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## Action! — Boost Students' English Learning Motivation with Filmmaking Project

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**Abstract:** *In Taiwan, English is more a major subject matter for student to “study” in school rather than a language for people to use in real life situations. Under the situation, students tend to have lower learning motivation when come to English classes, especially in higher academic settings, like universities. In order to boost students' learning motivation as well as to encourage their productivity and creativity at the same time, a preliminary action research was conducted by two researchers collaboratively whereas one researcher is the instructor simultaneously. The major focus of the action research is concerning the application of “filmmaking” as a potentially effective tool to attract students into the classroom activities as well as the lesson content. For four semesters successively, a semester project has been assigned to 10 classes. By the end of each semester, reflections from students and the instructor were collected for refining purpose. From the students' reflection and random interviews, an interesting comment appeared repeatedly: although the filmmaking project required them much effort and time, the results brought them the excessive fun and sense of accomplishment.*

**Key words:** *filmmaking, English learning, motivation*

### 1. Introduction

Since many college level students in Taiwan consider English as merely one general education course, they usually attend English classes with less enthusiasm. Many students go to English course reluctantly, while even more students just sit in the classroom to wait for the recess bell ring. It is even common to see students hide behind their classmates and fall asleep. Several reasons may cause their indifferent learning attitude. First, many students do not believe that they would actually need to use English in the future. Second, some students have unhappy English learning experiences either about their grades or about their learning process. Third, the textbooks are usually boring. In addition, further reasons are still yet to

be surveyed. In order to increase students' motivation, various methods have been discussed and evaluated. Likewise, this paper presents filmmaking as an effective method to boost students' motivation.

Numerous studies have advocated incorporating films or movies into EFL (English as a foreign language) classrooms due to countless advantages. However, most of them are related to viewing existing films (Chen & Oller, 2005; Golden, 1968; King, 2000; Sherman, 2003). The focus of these studies is regarding how to design a lesson plan based on the existing film. In addition to the various content and language focus, relevant pre-watching, during-watching, and post-watching activities have also been discussed broadly. Different from those stud-

ies, this paper demonstrates that “producing” instead of “showing” films will be an even effective way to support language learning.

Along with the population of the Internet, more films become available online for teachers to use. In 2005, three former PayPal employees created a website, YouTube, for users around the world to watch videos. In addition, members can also upload their own films, and to share films they like (Hopkins, 2006). According to its convenience and abundant resources, more and more educators consider YouTube as one useful teaching supplementary. Some teachers may show films from YouTube to support their ideas, to introduce new concept, or to make a connection with the curriculum content materials. Other teachers may even upload teaching lessons for students to review, or for other people who are interested in the topic. In recent years, more and more films created by students are posted on YouTube. It becomes a popular and practical media to encourage creativity.

Along with the rapid progress of technology, filmmaking is no longer an unusual technique for a small group of specialists to conduct. Now, everybody can make a short film simply with a digital device and a film editing software; both are available and common to regular students in many countries. In accordance with the technology advancement, the aim of the paper is to show how filmmaking can benefit students’ language learning.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **2.1. The Evolving Forms of Literacy**

Generally speaking, literacy can be narrowly defined as simply as “the ability to read and write” (dictionary.com) or as broadly as the comprehending/composing of any mode of representation that makes meaning possible (Eisner, 1998). In 1997, Ralph Cintron shared

his changing perspectives toward written texts: “If in 1987 I had seen written texts as discrete objects, in 1990 I began to see a written text as a sign system embedded in other sign systems and interpreters of the text as both signs and signers (p. 10).”

Later on, Cintron’s conception of written text does not only include pictographic, alphabetic, and all kinds of writing systems, but also some other special signs that are used for various professions and cultures, such as music notes, mathematic operators, etc. To expand the idea into the most recent society, the sign can also include “media literacy” (Kubey, 2000), such as hypertext, web-related signs and even computer languages. Similarly, Ong (1986) in his “Writing Is a Technology That Restructures Thought” article presents the parallels between writing and the most important modern technology—the computer—based on Plato’s condemnation of writing in the *Phaedrus*. Hence, it is not surprising that some scholars have started to advocate that learning a “new literacy” is essential for students and teachers today.

In recent decades, more and more educators and theorists proposed viewing literacy broadly to include visual and audio, and ranging from one dimension to multi-dimension. Eisner (1992) asserts, “We cannot know through language what we cannot imagine. The image—visual, tactile, auditory—plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning through text. Those who cannot imagine cannot read.” (Cited in Wilhelm, 1997, p. 15) Correspondent with Eisner’s statement, Rosenblatt (1983; 1978) has mentioned the “aesthetic experience” of a textual world in *Literature as Exploration* and in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*. She explains the “aesthetic experience” as the reader’s lived-through evocation of the text as it is imagined and visualized and experienced in the mind’s eye.

Moreover, Jeffrey Wilhelm (1997) has advocated that “Reading is seeing.” He believes that “visual imaging encourages students to access and apply their prior knowledge as they read, increases comprehension, and improves the ability to predict, infer, and remember what has been read . . . as well as help[ing] students to monitor their comprehension” (p. 117-118). ” Therefore, he subsequently considered that visual art could be influential and helpful in developing students’ response and discourse about what they had read.

As a matter of fact, visualizing is usually a great way to demonstrate (and to improve as well) students’ reading comprehension. As Rosenblatt (2005) quotes from the novelist John Fowles: “A sentence or a paragraph in a novel will evoke a different image in each reader.” Therefore it should be interesting to see how different readers visual the characters or the scenes in the reading assignments. In correspondence with this concept, modern students spend more time in front of computers “surfing” on the Internet rather than reading traditional books. On the other hand, it also becomes more common to see instructors showing short films from You Tube to illustrate their point of views. Although conventional teachers may argue the controversial role of the computer, it is undeniable that this fascinating technology can easily attract students’ attention and elicit their intrinsic motivation which is crucial for learning.

Furthermore, Willinsky (1990) defines “new literacy” as a recent form of progressive education with the reading and writing teaching strategies with the intention of shifting the control of literacy from the teacher to the student. In addition to visual art, theatre, creative writing, music, dance and the introduction of local art-related institutions which would be beneficial for education purposes, the Internet-related literacy, digital story making and many more computer-supported instruction should also be emphasized

because students will learn more meaningfully and effectively when interesting technologies are embraced in the curriculum. Additionally, most students will feel more “in control” to learn for themselves especially when most of them may deem themselves as more professional users (in computer, filmmaking or other high-tech tools) than their teachers.

## **2.2. From Drama to Movie**

As mentioned before, no matter how important English is in the education system of Taiwan, it is not the second (or even third, fourth) language in Taiwan. Students rarely have chances to actually “use” English in everyday life; thus, some English teachers have suggested incorporating drama-relevant activities into English classes due to various advantages. In most universities, a school-wide English drama contest is not unusual.

There are various advantages for incorporating drama-related activities into language learning process. In a drama, students are usually asked to portray some others or themselves in an imaginary circumstance. “In other words, drama is concerned with the world of ‘let’s pretend’; it asks the learner to project himself imaginatively into another situation, outside the classroom, or into the skin and persona of another person” (Holden, 1981, p. 1). By utilizing drama, students do not need the authentic environment or native English-speakers to practice their speaking skills.

Moreover, due to the variance of drama performance, it can be conducted individually as well as collaboratively. One person can conduct a scene; two people can converse with each other; more than three people can even produce more complex drama at the same time. In addition, instructors may provide existing scripts, which are organized and grammatically correct, for students to perform, or encourage students to create their own scripts freely. Ei-

ther way, student can “interact with other people and react to what they do and say, making use of their own personal store of language in order to communicate in a meaningful manner” (Davies, 1990, p. 87).

Although drama is an effective way to make students’ language learning meaningful, it has several shortcomings. First of all, for some students (especially those from Asia) who are shy and timid, they may be more afraid of performing in front of real audience than performing in front of a camera. Also, in classroom or stage settings, the lack of enough or effective voice enhancers for all the participants has always been a problem. Next, once the actors became too nervous or made a mistake, they might forget what to say for the rest of the play. Then, depression will replace the presumed accomplishment. Therefore, transforming the drama activities into filmmaking could be a good solution to adjust the drawback.

### **2.3. Action Research**

This paper is a preliminary action research which was conducted by two researchers collaboratively. At the same time, one of the researchers has been teaching various English courses in a northern university in Taiwan for two years. As soon as she found out the low learning motivation and dull reactions from students, she started to incorporate different teaching strategies into the curriculum in order to boost students’ learning motivation. Amongst the different strategies, filmmaking becomes one of the most popular and effective activities. In addition to attract students’ attention and interests, conducting a filmmaking project can also encourage their productivity and creativity. Subsequently, the major focus of the action research is concerning the application of “filmmaking” as a potentially effective tool to attract students into the classroom activities as well as the lesson content.

For four semesters successively, a semester project has been assigned to ten English classes. The courses are all related to English learning, including Freshman English, Practical English, Business English, Technology English and Public Speaking. In spite of the different sizes of each class, students were divided into small groups with 4 to 5 people as a team. Each team was required to produce a film as part of the visual aids for their final oral presentation. The total length of the semester oral presentation lasted 20 to 25 minutes, whereas the length of the film could not exceed 5 minutes.

The filmmaking project indicated several objectives: to encourage students to ponder over relevant questions, to invite students to show their creativity, and to promote the efficiency and practicability of teamwork. In addition, it offered students freedom to produce their own works based on a general topic, such as “Why learn English,” “Sell Yourself,” “Sell a New/Fictional Product,” “Promote Your School,” “Introduce a Night Market Stand,” and “Taiwan, Formosa!” The instructor would provide detailed preparation guidelines for students to know exactly what to do and how to accomplish the project. A couple of questions related to the major topic would be provided to facilitate the thinking process. Examples are presented in the following table (Table 1).

The film editing software, Windows Movie Maker, was introduced to students in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> week of an 18-week semester. At that time, the instructor and the students should have already built up mutual confidence, the students, therefore, would be more willingly to accept the challenge. Additionally, students would still have about one month to work on their project, which is a reasonable and sufficient time frame. During the whole semester, the instructor would give students suggestions regarding what they have learned could be adapted into the filmmaking project.

*Table 1. Questions for Brainstorming*

Main Topic	Questions to Think
Why Learn English?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Why do we have to learn English? (general vs. individual)</li><li>• What's the importance of learning English?</li><li>• What's the benefit about learning English?</li><li>• What kinds of reading will you read in English without hesitation and fear?</li><li>• In what ways can we learn English better? (general and/or individual)</li></ul>
Taiwan, Formosa!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What are some positive images of Taiwan?</li><li>• What are the most popular things in Taiwan?</li><li>• What kinds of food do you like the most in Taiwan?</li><li>• What kinds of places do you like to visit in Taiwan?</li><li>• What are the best ways that we can introduce Taiwan to others?</li></ul>
Sell Yourself!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What is special about YOU?</li><li>• What are the positive characteristics YOU possess?</li><li>• What YOU can do as a college student?</li><li>• What YOU will be able to do after your graduation?</li><li>• In what ways can YOU persuade an unknown audience to like YOU within 5 minutes? (General and/or individual)</li></ul>

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At the same time, students were encouraged to consult the instructor either by e-mail or face to face inquiring during the class period. Nevertheless, it is still very normal to see mistakes in their finished products. For that reason, a post review and discussion is a must for each presentation. By the end of each semester, reflections from students and the instructor were collected for refining purpose.

The instrument was chosen due to the convenience, accessibility, and the instructor's familiarity. First, Movie Maker is embedded with the most popular computer system, Windows, for versions above Window XP. Students, thus, just need to click on the start menu to find the application without having to download or purchase additional software. Likewise, Windows is also the most commonly seen system around the campus. No matter students are using their

own computers or the public computers around the campus; they would have no difficulties to access the program. Furthermore, the instructor is personally familiar with the usage of Movie Maker, and she has created several sample films to show the pupils.

### **3. Motivation**

Educational researches and studies have frequently discussed about the importance of motivation for academic development. In second language acquisition (SLA) area, various theories regarding learning motivation have also been introduced and discussed, for example, Gardner and Lambert's (1972) instrumental motivation versus integrative motivation, and Crookes and Schmidt's (1991) four motivational orientations (reason for learning, desire to attain the learning goal, positive atti-

tude toward the learning situation, and effortful behavior).

Regardless the differences and similarities of different motivational theories, most educators believe that students' academic achievement and learning outcome are strongly related to their "intrinsic motivation." The concept of intrinsic motivation has been carefully examined and demonstrated by Deci and Ryan (1985) who asserted that if students deem themselves as the controller of their educational results (i.e., their effort counts), believe that they could reach desired goals (i.e., the results are not determined by luck), and enjoyed the learning process in spite of their grades, they are intrinsically motivated.

In this research, students were invited to participate in a meaningful project which is relevant to their course with friendly encouragement. The instructor also provided a pleasant, safe and non-threatening environment to support the challenging teamwork. The project is interrelated between in-class and out-of class language activities. In addition to the practices in classroom, students had to apply what they have learned into the filmmaking process outside the classroom. Therefore, this activity help promote self-confidence, learning satisfaction, and good relationships among team members.

#### **4. Results: Observations and Reflections**

In fact, filmmaking is originally a small part of their semester project, but it turns out to be the most popular and valuable assignment both for students and for the instructor. To the students, it is usually the most interesting class during the whole semester. Hysteria laughter and applause can be heard frequently. Loud discussions and comments were naturally provoked occasionally. According to the action researcher's observation, there is almost no ab-

sentee in the final product presentation classes. Moreover, ranging from five to eight groups a class, the percentage of their film production that is not attractive to their peers completely is less than 12.5 %.

From the students' reflection and random interviews, many students claimed that they had tried very hard and spent much time to work on the project. At the same time, however, they feel all the time and effort is worthwhile one way or another. The followings are some examples: "We really spent a lot of time to prepare it, and I really happy that the member of our group that can work together well." "And the last part, promotion product report is the most interesting but also need to pay a lot of time to prepare." "I think this kind of report is so interesting." "Especially in the final project, we all have an unforgettable memory after trying so hard to think of ideas about how to make a funny video." "I had a lot fun making video for our last assignment with my closest friends in my class. It is something that will be a remarkable memory in my school life."

In addition to enjoy their films and have fun, students also expressed their thankfulness for what they have learned and their team members. "Try to learn and know how to deliver our meaning to other, it is useful." "I do learn a lot from the final report, not only by the practice, but also through the comment from the teacher." Many students stated "team work" as one thing they have learned the most from the project. "This English project not only trains our skill of oral ability and writing ability but also makes us learn team management." "I learn the most important thing is teamwork." "Finally, thanks to my dear members. Everyone does their best from planning to rehearsal." Some indicated that they have built up stronger and closer friendship because of the project. "To interact with our members, I feel happy so much, I love the feeling that group member working hard together!" "I am very happy to be with them."

Students all gave positive feedback about doing the project regardless how much time they have spent; how much effort they have invested; and how many obstacles they have to overcome. One student proclaims the project “is useful for students who are going to enter the workplace in the future.” Many consider it as “a good learning experience.” Another student declares that: “Usually we learn sales ways from books, but through this opportunity, we have an actual opportunity to operate and exercise.” “This project is more difficult than before. Fortunately, I have the chance to do this project.” “I know my English is not good, but I very enjoy the final project.” The overwhelming positive feedback may seem too unbelievable to be true, but there is no single negative comment (written or oral) had been received till this point.

To sum up this section, one student's comment may best describe how students perceived this project and how students grew from it:

This is the first time I acted in a film and had a lot of fun in the process of this English drama. I always think that I have no chance to have a conversation in English with foreigner, so how can I improve my English speaking skill. But this time, our group tries to make an English environment and image the people who we are talking with are foreign people. In that situation, all sentences and words we can use is in English, and the problem is coming, every word is running in my head without a sentence, so I spend so much time in overcome this and make my logic clearly at first. Finally, I have to thank teacher Ting and all my team members for giving me this chance to go through the whole process successfully, I learned brain storming, teamwork, and how to promote a product in marketing. (Anonymous student, 2011)

## **5. Conclusion**

In addition to boost students' learning motivation, to help students correcting common mistakes, and to give students more interesting learning experiences, the filmmaking project can also help students to have better understanding about each other, to build friendship and to enhance team work. All positive feedback ensures the feasibility of incorporating the filmmaking project into English learning classrooms.

This project had some successful results so far; however, some limitations could and should be improved in the future. For example, many mistakes that student showed in their finished film should be corrected earlier, especially the minor errors related to spelling and basic grammar rules. In this way, the discussion time during the final presentation could be shortened. Moreover, this project was conducted without the intention of being studied, the design of the lesson plans were not rigorous and systematic enough. In the future, the abovementioned limitation will be considered and remedial procedures will take place.

Consequently, all positive feedback ensures the feasibility of incorporating the filmmaking project into English learning classrooms. According to Wilhelm (1997), “The use of various meaning-making activities such as drama and art helps us to reach the various strengths and multiple intelligences of our various individual students.” (p. 147) All students have potential to reach high academic achievement as long as their teachers tried various methods for different students. Likewise, Eisner (1998) suggested the art experience could increase academic achievements. Therefore, filmmaking and many other computer-supported activities should be advocated because students will learn more meaningfully and effectively when interesting technologies are embraced in the curriculum.

Although conventional teachers may argue the controversial role of the computer, it is undeniable that this fascinating technology can easily attract students' attention and elicit their intrinsic motivation which is crucial for learning. Furthermore, most students will feel more "in control" to learn for themselves especially when most of them may deem themselves as more professional users (in computer, filmmaking or other high-tech tools) than their teachers. More importantly, society is transforming; access to literacy is altering; and standards of literacy are adjusting all the time. Every element is connected with one another. Consequently, educators should pay more attention to society shift and new technology development in addition to curriculum design and teaching techniques.

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