualitative analysis of the data, adopting an interpretive paradigm as described by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007).

The questionnaires were distributed to the students at the end of semester after all of the presentations were finished. They contained questions such as "Do you feel that you have benefited from being involved in this project? If "yes", then in what way?" and "Would you recommend that this type of activity be continued with your juniors? Why?".

The Project

The students themselves decided the theme of their video. However, they were advised by the instructor to include materials from the course curriculum, as this would encourage the students to re-activate their prior knowledge and to employ the linguistic skills they had acquired during the language program. Among the topics covered by the course curriculum were "My Hometown", "My Daily Activities", "Our University", "My Family and Friends", "Eating Out", "Looking for a Place to Live", "My House/Hostel" and so on.

The students were also advised that their video should include 'role-playing' by the group members. The conversations had to be in Russian and understandable to their classmates. In other aspects, the students themselves decided the format of their video. Not all of the students involved in the video project were equally adept technologically. Therefore, the inclusion of "extra" features such as animations, subtitles, sound effects, text "read-overs", and "pop-ups" was optional. The students were encouraged to be creative and bold. During a discussion regarding the duration of the video, it was decided that 5 to 15 minutes of footage would be sufficient. The next section gives a brief description of two videos produced by the students, "A Meal in the 'G. P.' Restaurant" and "A Trip to Kuala Lumpur".

THE STUDENT-PRODUCED VIDEOS

The students produced very creative and entertaining videos for which they received grades ranging from A to B+. For the video presentations, a notebook computer, speakers, and an LCD projector were set up in the classroom.

The Video "A Meal at the 'G. P.' Restaurant"

This video is about going out to lunch with classmates. In the video, the students acted out several conversations, beginning with a short dialogue in Russian in which one student invites her friends to a restaurant.

The English translation of the opening conversation is:

PH: Good afternoon! It is a sunny day today.
SS: Ya. Good afternoon.
KS: Good afternoon.
PH: Have you had your lunch already?
SS, KS: No, but we are going to.
PH: Perhaps we could go together to a restaurant?
SS: Let's go! Where is the restaurant?
PH: It is not far away from the "Sutera Harbour" Hotel. It is called "G. P.".
Have you been there before?

SS, KS: No.
PH: Let's go together. We will go by car.
SS, KS: OK!

In this short conversation, the students covered several topics that they had learned during the language course, such as greetings, commenting on the weather, inviting a person to go out, indicating where something is located, and discussing which mode of transportation to use.

The second part of the video takes place in the restaurant and focuses on the food. The students discuss various dishes available at the restaurant. They talk about the local cuisine and their favourite foods, and then they decide what to order. While eating, they make comments on the taste of the food. After the meal is finished, they go back to their hostel.

The Video "A Trip to Kuala Lumpur"

This video is an account of the narrator's trip to Kuala Lumpur. It begins with a self-introduction and an explanation about the reasons for the trip. While in Kuala Lumpur, the narrator comments on the weather, tells the location of her hotel, and mentions some places of interest, such as Dataran Merdeka, Tugu Negara, and others. She shares with the viewers her observations of the city scenes and the people around her. Then, the narrator decides to go shopping in KLCC. She describes the various shops that she sees there and the beautiful fountains. She buys some clothes and then heads to the Pudu bus station to catch her bus to Ipoh.

Of all the student-produced videos, this video has the most complex and rich text, which is the narrator's story in a "stream of consciousness" manner. To illustrate, here is a short passage from the script translated into English:

> *There are so many people here...I wonder why? It's already late, ten o'clock. Now I know! They have switched on the fountains! How beautiful!..Truly magnificent!..The KLCC Twin Towers are so high! Ah, it is really good to be here...I could spend the whole night in this place.*

However, this narrative approach is also the biggest shortcoming of the video. Although each group member takes a turn to "speak", there are no conversations or role-playing between the students, which somewhat undermines the purpose of the project. For this reason, the video received a B+ mark, which was the lowest among the marks given for the video projects.

During the presentations of their videos, the students shared their experiences about being involved in the video-making project. They talked about problems they had faced while working on the video, mentioned the difficulties that they had encountered, and explained how they had solved these difficulties. Among the problems mentioned were technical difficulties and feeling shy when "acting

out" conversations in public places. Other challenges faced by the students included creating the storyline and writing the script. Among enjoyable moments, the students mentioned working as a team, going out for filming, and selecting and adding soundtracks to the video.

LEARNERS' PERCEPTION OF THE PROJECTS

Analysis of the Open-Ended Questions

In response to the open-ended question of whether the learners had benefited from being involved in the project, all of the respondents gave positive answers, such as "yes", "of course", or "absolutely". The perceived benefits could be divided into several groups. The largest cluster of answers related to developing one's language skills with such statements as *"I read and spoke Russian more compared to previous projects", "I improved my grammar", "I know more lively language", "I got more language practice", "to develop the script, I had to use the words I had learned before"*. This was followed by statements related to improving one's social skills (e.g., *"I got closer to my group members", "I learned to interact more efficiently with others", "I know how to cooperate with others"*). The third group of answers indicated the expansion of the students' general and cultural knowledge (e.g., *"Now I know much more about food in Sabah", "I gained more knowledge"*).

In answering the question of whether they would recommend that the activity be continued with their juniors, twenty-two students gave positive answers and two students answered "no". The largest set of positive answers related to the perception that working on a video project was more meaningful and even "fun" as compared to writing a report. Typical answers were, *"making a video is more interesting than a paperwork project", "(it is) more interesting to do different kinds of projects during learning", "(it is) more challenging and meaningful than doing the paperwork only"* and *"they can have fun besides learning language"*. Interestingly, some statements indicated that the students were aware of multiple learning outcomes of the video project (e.g., *"one can learn more things"* and *"they (the juniors) can benefit and learn more"*).

One of the two students who wrote that the project should be discontinued cited the reason that videos "take more time (and are more) tedious work", while the other stated that it was "hard to delegate tasks."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Involving language learners in a video-making project in the target language offers a feasible way to infuse constructivist pedagogical strategies into foreign language teaching. First, implementing the video projects necessitated an active participation of every group member. It required a high level of teamwork and intensive interaction and cooperation between the students. Each student was able to contribute to the project in various capacities, often alternating between being a scriptwriter, actor, director, editor, and a member of the technical support team. Instead of being passive recipients of knowledge in the familiar and somewhat ritualised proceedings of the formal classroom, the students developed their own learning situations. This makes the students' involvement in the learning process deliberate and active. The presence of these elements satisfied two important constructivist assumptions, which are active participation of the learners in the learning process and the social nature of knowledge construction (Loyens, Rikers & Schmidt, 2007; Phillips, 1995).

The other two constructivist assumptions – self-regulated learning and the authenticity of the learning situation – transpired to be inherently connected in the course of the project implementation. To be more specific, first of all, while working on the project, the students had to attend to various aspects of movie-making, such as developing the plot, writing the script, and deciding how, when, and where to film. Dealing with multiple and diverse tasks demanded that the students become self-regulated learners who "organise, plan and monitor" their learning process (Loyens, Rikers & Schmidt, 2007). Secondly, the video projects described in this study were related to the students' ordinary life experiences, such as having lunch with friends or taking a trip. As such, the learning situations were rooted in and motivated by what Kearney and Schuck (2004) called "real world contexts". Furthermore, the authenticity of the learning situation was sustained by the fact that the students had to deal with a complex and ill-structured task and had to solve problems that they would not have encountered in the classroom setting, all of which stimulated the development of skills necessary for living in society (Kearney & Schuck, 2004; Loyens, Rikers & Schmidt, 2007).

As the students' answers to the open-ended questions attest, among the skills acquired or perfected by the learners were writing, speaking, and listening. Additionally, they gained more confidence in speaking the target language. These learning outcomes have been mentioned in previous studies (Charge & Giblin, 1988; Gardner, 1994; Pearson, 1990). More importantly, the students considered the project important and beneficial in not only developing linguistic competence but also in enhancing one's social aptitude and skills, such as developing the

ability to cooperate with other people and to interact more efficiently with team members.

The students' opinions about the project support the proposition that incorporating video making into a curriculum can "support, extend, or change pedagogy and curriculum outcomes" (Kearney & Schuck, 2004: 1). One of the important implications garnered from the project was that the learners realised they had learned "more things" and "learned a lot" while working as a team. Last but not least, the students regarded the activity as "fun" and not as "schoolwork" or an "assignment", which indicates that the convergence of technology and pedagogy has a great potential in making teaching and learning experiences rich, memorable, motivating and enjoyable for both the learners and their teachers.

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