Promotional Video Production in a Foreign Language Course

Tatsuya Fukushima
University of Arkansas

Abstract: *Multimedia equipment enables second language (L2) instructors to explore innovative course approaches, but such technologies are sometimes adapted with few pedagogical considerations. For optimal results, it is important to adapt multimedia technologies in a task-based activity whereby the resulting product delivers meaningful L2 content of practical value in the real world. This article describes a course project in which a group of intermediate Japanese language learners at the University of Arkansas produced the university's promotional video in the target language. Students wrote and narrated a script that described features of the university's popular colleges and facilities, videotaped the scenes on campus, and edited the recordings into a three-minute Japanese promotional video with English subtitles. The complete promotional video was later uploaded for viewing on the WorldWide Web. By employing user-friendly computer software, the students produced a promotional video of substantial real-life value and of near-professional audiovisual quality. Pedagogically, this video serves not only as a showcase of the learners' L2 skills but as a motivational tool for students with limited opportunities to use their target language.*

Introduction

Although commercially available multimedia technologies increase the potential for innovative instruction in foreign/second language instruction, these applications are mainly directed to receptive (as opposed to interpretive) skills. To maximize pedagogical benefits, the appropriate use of multimedia equipment as a medium for the learners' active L2 production should be explored. Additionally, producing a work of practical value would not only challenge the participating students as L2 learners but also reward them as contributors to the real world.

This study discusses a technology-based project as a requirement for a traditional intermediate Japanese course at the University of Arkansas. In this project, the students worked in a small group to produce the university's promotional video in the target language, thus enhancing their Japanese language skills and promoting the university and Japanese language program to the public. Video recordings with their L2 narration were digitally edited with a computer application into a complete presentation. This promotional video was subtitled in English with the same computer application so that it could be presented to the English-speaking audience.

This article first reviews studies that are relevant to the pedagogical rationale of this course project. After these reviews, the article describes the procedures and equipment used in the process and evaluates the results and their pedagogical implications.

Theoretical Background

Project-based Curriculum

Defined as a "theme and task-centred mode of teaching and learning which results from a joint process of negotiation between all participants" (Legutke & Thomas, 1991, p. 160), project work in L2 courses has been drawing considerable attention from numerous researchers.

Tatsuya Fukushima (PhD, Oklahoma State University) is Assistant Professor of Japanese at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Initially, project work was incorporated into advanced L2 courses in an attempt to revitalize "students who may lack motivation to relearn, or who feel that only 'new' material is interesting and relevant" (Fried-Booth, 1982, p. 98). Although syntactically and lexically oriented L2 instruction would seemingly offer few challenges to learners of high proficiency levels, an adequate content-based task challenges and rewards these learners in a pedagogically meaningful manner.

Sheppard and Stoller (1995) and Stoller (1997) summarize the characteristics of project work and distinguish it from conventional L2 instruction as follows:

- Project work aims at the learners' L2 performance beyond the sentence level.
- Project work requires the learners' active, self-directed, and purposeful L2 performance.
- Project work evaluates group performance, whereas conventional L2 instruction evaluates individual performance. Therefore, participants in project work cooperate with each other for successful completion, whereas those in traditional L2 courses engage in classroom activities for personal advancement.
- Project work, based on information from various real-life sources, serves a practical purpose because it has value in the real world.
- Whereas traditional L2 instruction often offers little challenge to learners of high proficiency levels, the anticipated concrete outcome and practical value of project work increases participating learners' motivation. At the same time, integration of an appropriate level of L2 components in a given context empowers the participants as L2 learners.

Videotaping in Second/Foreign Language Courses

Playback was a predominant form of incorporating video in earlier classroom L2 instruction (e.g., Santoni, 1975; Altman, 1989; also see Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990, for a practical list of video-based activities in L2 courses). The videotaping of learners is now becoming increasingly common in L2 courses amid commercial releases of advanced and affordable equipment (e.g., Buehler, 1982; Cox, 1989; Korb & DeMeritt, 1990). In light of these developments, researchers have discussed the pedagogical rationale for videotaping learners' L2 performances. First, video requires "as high a level of proficiency as possible" of the learners (Tudor, 1986, p. 21). Second, video facilitates L2 performance with meaningful content and gives the learners opportunities for systematic feedback (Tudor, 1986, p. 21; Stoller, 1999, p. 12). Third, students are accustomed to using multimedia equipment (Korb & DeMeritt, 1990, p. 112). Fourth, the actual use of the multimedia equipment in the process of the project "generates high levels of enthusiasm among the students" (Korb & DeMeritt, 1990, p. 113). The impact of this enthusiasm may extend beyond the L2 learners directly involved in the activities. At the sight of learners participating with vigor in the video activities, those in lower-level courses may "look forward to the day they can participate in such fun" (Korb & DeMeritt, 1990, p. 113). Fifth and finally, multimedia technologies such as "the video-recorder [and] . . . computer . . . provide a rich variety of tools and techniques for the implementation of self-directed learning" (Gremmo & Riley, 1995, p. 153).

Rationale for Video Production Project

Unlike content-based instruction, which requires "extended and sometimes complicated decision-making processes, negotiation, and incremental implementation, with piloting if possible" (Stoller, 1999, p. 12), project work is easily adaptable to a foreign language course. With adequate consideration of the content, project work can be integrated with ease into L2 courses for learners at varying proficiency levels. Moreover, project work can be easily incorporated into a conventional L2 course as "a typical sequence of activities" (Stoller, 1997). Additionally, self-directed learning through project work provides opportunities for learners to play an active and participatory role in purposeful L2 performance. "[S]tudents' involvement and motivation will be greater if they can decide how activities are structured" (Tudor, 1993, p. 22).

Multimedia technology, if adapted with careful consideration of its feasibility and pedagogical strengths, can be an effective medium for project work. Contrary to some instructors' perception of cost as a deterrent to video production or other technology-based L2 course projects, "one does not need an elaborate studio set-up" (Korb & DeMeritt, 1990, p. 116) to produce a video recording of high quality. Thanks in large part to massive commercial production, camcorders of high — or even professional — audiovisual recording quality are available at increasingly affordable prices.

Another noteworthy development in technology is the commercial release of video editing computer applications. Only a decade ago, the task of video editing was reserved for professionals at state-of-the-art audiovisual studios. Today, however, relatively inexpensive and user-friendly video editing applications have rendered production of a video of near-professional quality a feasible task for students, for whom "computer literacy is essential [for] entering mainstream courses" (Stoller, 1999, p. 12). Furthermore, recordable compact discs (CD-Rs) preserve the video recordings almost permanently in a digitized format.

Self-directed group production of a video with a content of practical value in the real world is one pedagogically beneficial form of multimedia adaptation in an L2 course. As Gremmo and Riley (1995) caution, there are

concerns for the adaptation of technologies in an L2 classroom in "a retrograde and unreflecting" form (p. 153). Rather than as a tool for classroom presentation that in itself does not change the essentially receptive nature of the learning process, it is desirable to employ the technologies as a medium for the learners' active (as opposed to receptive) L2 performance. Learners' self-directed performance should maximize the meaningfulness — and possibly the practical value — of the content. At the same time, knowing that their product will be presented to the public should elicit their best possible L2 performance and responsible content.

This study discusses and evaluates a foreign language course project in which the learners videotape their self-directed performance for public presentation. We will first discuss the procedure of promotional video production. Based on observations throughout the project, we will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the project from the perspectives of learner empowerment, learner autonomy, real-life value of the learner product, and pedagogical benefits.

Participants, Equipment, and Procedures

Student Participants

In the spring semester of 2001, seven students at the University of Arkansas participated in project work in a fourth-semester Japanese language course. The project was designing the university's Japanese-language promotional video with English subtitles (for presentation to the English-speaking audience). All seven students in this project had taken the previous Japanese language courses at the university, and each of the previous and current courses met three hours per week. Of the seven participants, six were U.S. citizens of European descent and one was a U.S. permanent resident with German citizenship. None of the students had been to Japan previously; two of them — both U.S. citizens — had been admitted to study-in-Japan programs for the following academic year.

Equipment and Materials

The filming was done with a student's personal camcorder. For the subsequent audiovisual editing processes, the university's Language Learning Center (LLC) reserved one PowerMac G3 computer equipped with an audio/video capture card, a device used to transfer video recordings into a computer hard drive.[1] The video editing computer application used was Adobe *Premiere* 4.2 for Macintosh, which was already available at the LLC at the time of the project. This commercially available application allows the user to edit video cuts and sounds digitally on a computer. In addition to these editing capabilities, digital transmission of audio/video recordings allows the user to copy and paste the files with virtually no deterioration of audiovisual quality.

Procedures

Participants in this project conducted conferences in English and then wrote and narrated the script in Japanese. The project began with an in-class conference during which the students assigned tasks in the project. During Week 1 of the semester, the instructor used one entire class meeting for the participants to discuss their roles in the project. It was agreed that all participants should share the task of script writing. More specifically, they shared the task of describing popular colleges, academic programs, and extracurricular activities. The aforementioned camcorder owner volunteered to do the video recording. One journalism student, who was acquainted with personnel at the university's TV/radio stations and publicity office, volunteered to obtain background music and university file footage to use in the promotional video.

One week before spring break, the instructor held a class meeting at the LLC, wherein the LLC director[2] conducted an Adobe *Premiere* workshop. The LLC was reserved for the workshop so that each student would have access to a computer for hands-on practice of the editing procedures. During the workshop, the director demonstrated — and all students practiced — all audio/video editing procedures necessary for the production, including capturing audio/video files into a computer hard drive, copying and pasting them, adding fade-ins/outs between video cuts, controlling sound volumes (e.g., the balance between the narration and background music), and subtitling.

In the subsequent class meeting, the instructor spent approximately 20 minutes on follow-up group discussion. All student participants agreed during the discussion that Adobe *Premiere* would be a sufficiently easy application to operate independently, and they decided to share the task of audio/video editing. They then set tentative deadlines for the complete script and video recording. In an attempt to have the students represent their L2 skills in their script, the instructor advised them to avoid excessive details and minimize grammar and vocabulary that they had not yet learned. The students were informed that the instructor would meet with them after spring break to proofread the first draft. They decided to assign one college to each group member for script composition, and then set the date for an out-of-class meeting in which they would compile their writings into the complete first draft. At the end of the discussion, the instructor provided the students with the URL an on-line journal article (Karamitroglou, 1998) that summarizes guidelines for professional foreign film subtitling.[3]

Upon completion of their scripts after spring break, the students invited the instructor to two meetings out of

class for proofreading. During the first meeting, it was discovered that the first draft lacked a balance in its overall information content. This imbalance arose mainly because some descriptions of a few colleges included excessive details about their research fields and facilities. To streamline this draft, the students held a group conference and highlighted features to mention in the revised draft. The students set the deadline for the revision and made an appointment for the second meeting with the instructor.

In the second meeting less than a week later, the instructor proofread the students' revisions to confirm that this draft provided well-balanced descriptions of the featured colleges and facilities. Upon this verification, the students selected a script editor, who immediately compiled all writings into a complete, error-free script during the meeting with the instructor's guidance. In the meantime, other students set the times and dates for the video recording sessions at various locations on/off campus and for the subsequent audio/video editing sessions at the LLC. (The instructor did not participate in any portion of the video recording sessions, although the students kept him posted about their progress.)

After completion of all recording sessions, the students edited the audio/video recordings at the LLC into a complete promotional video. At first, the students asked the LLC director to conduct a preliminary audio/video editing session. During this session, the LLC director transferred all video recordings and background music into the reserved computer's hard drive for the students and reviewed the audio/video editing procedures with hands-on practice. In an attempt to expedite the process, the students visited the LLC as individuals or in smaller groups at available dates and hours to proceed with the actual editing, in addition to periodically meeting as one group at the LLC to discuss the desired sequencing and design of the final edition.

Throughout the audio/video editing sessions, the students contacted the instructor only once for assistance. At that time, the students were having difficulty making the yellow subtitles[4] legible in scenes with bright background colors. To solve this problem, the instructor suggested that a dark gray contour be added to the subtitles.[5] This solution improved readability of all subtitles in the promotional video to the students' satisfaction. Upon completion of the entire editing process, the student participants submitted a CD-R copy of the final product to the instructor in the Microsoft AVI and QuickTime formats. The compressed QuickTime video file was uploaded on the Internet for viewing on the university's Japanese Language Program Web site.

This course project was worth 15% of the final grade. For this project, all students were given full credit for the complete work for three reasons. First, students were occasionally assigned different tasks in the process, and it would be unfair to rate their contributions differently. Second, the students' compositions were compiled into one piece, and it was virtually impossible to assign different grades to individual students. Third, given the overall quality of the complete video (see Discussion for details) and the amount of time the students invested in this project, the instructor felt that full credit was appropriate.

Discussion

Three minutes and 21 seconds in total length, the promotional video consisted of a concise overview of the university's ESL program, Japanese language program, the popular colleges offering undergraduate and graduate degrees, and extracurricular activities. The L2 content of the video was not only adequate for the intermediate course, with minimal use of unfamiliar terms, but appropriate for the university's promotional activities. In particular, the students' L2 fluency in the video was sufficient for public presentation and representative of intermediate foreign language learners. The use of the commercially available, user-friendly multimedia equipment and software contributed to the near-professional audiovisual quality of the final product. Furthermore, the digital transfer of audio/video files with a computer enabled the students to edit all audio/video files into a complete promotional video of considerably high quality in an almost permanent format.

From the administrative perspective, this project suggests the potential for a remarkable accomplishment in a foreign language course with multimedia software and hardware. All software and hardware used in this project are compatible with commercially available computers. Also, because of their potential applicability to other similar course projects, the video editing software and video capture device would be worthwhile investments for L2 programs seeking to integrate learner-videotaping activities into their classes. In the case of our project work, the LLC was already equipped with the necessary software and hardware. Therefore, our students only needed to purchase one videotape for recording and a few Zip disks[6] for saving the audio/video files; the LLC provided the CD-Rs for filing the final edition.

This course project had four pedagogical benefits. First, the computer workshop *before* the video recording sessions raised students' motivation to complete this project. During the preliminary conferences, the student participants were somewhat skeptical about the potential outcome and the adequacy of their own computer skills in editing the audio/video recordings. However, the computer workshop at the LLC transformed these concerns into enthusiasm for producing a high-quality promotional video. Additionally, during the hands-on practice session, the students found that the video editing application was

sufficiently user-friendly to operate with ease. In conjunction with the anticipated near-professional quality, the equipment's user-friendliness raised the confidence level of the student participants. As a result, the students demonstrated high levels of self-expectation during the video recording sessions.

Second, integration of multimedia equipment led to a pedagogically beneficial form of self-directed L2 production. Although numerous ideas for integrating multimedia equipment in L2 courses have been proposed, many of them fall short of changing the essentially nonautonomous nature of the learning process. As Gremmo and Riley (1995) state, "A grammar drill on a computer is still a grammar drill and if learners are given little choice (or no training, which comes to the same thing) then it is a travesty to call their programme 'self-directed'" (p. 153). In a conventional foreign language course with little learner autonomy, autonomous L2 production out of class is a key to successful integration of multimedia equipment for meaningful results. As described in a previous section, our students' product is a result of autonomous L2 production with meaningful content, rather than of mechanical repetitions of routines. The instructor's involvement in the participants' activities was limited to proofreading the scripts and demonstrating the procedure for adding a dark gray contour to the subtitles for increased readability. The instructor played absolutely no role in the video recording sessions.

Third, the product of this course project is a useful promotional medium in the real world. Consisting of information on available academic programs, student population, facilities, and extracurricular activities, our students' promotional video provides an appropriate overview of the university for the general public. Moreover, the near-professional audiovisual quality makes the product presentable not only on the WorldWide Web but on a VHS or Video CD (VCD).[7] Especially for the Japanese language program, this video has a positive impact on both current and prospective students. For the students in the project, the product is a permanent record of their personal accomplishment. For students in beginning-level courses, the promotional video represents in a visually appealing form the L2 skills that they should be able to achieve through the program. The video also gives prospective students high expectations of the L2 skills that they might achieve.

Fourth, this project maximized the capabilities of commercially available multimedia tools without extensive training in their operational procedures. Today's young U.S. students are sufficiently accustomed to multimedia equipment to operate most of the commercially available software and hardware. Moreover, the user-friendly designs of today's multimedia software and hardware allow these students to operate them individually with considerable ease after appropriate — and nonexhaustive — workshop practice. Moreover, the project work preserved the operation of the equipment as a means to an end, instead of turning it into an end in itself.

On the other hand, we observed several shortcomings in this course project. For instance, the amount of time for the project exceeded the students' predictions due to difficulties scheduling conferences and video recording/editing sessions out of class. These difficulties arose from differences not only in class schedules but in part-time work schedules. Also, this promotional video includes only one seven-second scene of the students themselves. This problem is not negligible, because the students' limited appearances on camera may undermine the value of this video as a showcase of their L2 skills.

From the pedagogical perspective, we observed two weaknesses in this project. First, the nature of the content, which focuses on the availability of academic programs, facilities, and university-related activities, would inevitably limit syntactic and lexical variations of the L2 content. Specifically, we observed that a large number of sentences throughout the script end with *imasu/arimasu* (there is/are).[8] These frequent uses of *imasu/arimasu* suggest that the learners were too conscious of their fluency to include many newly learned L2 components (which would impede their fluent narration), although they do not make this promotional video's L2 content less authentic or natural. Second, the prepared script in this video inherently fails to showcase the learners' skills for face-to-face communication. Thus, while the project was useful as a confidence builder, it is questionable whether it would be useful for pedagogical feedback aimed at improving the participants' L2 communicative skills.

Suggestions for Future Projects

Based on our observations thus far, we can make suggestions for maximizing the pedagogical benefits of future projects. First, the instructor should conduct a survey of students' schedules at the beginning of the project to ascertain their availability out of class for the video recording and audio/video editing sessions. Second, participants in projects of this kind are likely to be more productive in small groups than in large groups. This project preserved the students' cooperative spirit thanks partly to the small size of the class. In a large class, dividing students into smaller groups could minimize interpersonal conflict and difficulty in scheduling meetings as well as videotaping sessions out of class. Third, it is advisable to establish a series of deadlines for each key step instead of one deadline for the complete project. Deadlines for the script writing and video recordings will expedite each step and ensure allocation of adequate time, thereby enhancing the quality of the resulting product. Fourth, the students recommend-

ed that participants in future projects hold conferences more regularly than they did to ensure the desired progress of each step. Fifth, some course assignments (e.g., homework assignments, simulations in class, etc.) may be tailored specifically to this project to facilitate its relevance to newly learned grammar rules, vocabulary, and other L2 components. Sixth, and finally, it is desirable that students appear on camera in the final edition as frequently as is artistically appropriate. From a pedagogical standpoint, frequent appearances on camera would boost the learners' confidence and render the learners more willing to practice their L2 in and out of class. At the same time, these appearances will demonstrate the L2 skills that learners can achieve at high proficiency levels.

Conclusion

With a high level of motivation to demonstrate their best L2 performance, our students produced a visually appealing promotional video whose content is not only representative of their L2 level but appropriate for the video's practical purpose. This course project gave the students opportunities to incorporate all learned L2 components into a product of practical value. The project work successfully employed accessible and user-friendly multimedia software and hardware for optimal pedagogical benefits in an L2 course, without turning the use of the technology into an end in itself. Furthermore, it employed the multimedia equipment as a medium for the learners' self-directed L2 production.

In the course of the project, we observed several procedural and pedagogical shortcomings. These problems, however, can be solved by several adjustments in future implementation of the same or similar projects. Newer technologies such as digital camcorders and more advanced video editing applications may lead to even higher product quality and more efficient production.

Notes

1. This PowerMac was equipped with a 266 Mhz microprocessor, 64 MB RAM, 4 GB hard drive, and an internal video capture card with analog audio/video input and output. The operating system installed in this machine was Mac OS 8.6.

2. We would like to thank Dr. Linda C. Jones, Director of the Language Learning Center at the University of Arkansas, for conducting the workshop and providing technical assistance for the students throughout the project.

3. The following are some of the subtitling techniques that Karamitroglou (1998) lists for optimal readability:

> Each subtitle should be presented in a maximum of two lines.
>
> Each subtitle line should consist of up to 35 characters.
>
> Fonts with serifs should be avoided.
>
> Generally, a full two-line subtitle should remain on the screen for 6 seconds.
>
> A long utterance should be divided into two separate subtitles, with ending/starting triple dots (…) in between.

4. Karamitroglou (1998) recommends the use of a pale white font for subtitling. However, based on the use of yellow in many recent Japanese films released in the U.S., the student participants chose a yellow font for their promotional video.

5. Karamitroglou (1998) recommends that subtitles be "presented against a grey, see-through 'ghost box' rather than in a contoured format (surrounded by a shadowed edge) since . . . it (is) easier for the eye to read against a fixed rather than a varying/moving background." However, the use of the contour is common in English subtitles for Japanese films released in the U.S. in recent years.

6. A ZIP disk stores 100 or 250 Megabytes (MB) of data while a conventional floppy stores only 1.44 MB. The total file size of the final edition before compression is 91.1 MB.

7. The overwhelming majority of the commercially available DVD players are compatible with Video CD (VCD), a popular multimedia CD-ROM format in Asia. An Adobe *Premiere* video file will become playable on a DVD/VCD player by converting it with a downloadable plug-in application.

8. The Japanese verbs *imasu* and *arimasu* both mean "there is/are." The verb *imasu* takes an animate subject Noun Phrase (NP) and *arimasu* an inanimate subject NP:

(a) *Niwa ni neko ga imasu/*arimasu.*
garden LOC cat NOM there-is
"There is a cat in the garden."

(b) *Niwa ni isu ga *imasu/arimasu.*
garden LOC chair NOM there-is
"There is a chair in the garden."

The subject NP of (a) is the animate *neko* "a cat," so *arimasu* would make the sentence ungrammatical. On the other hand, the subject NP of (b) is the inanimate isu "a chair," so *imasu* would make the sentence ungrammatical.

References

Altman, R. (1989). *The video connection: Integrating video into language teaching.* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Buehler, G. (1982). The videotape recorder in foreign language conversation and composition courses. *Foreign Language Annals, 15,*2, 103–7.

Cox, D. P. (1989). In defense of classroom video. *Guidelines: A Periodical for Classroom Language Teachers, 11,*1, 58–65.

Fried-Booth, D. (1982). Project work with advanced classes. *ELT Journal, 36,*2, 98–103.

Gremmo, M.-J., & Riley, P. (1995). Autonomy, self-direction, and self access in language teaching and learning: The history of an idea. *System, 23,*2, 151–64.

Karamitroglou, F. (1998). A proposed set of subtitling standards in Europe. *Translation Journal* [online serial], *2,*2. http://accurapid.com/journal/04stndrd.htm.

Korb, R. A., & DeMeritt, L. C. (1990). Lights! Camera! Action!

Videotaping in the conversation class. *Die Unterrichtspraxis: Teaching German, 23,*2, 112–17.

Legutke, M., & Thomas, H. (1991). *Process and experience in the language classroom.* Essex, UK: Longman Group.

Santoni, G. V. (1975). Using videotape in the advanced conversation class. *Foreign Language Annals, 8,*3, 233–38.

Sheppard, K. & Stoller, F. L. (1995). Guidelines for the integration of student projects into ESP classrooms. *English Teaching Forum, 33,2,* 10–15, 34.

Stempleski, S., & Tomalin, B. (1990). *Video in action: Recipes for using video in language teaching.* London: Prentice Hall.

Stoller, F. L. (1997). Project work: A means to promote language content. *Forum, 35,*4. http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/vols/vol35/no4/p2.htm.

Stoller, F. L. (1999). Time for change: A hybrid curriculum for EAP programs. *TESOL Journal, 8,*1, 9–13.

Tudor, I. (1986). Framework for the exploitation of video in the language classroom. *British Journal of Language Teaching, 24,*1, 19–22.

Tudor, I. (1993). Teacher roles in the learner-centred classroom. *ELT Journal, 47,*1, 22–31.