The Interdependency of Context, Comfort, Critical Thinking, and Discourse: Using Videos in the EFL Classroom

Takushoku University
International University of Japan
Asia University

Tomoyuki Koike
Dawn Paullin
Mary Sandkamp

I. Introduction

The value of using videos in language classrooms is not a secret to many EFL instructors around the world. A recent Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) survey of its US members showed that many ESL instructors use videos in their classrooms (Stempleski, 1995). In Asia University’s (AU’s) Center for English Language Education (CELE) eleven-year history, many teachers have successfully used videos in their classrooms, making them an essential part of their Freshman English (FE) curricula and planning communicative activities around the content of the videos (Karn, 1995; Passero, 1996; Forster, 1997; Matsuta, 1998). One expert in the field of ESL video use listed the benefits of authentic videos as presenting real language, providing an authentic look at culture, giving students practice in producing videos, and motivating learners (Stempleski & Arcario, 1995). Video-based ESL and EFL researchers further advise teachers to use videos actively in their classrooms to encourage and spark communication among students and between the teacher and students about the videos’ content (Longergun, 1984; Stoller, 1995). To make videos jump off the screen and into the
The interdependency of Context, Comfort, Critical Thinking, and Discourse: Using Videos in the EFL Classroom


In this paper, we first discuss an EFL lecturer's Japanese educational experiences with one-dimensional grammar translation curricula. Then, we present a multi-dimensional framework, which incorporates video and the three Cs of context, comfort, and critical thinking within a framework.

II. On English-Language Education in Japan

My English-language learning experience in the Japanese system lacked meaning. In my eleven years of EFL study in Japan, I did not gain any communication skills, only a flat, and grammar-translation-based view of English. After years of studying EFL only to pass the university entrance examination, I didn't have real-life speaking skills; my primary focus was on memorizing random, unconnected grammatical structures and sentences, a distorted one-dimensional process. Now, after 23 years of studying English, I conclude that curriculum modifications are needed in Japan's second-language classrooms, specifically at the secondary and tertiary level. Active use of videos by EFL might help the communication deficit in many Japanese classrooms and change the language education system into a multi-dimensional approach to teaching and to learning English.

(T. Koike, personal communication, October 3, 1999.)

III. A Multidimensional Approach

In Koike's classes, students did not practice real-life communication skills; Koike did not hear, see, or listen to practical English dialogue. In the following three sections, we will describe one possible way to restructure English-language education in Japan to give students in Koike's
situation meaningful and real-life language study. We will begin with a
definition of the three Cs and examples of using videos to meet seven learn-
ing objectives. Finally, we will explain how Koike’s use of our
multidimensional approach increases discourse and learning in his univer-
sity EFL classrooms.

IV. Context: The First Step to Increase Classroom Discourse

It is obvious that knowledge of lexical meaning is not sufficient to
produce a correct form. Students need to have cultural knowledge
in order to speak in a situationally appropriate register, to under-
stand regional dialects, to make and understand allusions, and to
correctly identify tone and intention. These points argue strongly for
the presentation of vocabulary in an authentic linguistic and cultur-
al context (Spinelli and Sisken cited in Heusinkveld, 1997).

In relation to language teaching and video use, we define context in two
ways: culturally and linguistically. Cultural context refers to the envi-
ronmental and social factors surrounding language such as the setting,
verbal and nonverbal communication styles, behavioral rules, norms, val-
ues, attitudes, and beliefs. About the relationship between language and
culture, one researcher in the field of culture states, “Communication
occurs in a cultural context, and knowledge of this context is essential for
fully and accurately decoding most messages.” (Seelye cited in Heusinkveld, 1997).

Videos provide a context for students to discover, analyze, and discuss
the cultural elements impacting language usage. Linguistic context con-
nects the words and grammatical structures presented in EFL textbooks
with real-life situations, giving meaning and life to the vocabulary and
grammar. In the following examples, we will explain how popular videos
The Interdependency of Context, Comfort, Critical Thinking, and Discourse: Using Videos in the EFL Classroom

can be teaching tools and create a context to make a strong communicative foundation in Japanese EFL classrooms.

**Cultural Context**

**Objective one: videos encourage students to think in a different cultural paradigm**

Paulin begins each school year by creating a cultural context. The combination of showing clips of American classrooms from two films—*Dead Poet’s Society* (1990) and *Stand and Deliver* (1988) and assigning a double entry journal (Knight, 1994) encourages students to think in a different cultural paradigm. These films show two very different classrooms in the United States—one private boy’s school and one inner-city urban high school. The purpose of showing these two films at the beginning of the school year is threefold: to show students the teacher’s background with education, to demonstrate two different examples of western-style teaching, and to compare the students' own experiences with the classrooms shown in the videos. When students watch these two brief clips, they work on the double entry journal (Knight, 1994). In this style of journal, students take movie notes on one-half of the journal page during video-viewing time. The other half of the journal page is for examining, inferencing, and making assumptions, which is due later as homework. This springboard video activity introduces a different style of teaching to the students, and takes the students into a different cultural paradigm related to education.

**Linguistic Context**

**Objective two: videos increase students’ grammar skills**

Concerning the linguistic element of context, Sandkamp and Koike planned an activity to make the grammatical structures in the invitations chapter of the EFL textbook *English Firsthand* (Helgesen, Brown, &
Mandeville, 1999) come alive by playing a short clip from the video *Sleepless in Seattle* (1997). For the pre-viewing, schema-building activity, the teacher asks students to review and scan the textbook for different ways of making and accepting invitations. For the video-viewing activity, students watch a section of the video in which Tom Hanks calls a friend and asks her on a date. The teacher provides a transcript, which includes Hank's discourse. Students predict and write the friend's response to the invitation. Finally, they practice the dialogue, write their own invitation dialogue, and present it to the class. This activity exposes students to a real-life context, gives them an opportunity to practice the functions in the text and allows them to create their own original responses.

**Objective three: videos increase students' vocabulary and pronunciation skills**

Seventy percent of the Asia University Freshman English students express a desire to improve their speaking skills. The two most frequently cited reasons for wanting to improve their speaking skills are for work and travel (Morrison & Paullin, 1997). To work in an international company and use English on the job, many students are required to take the TOEFL test. Videos give TOEFL study a real-life context. One section of the TOEFL test focuses on listening comprehension and contains English conversations full of idioms and phrasal verbs. Paullin asks students to watch a video of their choice on a weekly basis with the subtitles covered to improve their vocabulary and communication skills.

For this project, students guess their videos' dialogues from watching only the pictures, guess the pictures from only listening to the dialogues, guess one-half of the picture from looking at the other half of their screens, compare their movie with one of the movies they watched in their past, analyze aspects of culture presented in their videos, conduct character analyses, list words already known as well as new words and phrases, find connections between the videos and their own lives, and
The Interdependency of Context, Comfort, Critical Thinking, and Discourse: Using Videos in the EFL Classroom

examine the main conflicts in the videos.

V. Comfort: The Second Step to Increase Classroom Discourse

"Traditionally, education has poured the content into the student. Affective education draws it out of the student. It recognizes that anyone who teaches is automatically dealing with students' feelings, which are always present. These are bound to affect learning and should be put to use in teaching." (Moskowitz, 1978, p. 12)

The word affective filter echoes throughout language curriculum planning tables and EFL textbook review sessions. Video pedagogy can decrease anxiety levels in a language classroom, increase students' confidence in their language ability, and provide a comfortable classroom atmosphere necessary for students to speak.

Objective four: videos lower affective filters

Koike and Sandkamp have planned an activity built around the restaurant scene from the video Mrs. Doubtfire (1996). This clip functions to remove classroom tension and stress, creating an energetic, positive environment. In this comical scene, Robin Williams dresses up as a woman. Throughout the scene, he changes back and forth between Mrs. Doubtfire and his real identity. For this activity, the video monitor is placed in the middle of the classroom. One-half of the students watch this brief scene, describe it and act out the characters' actions, facial expressions, and body language while the other half of the students listen to the video and guess what is happening in the scene. For this activity, the teacher could provide Japanese translation to make beginning and intermediate-level students feel at ease in expressing their descriptions of the videos. Williams' humor helped Sandkamp turn her classroom into a theater, cre-
ating a comedy-like atmosphere, which flowed over into her subsequent classes throughout the year.

VI. Critical Thinking: The Third Step to Classroom Discourse

“To be educated is to know what depths await us underneath the surface of things, whatever those things may be. To shield students from life’s perplexities is to leave them at the mercy of their ignorance and to deny them the wonder that is the basis of everything we know.” (Thomas, 1985, p. 222)

One of the Center for English Language Education’s three main goals is to teach students critical-thinking and language-learning skills (Morrison & Paullin, 1997). We have successfully used videos along with critical-thinking activities at the beginning and false-beginning levels. For this paper, we define critical thinking as careful questioning about our lives, our relationships to others and our places in the world.

Among educators, critical thinking has many different definitions. Some ESL and EFL researchers say it is the simulation of analytical and evaluative processes of the mind (Paul cited in Reid, 1998). EFL instructors also give reasons for teaching critical-thinking skills, such as to develop metacognitive awareness (Reid), to teach higher-level reading skills (Carrell cited in Reid, 1987), and to develop a community of thinkers (Chamot cited in Reid, 1950). One researcher in the field of EFL education lists two additional reasons for Japanese students to learn critical thinking skills: when students use the internet they need truth detectors and when students take the TOEFL test they need elements of reasoning in the English language (Davidson, 1998). Videos help connect classroom content to students’ lives, giving textbooks real-life meaning and leaving
students motivated to communicate in English.

**Objective five: videos prompt students to think critically about social issues**

"Movies challenge us to think—and to respond—to important problems we face in the world today...Learning to “read” and understand “words” means learning to “read” and understand the world...” (Shea, p.1, 1995).

In a series of steps to increase critical-thinking skills, Sandkamp and Koike planned a natural disaster activity in which the teacher shows a clip from a current news interview (CBS news, 1999) about Hurricane Floyd and use pictures from the Taiwan earthquake. Through the use of these pictures and video clip about the hurricane, students cognitively enter into another culture. Next, students connect this theme with their own lives and think seriously about important issues, such as social responsibility and international collaboration.

As preparation for this video scene, students work in groups, look at the newspaper pictures and brainstorm words and phrases. Then they discuss their own and other’s experiences with natural disasters. Next, they watch the news interview, which is about an older couple whose business was nearly destroyed by the hurricane. The scene visually depicts the flooding damage and the distress the couple feels over losing their life’s savings and possessions. The teacher pauses the video when necessary to explain slang terms and idioms used in the scene. After the video, students predict their actions if a similar situation were to occur in Japan. Finally, they discuss Japan’s duty or responsibility when natural disasters occur in Asia and in other parts of the world. In this other dimension, students learn not only language, but also critical-thinking skills about social issues.
Objective six: videos teach self-evaluation

Self-evaluation is one language-learning strategy EFL teachers often ask students to practice (Reid; Carrol; Chamot). Self-evaluations can be used with videos to increase students' critical-thinking and communication skills. Paullin has asked her students to conduct self-evaluations as part of an English dialogue-acting assignment. Students first design, write, and act out dialogues about various themes presented in EFL textbooks. In Paullin's class, students have acted out telephone dialogues, health-club dialogues, and family Christmas party dialogues while being videotaped. A few days after the videotaping, students watch their dialogue and complete a video self-evaluation form. Seeing themselves speak English on video helps students to think about their own language-learning skills and motivates them to plan and develop self-designed language-learning strategies.

Objective seven: videos empower students to learn about and share their own culture.

As part of a unit on Intercultural Communications (Meares, 1997), Paullin asks her International Relations (IR) students to create a classroom culture video, describing visible and invisible aspects of Japanese culture. To begin this activity, students read a brochure from one famous Japanese culture festival in the US, detailing several visible aspects of Japanese culture (Missouri Botanical Garden brochure, 1999). Next, in pairs, students brainstorm various examples of visible and invisible Japanese culture. Students then decide on two topics to summarize—one topic about visible Japanese culture and one about invisible Japanese culture. For visible culture the IR students videotaped the traditional Japanese tea ceremony, modern Japanese youth fashion, and rush-hour commutes with some students filming live from crowded morning trains. Some of the invisible parts of Japanese culture researched and coined by students for this assignment
are the Japanese *I'm Sorry* phrases and the *English Assumption* (assumptions that all foreigners do not understand Japanese). This activity works well for nudging students to understand and to evaluate their own culture, as well as drawing out students' imaginations.

**VII. The Effects of our Multidimensional Approach**

Koike’s dissatisfaction with the grammar-translation method of language instruction, a method widely used throughout Japan, has motivated him to utilize our multidimensional video approach to teaching English. The effectiveness of video is evident in the feedback Koike received from students in his English classes in which he used video. At the end of the school term, Koike distributed a questionnaire. Students said the video clips made them realize for the first time the close relationship between language and culture. Other students mentioned that watching videos made learning English exciting and motivated them to speak in class. Most of the students said they were very satisfied with the use of videos in the classroom and preferred this type of classroom procedure.

As a non-native instructor of English, video has enabled him to bring cultural and linguistic contexts into the classroom, creating an energetic atmosphere that lowers students' affective filters. Through incorporating global, cultural, and social issues into the classroom, he has also led students to develop their critical-thinking skills.

**VIII. Conclusion**

As we said in the introduction, the value of videos is not a secret to many educators. Within our multidimensional framework, we have presented how videos provide linguistic and cultural context, make the classroom more comfortable, and help students and teachers to think critically about
the condition of being human. Videos and the three Cs along with the following seven learning objectives can ignite students' imaginations and interest in studying English and bring the world into their classrooms.

1. to encourage students to think in a different cultural paradigm
2. to increase students' grammar skills
3. to increase students' vocabulary and pronunciation skills
4. to lower students' affective filters
5. to prompt students to think critically about social issues
6. to teach students self-evaluation
7. to empower students to learn about and share their own culture.

We hope that through this framework native and non-native English-language educators can successively incorporate our multidimensional approach of the three Cs (Context, Comfort and Critical Thinking), the seven learning objectives and the use of video in their classrooms and subsequently increase classroom discourse and English-language learning in Japan.
The Interdependency of Context, Comfort, Critical Thinking, and Discourse: Using Videos in the EFL Classroom

REFERENCES


University Freshman English program. ELERI Journal, 5, pp. 130-143.
The Interdependency of Context, Comfort, Critical Thinking, and Discourse: Using Videos in the EFL Classroom

Abstract

The Interdependency of Context, Comfort, Critical Thinking, and Discourse: Using Videos in the EFL Classroom

Tomoyuki KOIKE
Dawn PAULLIN
Mary SANDKAMP

Videos serve as a framework for structuring context, comfort, and critical thinking (the three Cs) in the EFL classroom. By using videos to facilitate the three Cs, EFL teachers can bridge the gap between theory and practice in many programs and increase classroom discourse. When EFL teachers and students analyze the discourse presented in popular videos and take part in various pre- and post-viewing activities, effective EFL instruction can occur. This paper defines and sets criteria for context, comfort, and critical thinking as well as giving examples of various video clips from popular movies, which are used with the three Cs to teach EFL.