

LEARNING LSRW SKILLS THROUGH ACTIVE STUDENT-INVOLVEMENT: SCREENING AN EDITED FILM

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to find out whether students' active involvement in classroom activities can promote language learning. This paper, using practitioner research, examines the active involvement of first-year engineering students in a film activity. The research took place in three phases: (1) the students were divided into five groups and given an assignment each, a month ahead, to edit a full-length movie to one hour without tampering with its story element; (2) the five groups presented five different edited movies on five different days; (3) the data was collected and analysed by the teacher as follows: observing the classroom performance, transcribing the students' spoken language, and collecting the students' written transcripts. The research analysis and discussion show that the whole process of the film task provided a rich input in listening and reading, and subsequently a productive language output in speaking and writing. The feedback conducted states that the students enjoyed the video classes thoroughly and the experience was rewarding because of their active involvement in the practice of LSRW skills.

Keywords: LSRW; film editing; task-based teaching

1. Introduction

Involving students in a learning task effectively is a problem that teachers have faced over the years. Studies have proved that students' active involvement in a task improves their language learning (Prabhu, 1987; Willis & Willis, 2007). At the same time, teachers are aware that films offer a great opportunity for students' language learning (Sherman, 2003; Stempleski & Tomalin, 2001; Willis, 1983). Thus, a film activity or a video activity combined with students' active involvement can facilitate the development of the four skills of the language (Kennedy, 1983; Lansford, 2014; Goldstein & Driver, 2015).

The present study uses practitioner research methodology to investigate and reflect on the students' active involvement that would lead to the active use of the language. To substantiate this point, this teacher-researcher designed an experiment, "Screening an Edited

Film,” to find out whether involving students in a film activity could lead to the enhancement of their LSRW skills in English.

2. Literature review

2.1. Video in language teaching

Researchers have shown on many occasions that involving students in a task leads to active language learning. The term “Student Involvement” is derived from the “Student Involvement Theory” of Astin (1984), which refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the students devote to academic experience. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational programme is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program (Astin, 1984). Another closely linked term in education is “Student Engagement,” that is, the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, motivation, optimism and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught (“Student Engagement,” 2016). Research on student engagement is largely related to improving student learning, that is, when students are actively and experientially involved in the learning process, and the higher the engagement, the more learning takes place. This fundamental concept is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities that are likely to lead to high-quality learning (Coates, 2005).

It is an accepted fact that motivated students engaged in activities usually perform higher academically too, and they are better-behaved than their peers; as a result, they show positive feelings and higher thinking abilities. That is to say, behavioural engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement in a particular task enhance student-engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Fredricks, 2014).

Cooperative and collaborative learning are approaches that make student involvement genuine and thereby promote active learning (Astin, 1984; James, 2015; Stephen, 2015). Stephens (2015) claims that active learning in groups, peer relationships, and social skills are key components to engagement and motivation. Simple learning assignments are not as effective as challenging activities. When students reflect, question, conjecture, evaluate, and make connections between ideas, they are actively engaged. She agrees that motivating students is not an easy task because motivation is intrinsic to the individual. All the same, teachers can definitely play a significant part in encouraging students (Stephens, 2015).

No teacher can underestimate the fact that making or watching videos has become a primary mode of communication universally, especially with youngsters. Way back in 1983, Willis emphasized the uses of the video saying that film promote the active learning of a language as it “brings real life into the classroom.” He lists such its aims as contextualizing new language items, giving the language input for a task, providing an authentic sample of language use, and building up confidence of and familiarity with the target environment (Willis, 1983). Sherman gives a few points to demonstrate why video is required for developing speaking skills: to serve its own purpose; to comprehend the spoken language; to use as a language model; to be exposed to culture; to act as a stimulus or input; and to function as a moving picture book (Sherman, 2003). In the foreword to *Film: Resource Book for Teachers*, Maley focuses on the point that culture is dominated by the moving image globally: “The combination of sound, vision and language engages and stimulates our senses and cognitive faculties simultaneously, creating a total impact that dwarfs other mediums” (Stempleski & Tomalin, 2001).

Besides giving practice in listening and speaking, videos can be exploited to develop reading and writing skills by designing appropriate student-centred activities (Goldstein & Driver, 2015). They provide a platform for a wide range of tasks that incorporate the LSRW skills. Lansford (2014) gives six reasons for using the video in the ELT classroom: It speaks to Generation V (‘V’ stands for ‘video’); it brings the outside world into the classroom; it engages learners; it is a great source of information; it provides the stimulus for classroom activities; and it is a good model for learner output. Donaghy (2014) explains why films are such a good resource: learning from films is motivating and enjoyable; they provide an authentic and a varied language; they give a visual context; and they offer variety and flexibility to the classroom. Researchers in the field ascertain that films render a supportive medium to engage learners in the active learning of a language (Goldstein & Driver, 2015; Sherman, 2003; Stempleski & Tomalin, 2001).

2.2. Student involvement in a film activity for language learning

Research into students’ involvement has been carried out in the field of education for school students but not much has been done for college students. In higher education, the studies on students’ involvement mostly pertain not to the involvement of students on a particular subject but to their overall academic programme. That is, when the concept of “student involvement” was used by Astin in 1984, he referred to the involvement of students not just in the classroom activities but their overall involvement in the academic programme, including

curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities of the college. The term “student engagement” was mainly used with reference to students at the pre-collegiate level.

I would like to use a term “Active Student-Involvement” to refer to the active involvement of the students in the activities of the classroom, so that learning would take place actively. If students are encouraged to involve themselves in video and film activities in the classroom, it would be a great stimulus for them to develop their LSRW skills. Therefore, as an engaging tool to practise language skills, video can make language classes relevant to the learners’ lives and thus lead to an active language learning experience. Not many ELT practitioners have experimented with the student involvement theory in English language learning in the colleges. So here is an attempt to fill this gap and prove that students’ active involvement in a language learning activity would positively lead to the learning of the language.

3. The study

3.1. Background and aims of the study

The film activity, “Screening an Edited Film,” was conducted in the English classes at SSN College of Engineering. The participants are the first year first-semester students of Electronics and Communication Engineering in the year 2010-2011. The said college is one of the 500 plus engineering colleges affiliated to Anna University, a technical university in Chennai, India. Anna University then offered ‘Technical English I’ in the First Semester and ‘Technical English II’ in the Second Semester, each a four-credit course of 60 periods, involving the LSRW skills. In the third-year, there is a two-credit course of 60 periods, ‘Communication Skills Laboratory’, the intention of which is to make students more interactive and thus employable.

The study was based on the hypothesis that students’ active involvement in classroom activities promotes language learning. In accordance, this paper raises the research question: “Does the students’ active involvement in a film activity promote the LSRW skills in English?”

3.2. Procedure

1. Before the class

The teacher divided each class of 60 students into 5 groups of 12 each, and each group was given an assignment a month ahead to choose a video or film or TV program, edit it by

cutting off the unnecessary details without tampering with the story element. Each group was requested to introduce the edited film in a presentation of 3 minutes and screen the edited version in an hour. Two consecutive periods were set apart for the presentation of each group. The students were also given a follow-up task of writing a report.

2. During the class

During the 3-minute oral presentation of the groups, the teacher recorded the classroom observation in writing. From the students' side, they included two video presentations -- a title clip and a credit clip within the 3-minute oral presentation.

Note: It needs to be recorded here that the spoken language of the students in all the groups contained mistakes in grammar and construction. Therefore, the transcript given here is edited by the teacher-researcher for obvious reasons.

3. After the class

The students were asked to write a report of the activity, based on the following questionnaire given by the teacher:

1. What made you choose this particular film?
2. Write a review of the film.
3. How did you go about the editing part?
4. Write a report on the whole activity.
5. What skills did you develop?
6. Give a feedback of the activity done.

Some of the groups presented handwritten scripts, others sent emails to the teacher. It needs to be recorded here that the written language had spelling mistakes, missing articles, slangs, abbreviations and emoticons, besides the generous use of ellipses, question marks and exclamation marks, denoting their awe and elation. The transcript given here is also edited by the teacher-researcher for understandable reasons.

3.3. Methodology: data collection and analysis

The teacher-researcher adopted the elements of practitioner research such as classroom research and action research to verify the hypothesis and arrive at a conclusion employing reflective practices. The data was collected and analysed by the teacher as follows: (1) using observation notes to monitor the classroom performance and record the involvement of the students, (2) transcribing the students' spoken language to show a productive spoken output

and (3) collecting the students' written transcripts to examine a creative written output. By means of various software, the 5 groups presented the following 5 movies on 5 different days: *The Italian Job*, *Baby's Day Out*, *The Phone Booth*, *The Vantage Point*, and *How to Train your Dragon*. The transcripts of the data thus gathered and analysed are divided into three parts as given below: (1) observing the classroom performance, (2) transcribing the students' spoken language, and (3) collecting the students' written transcripts.

3.4. Results

Group 1: *The Italian Job*

1. *Observing the classroom performance*

While presenting the task, the leader of the group ascended the platform to give the gist of the movie. The reaction of the class was heartening as they watched the introduction. It was a title clip, a sand-art animation that ended with the display of words, "You have got a friend. It's us." This set the mood for the group-viewing. When the movie ended, the group screened a small credit clip which explained the whole process of editing, and then on the lighter side, they attached another credit clip of the team mates wherein each one of them appeared on the screen with captions highlighting their qualities. They had worked on it using the following software: Windows Live Movie Maker & Windows Movie Maker 2.6, Corel Video Studio PRO X3, Subtitle Workshop, Virtual Dub, Adobe Photoshop, Audacity, and Total Video Converter.

2. *Transcribing the students' spoken language*

The following are a few samples of the conversation that took place among the students in the class before and after the movie was screened:

"At the outset, I suggested, *The Italian Job*, and the first reaction from our group mates was, "How on earth are you going to edit a heist movie and reduce it to one hour?" They were partially right because editing a heist movie is challenging as all the events are interlinked and even a small mistake in editing could render the movie illogical! Moreover, the movie had a running length of 105 minutes and we had to bring it down to 60 minutes! There were other suggestions from the group but I was able to convince them that it would be a worthy challenge to meet."

"Our first task was to choose a production banner for our group. I took the initial alphabet from the names of our group members, arranged them using various permutations and combinations

and finally settled on the following: $PLV (RT)^2 S^4$. Its first impression was that of a formula in physics!”

“We sat down on a weekend and saw the full film five times and parts of it several times and each time noted down the minute parts that could be edited. By the end of the week, our baby was born with a running length of 69 minutes!

“I supported my friend in choosing this movie because I was sure with his help we could meet the challenge.”

“What is special about this movie is that it is a high-voltage action film, a brilliantly-planned heist movie, a freaky fast car flick, etc. all in a single compact film. In short, it combines several features that are a craze for us, teenagers, in the age-group 17-19.

“I love the precision and planning carried out in this movie. Imagine stealing \$30 million worth of gold right before the owner’s eye without using a pistol or even a knife! This movie does exactly that! Another attraction is that the cast of the film is star-studded with academy award winners, Charlize Theron and Mark Wahlberg in the lead. Jason Statham, Seth Green and Edward Norton too did a good job.”

“Our concern was whether to choose the 1969 version or the 2003 version of *The Italian Job*. Finally, we decided on the 2003 version.”

3. Collecting the students’ written transcripts

The following are the extracts taken from the written transcripts of the different members of the group:

“The D-day arrived, and one of us missed the first period to give the final touches to the movie. We were excited and anxious because we were the first team to perform.”

“When the stage was set for the movie to begin, I narrated the gist of the movie, pressed the play button and went back to my seat. Every 15 minutes I summarized the story element for the sake of our regional-medium friends.”

“The whole class was amazed by the planning done by our group in secret. Even our English teacher was highly impressed by our enthusiasm.”

“I spent too much time designing the credit part but my hard work paid off well, as evident from the reaction of my friends. The expansion of the formula, stated by Group member 2 may be given as follows: $PLV (RT)^2 S^4 = \text{Perfect} + \text{Lovable} + \text{Victorious} + \text{Remarkable} + \text{Terrific} + \text{Successful}$.”

“The finale of our project was a photograph of the group taken along with our loving English teacher! What else would have been a perfect finish to this project?”

Group 2: *Baby’s Day Out*

1. Observing the classroom performance

The group conducted an introductory video presentation and then the edited movie of *Baby’s Day Out* interpolated with regional music and dialogue. They also showed a video

presentation of the group in action: the process of selecting the movie, the group working at it, the places they went, the time they spent together and the different aspects of editing, using the software: Windows Live Movie Maker, Windows Movie Maker 2.6, Adobe Photoshop.

2. Transcribing the students' spoken language

To put it in the spoken words of the students: "We chose *Baby's Day Out*, because the film does not have much of a story in it and therefore it would be easy to edit it."

3. Collecting the students' written transcripts

The following extracts taken from the students' written transcripts demonstrate their perceptions of the whole process:

"The response was overwhelming. Everyone enjoyed the movie. They could not stop laughing."

"The dialogues of Vadivel (a Tamil film Comedian) interposed in between added to the mirth of the audience. To keep the momentum of the film, we added thematic songs that rendered the movie thrilling. To add to the joy of the experience, we distributed lollipops to the class during the intermission."

Group 3: *The Phone Booth*

1. Observing the classroom performance

The group agreed upon a stunt-video presentation for the title. The names of the team members and their qualities for team spirit too were displayed. Some hilarious moments followed when a video clip was shown in which one group member mimicked their English teacher's anglicized pronunciation of Tamil names. In a few minutes, *The Phone Booth* was screened and everybody liked the brilliant portrayal of the psychological thriller. As the movie progressed, the momentum kept building and gradually all eyes were engrossed in the movie. The movie was followed by a series of slides giving quotes on love and friendship. They used the software: Windows Live Movie Maker, Subtitles Workshop. To convert the video to the desired formats, they finally used AVS Video Converter.

2. Transcribing the students' spoken language

Extracts from the students' conversation demonstrate some of the characteristics of the process:

"We agreed upon *The Phone Booth* because the previous batches had chosen action and comedy films."

“Our group unanimously felt that our choice of the movie was right.”

“We decided on this movie hoping that it would grab the attention of all viewers till the very end. And it did.”

“Our team said that sometimes bad things become essential while doing good. This movie was about that.”

“It was gratifying to find everybody applauding our effort. Some of our classmates were glad to note that the life of a woman is shown as precious – a message very relevant today.”

3. Collecting the students' written transcripts

This extract from the students' written transcripts indicates how they became involved in the process, not even becoming aware of the educational dimension of the task:

“We jelled together as a team to present the edited movie. Editing gave us immense satisfaction because we succeeded in conveyed the theme. The mimicking of our English teacher's Tamil accent was taken by the teacher in a jovial spirit. The whole adventure was rich in experience and learning and had a positive impact on us.”

Group 4: *The Vantage Point*

1. Observing the classroom performance

The group chose *The Vantage Point* to minimize the editing work, they deleted some title scenes and credit scenes and created their own; kept the other parts of the movie untouched because every part of it was required for comprehension. They spent four days to edit using the software: Corel studio Pr0 X3, Windows live movie maker, Windows movie maker 2.6

The story line was displayed thus: ‘The President of the US, who is now in Spain, is going to address the citizens in a public square.’ The story is related from different angles – from the angle of an American tourist with a video camera; from the angle of a Secret Service agent who has just returned from medical leave; from the angle of the President of the United States. A remarkable credit video followed.

2. Transcribing the students' spoken language

Extracts from the students' conversation demonstrate their perceptions of the process:

“I selected this movie because I thought it would appeal to our generation and also make them think.”

“Deleting some scenes from the title and the credit clips was difficult. Creating our own was even more difficult but we managed somehow.”

“Even our group members felt we had done an awesome editing work.”

“The other groups told our group that our editing work was the best. We were very happy to hear that.”

3. Collecting the students' written transcripts

Extracts taken from the students' written transcripts:

"Most of our classmates said that our choice of *The Vantage Point* was admirable because it created anxiety and suspense."

"The dialogue and the scenes and sounds were so enthralling that students sat with rapt attention so much so when one group member attempted an explanation of the storyline, the others silenced him."

"One of the students who fell ill had an option of leaving the classroom but as the movie was screened he was mesmerized, and took rest in his seat."

"The class admitted that our group had the credit of selecting a postmodern movie with a journalistic technique of portrayal. They also congratulated our group in a special way for our remarkable editing."

Group 5: *How to Train your Dragon*

1. Observing the classroom performance

The video presentation of the title clip was shown followed by the presentation of the main movie. This was rounded off with a unique credit clip, that of the group members at work. They used the software: Windows Live Movie Maker, VLC Media Player, Adobe Photoshop, and MS Paint.

2. Transcribing the students' spoken language

Extracts from the students' conversation:

"It was on seeing the other presentations that we decided to choose an animation film, *How to Train your Dragon*."

"We first decided on *GI JOE* and then changed to *How to train your Dragon*. A lot of time was lost by the change. It was a tight schedule. Some finishing touches had to be done until the last moment, and the work was complete only a few seconds before we entered the class."

"The entire hostel marvelled at our industrious venture, and even more our cooperation."

"Our team members felt that we could have done a better job if we had not changed the movie at the last moment. Yet, we were happy with whatever work we did."

"By chance, all the members of this group were from the boys' hostel and so we could manage in spite of the change of mind at the eleventh hour."

"We are thankful to our English teacher for entrusting us with such an enterprising task."

3. Collecting the students' written transcripts

Extracts taken from the students' written transcripts:

“Though we decided on the film *GI JOE* at the outset, seeing the excellent presentations, week after week, we changed our idea at the last moment, and chose, *How to Train your Dragon*. Unfortunately, considerable time was lost but we were not disheartened. We delegated the work among ourselves and started working on the film at 8 pm the previous day of the presentation!”

4. Discussion

This paper is inspired by the positive response of the students while doing the activity “Screening an Edited Film.” When it was first conducted in 2010-2011, it was highly successful and the teacher-researcher thought she was lucky to have a batch of students with good team skills. Later she realized that the activity worked well because of the students’ active involvement. The above-mentioned activity gave students plenty of opportunities for interaction, discussion and collaborative team work. This is in keeping with James’s (2015) suggestion of the six elements required while designing and implementing learning activities that involve student engagement: Make it meaningful, Foster a sense of competence, Provide autonomy support, Embrace collaborative learning, Establish positive teacher-student relationships, Promote mastery orientations.

It is true that the presenting group and the listening groups in the class acquired the four skills side by side as the skills are interlinked in any language activity. For example, the students acquired listening skills when they played and replayed the movie several times to reduce its length. Again, when the edited movie was screened in the class, they got input for listening. They also practised speaking skills while rehearsing and presenting the video in the class. Moreover, when they watched the movie with the subtitles on, they enhanced their reading skills. Yet again, to write the written transcripts, they read the reviews of the movie from the Internet several times and thus had further practice of the reading skill. They also practised their writing skills when they were answering the questionnaire given by the teacher. Thus, the film activity assisted them in enhancing the LSRW skills though there is no arbitrarily attempt to teach the skills. The transcripts given here prove that there was a considerable spoken and written output. MacKnight (1983) ascertains that the video enables the students “to experience authentic language in a controlled environment.” They develop all the skills side by side as it is impossible to bring in a rigid division between them. Listening and speaking skills are more developed than reading and writing in this activity.

After the presentation, the teacher collected feedback, a few extracts of which are included here with some minor corrections:

An extract from the report of Group 1:

“The first person to thank is of course our English Madam for encouraging us to work on this different concept! Thanks a bunch Ma’am! We learned many things, not only technically, but also how to manage a team, how to be dedicated to the work we do, how to organize our ideas and put them into action effectively etc. We learnt a ton during this whole journey!!! Looking forward to a similar project next semester too, Ma’am! ☺ (sic).”

An SMS from Group 2:

“Good afternoon Ma’am. This is Prasanna here, Ma’am. . . Hope you liked the show today in class . . . *Baby’s Day Out* ☺ Thank you so much Ma’am for giving us this beautiful opportunity ☺ looking forward to more interesting tasks like this one, Ma’am ☺ ☺ ☺ Thank you, Ma’am ☺ (sic).”

Group 3:

“The activity had a positive impact on our team. We worked in unison to develop the presentation. Our video editing skills were tested by this constructive activity (sic).”

What was derived from the feedback was that even without intending to teach the students the video editing skills, they learned those by practice, or, through active involvement in the activity. The groups were highly engaged in the activity, and even more than that, the groups that finished their presentation helped the other groups to present their task. There was an overall involvement in the activity thereby proving that they had acquired the elements of active language learning. It is no exaggeration to say that sometimes the classes outperformed the teacher’s expectations by their total involvement in the task. Though the teacher anticipated only a simple editing task like stopping, playing and fast forwarding the movie, the students went beyond the expectations and came up with a creative video presentation with a title clip and a credit clip showcasing their imagination. This addition was their own idea not requested to by the teacher. The title clip and the credit clip also portrayed their struggle and satisfaction while editing the movie. The title clip and the credit clip showed the students’ sincere involvement in the task. Keddie (2014) suggests that creating a film presentation by students is “a great way to motivate students” and enhance their “creativity, interaction and learning.” The teacher’s enthusiasm is required for success of the activity.

Graham (2013) provides a list to show that video is useful in the ELT classroom because: it is motivating; it can be relevant; it can be used at different levels; it is easy to use being low tech; it generates real inter-student communication; and it is a great activity for homework.

At this juncture, there is possibility for a natural query: “Should movies be introduced in an ESP classroom?” An engineer only needs to know how to read a journal article, listen to lectures, take notes, etc. Interestingly, Kennedy (1983) points out that the purpose of an ESP programme is to enable students to adapt themselves to real-life situations. This can be made

possible only by introducing videos in the classroom that would motivate them to get involved in the activities and participate in them actively and thus improve their 'social' skills. When films are shown in the class, the students are excited and naturally get into the habit of watching them, a practice that would provide a significant input of language skills and enable the students to become autonomous learners.

5. Limitations of the study and future implications of the research

The above-mentioned activity was successful in one particular class in one particular year. Only 5 English periods were utilized for this activity though the groups spent several hours other than the English periods to listen to movies, decide which movie to work on, and edit the movie. To spend many hours outside the classroom for an English activity is not practical in an engineering scenario. The teacher-researcher reflected on the reason why it was successful in one class and found out that it was because of the particular kind of activity given to them, and also their active involvement during the editing process. Similar research can be carried out to see whether the involvement of the students in other activities would produce the same result and lead to an active language learning experience. Further conclusions can be drawn only after repeated experiments in similar classroom settings, and also after similar experiments in different classes with the same activity and other activities too. As already stated, not much research has been done in the area of Active Student-Involvement in ELT; so, there is scope for future studies in the field.

6. Conclusion

The study was to investigate students' active involvement in classroom activities and to find out whether a film activity can enhance the development of LSRW skills. As already stated, I use the term 'Active Student-Involvement' to refer to the active involvement of the students in the activities of the classroom. The activity explicated here is "Screening an Edited Film," where students are active in groups to present edited movies. The data collected by classroom observation and students' spoken and written transcripts proved that they had several opportunities to practise their LSRW skills. The research analysis and discussion show that editing and presenting the task provided a rich input and output of the language skills. Feedback received stated clearly that the students also enjoyed the video classes because they were totally involved in the activity. The video is an engaging tool to make language classes relevant that leads to the development of their LSRW skills. Thus, when teachers motivate

‘Active Student-Involvement’ in video and film activities, it would turn out to be an effective language learning experience.

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