



## **CREATING AN AUTHENTIC LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

**Larisa Nikitina**

Lecturer, Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning,  
University Malaysia, Sabah, Malaysia,  
*larisa.nikitina@gmail.com*

Theatrical activities are widely used by language educators to promote and facilitate language learning. Involving students in production of their own video or a short movie in the target language allows a seamless fusion of language learning, art, and popular culture. The activity is also conducive for creating an authentic learning situation where the real world becomes a part of the educational experience and necessitates the use of an authentic language by the learners. This article describes a video project carried out by Russian language learners at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). It examines how the work on the project created and supported authenticity of the learning experience. Though the article focuses on the video project done in the context of language learning and teaching this activity could be successfully implemented in teaching various subjects at both secondary and tertiary levels.

Key Words: language teaching, student-produced video, authentic learning situation, Malaysia

### **INTRODUCTION**

Theatrical activities, such as role play, drama production, improvisations, skits based on folk tales and fairy tales have been a ubiquitous feature in the language classroom. This could be due to a fact that “[i]n both theatre and language learning communication is a principal component” (Schultz and Heinigk, 2002, p.235). Though theatrical activities have been widely used for language teaching and learning, for the most part, language learners have been staging dramas from already written scripts in the target language. Involving students in creating their own scripts and producing their own video opens up a venue for practicing constructivist approach to teaching, which has been associated with advanced pedagogy (Semel and Sadovnik, 1999). Among the key constructivist assumptions is a demand for authenticity of a learning experience (Loyens et al., 2007).

In the context of foreign language pedagogy, the need for authenticity is well recognized. The dominant approach to language teaching – the communicative method -- demands that the use of ‘real life’ language is promoted in the classroom. In order for the real world language to emerge there is a need to create authentic learning situations. As Sildus (2006) observes, “[R]eal life language always happens in a context, and it would be logical to design classroom activities to resemble real language use” (p.55). The current paper describes one such activity, which is a video project carried out by learners of the Russian language at University Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The objectives of this study are:

- (1) to examine how the video project helped create and support authenticity of the learning experience;
- (2) to explore how the video project helped promote the use of a real world language by the students.

### **Literature Review**

#### *Benefits of Using Theatrical Activities in Language Learning and Teaching*

Various theatrical activities can be employed in the language classroom ranging from a simple situational role play to a full scale theatre production (Dodson, 2000). These activities can help obtaining “multiple yet distinctive learning objectives” in language teaching and learning (Schultz and Heinigk, 2002, p.235). The benefits of using drama in language teaching and learning are numerous. It has been observed that involving language learners in drama production stimulates development of the analytical skills and creativity (Schultz and Heinigk, 2002), it promotes the students’ ownership of their learning (Moody, 2002), and introduces in the language classroom “countless different dimensions that they [the students] wouldn’t otherwise be likely to be exposed to in the same hands-on context” (Lys et al., 2002, p. 223). Among these numerous “different dimensions” is that drama production can be a means of creating and maintaining an authentic learning environment.

The latest developments in digital technologies have widened a spectrum of theatrical activities that could be carried out in the language classroom. Involving students in producing their own digital video is a viable option to stimulate authentic communication in the target language (Gareis, 2000), to enhance the vocabulary retention (Sildus, 2006), to induce a more complex thinking in the target language (Carney and Foss, 2008), and to promote the development of various types of literacies (Meeks and Ilyasova, 2003).

#### *Authentic Ecology of a Video Project*

Theatre and art are inalienable parts of human existence. We live in a “dramatized society” where “drama surrounds us, through the pervasive televised and cinematic performances that we view on our screens ... to the roles in society that we assume on the streets” (Hornbrook, 1998; Moody, 2002, p. 140). A fusion of video making and language teaching and learning has a potential to establish a link between the university auditorium and the world outside of the classroom. Through producing and filming their own video the students become able to amalgamate a rich reality beyond the campus into their educational experiences. Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves (2003) have distinguished ten elements that point to authenticity of a learning situation. They are: (1) real world relevance, (2) ill-defined nature of the learning task, (3) incorporation into the activity of several complex tasks that require a sustained period of time to be fulfilled, (4) opportunity for the students to explore the task from different perspectives, (5) opportunity to collaborate, (6) opportunity to reflect, (7) activities can be integrated across different subjects, (8) assessment is seamlessly integrated with the task, (9) outcome of the activity is a polished product, and (10) diversity of outcomes is possible.

How can a video project promote an authentic learning situation? Evidently, creating and filming a drama or a short movie in the target language is an ‘ill-defined’ and complex task which takes a certain period of time to complete; the outcome of the activity is a ‘polished product’. Through the creative process ample opportunities arise for the students to collaborate on the task, to reflect on their learning, and to explore the task from different perspectives. The learners have to deal with multiple responsibilities, such as writing the script, preparing physical props, acting, choosing suitable locations to shoot the video, etc., which also promotes the learners’ ownership of their learning.

It is not mandatory that a learning experience has each and every of the above-mentioned features to qualify as authentic. Moreover, Petraglia (1998) argues that authenticity can not be designed in advance and the requirements for authenticity cannot be singled out and listed. However, in a rich and meaningful learning environment where the students work on a project that has real world relevance many of these elements would transpire in the course of the project implementation. As Barab, Squire, and Dueber (2000) point out, “authenticity is not an objective feature of any one component in isolation” as it comes into existence through a constant dynamic interaction between the learners, the task and the environment and “manifests itself in the flow” (p.38). To add to a rich potential of a video project, the students get a chance “to interpret their world” (Moody, 2002, p. 140), to define themselves as human beings and to make sense of their experiences (Hornbrook, 1998).

## **METHOD**

### **Background and Participants**

Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) is a big public university located in Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah state in Malaysia. Study of a foreign language, such as Arabic, French, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish is compulsory for the students who are proficient in the English language and had obtained Bands 4, 5, and 6 of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) prior to the admission to the university.

The video project was carried out with a class of 37 Russian language learners. The students had been learning Russian for four semesters and had acquired a sufficient knowledge of the language to be able to create their own scenarios and write the video scripts. All participants in this project were below 26 years of age. There were both male and female students in the class. They represented various ethnic groups living in Malaysia, such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, Bidayuh, Kadazan-Dusun, and Iban. The majority of the students were majoring in science and engineering subjects.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data for this study included the artifacts (i.e., the student-produced videos and work-in-progress reports), the researcher's own observations of the students' team work, discussions and consultations with the students at various stages of the project implementation. The study employed interpretive research paradigm as described by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007).

## **THE PROJECT**

### **Implementation of the Video Project**

The students worked on their videos in small groups of 4-6 persons; total 8 videos were produced. The work on the project lasted for 12 weeks. The video presentations were done in the class during the last two weeks of the semester (i.e., weeks 13 and 14). The students were informed how their videos would be evaluated and were given an evaluation scale in the beginning of the project implementation. The scale included marks for language use, content, creativity, and team work. Each group was required to prepare a work-in-progress report that must be submitted to the lecturer upon the completion of the project. In the reports, the students were asked provide information about various stages of the project implementation (e.g., the dates they met for discussions, how they separated the tasks, how they shared the responsibilities, etc.). Also, they were required to list the problems they had encountered -- and how they had solved

these problems-- and to note down anything related to the project they considered important or worth mentioning. These reports allowed the instructor to have additional insights into the team effort.

To ensure solid learning outcomes the instructor advised the learners that (1) the video must be in the target language and understandable to their audience, (2) it must include topics and vocabulary from the course syllabi from Level 1 to Level 4, (3) the video must contain role-play, and (4) all the group members must appear and speak in the video. For the rest of the project, the students were given a complete freedom to make their own decisions. Thus, they formed their own groups, determined the format of their video and its genre, developed the storyline, etc. The students were encouraged to be brave, creative, and bold. They could seek advice from the instructor at any stage of the video production.

## **STUDENT-PRODUCED VIDEOS**

### **Synopses of the Videos**

The titles of the videos produced by the students are: “Vkusno!” (“It’s Tasty!”), “Travel and Living: Kundasang”, “Old Friends”, “My First Day at the University”, “Da-Da, Nyet-Nyet” (“Yes-Yes, No-No”), “Show Time”, “Kidnapping”, and “Vlad”. The videos represent various genres. For example, “Vkusno!” is a TV cooking show where two teams of students prepare several dishes. A judge in the ‘show’ evaluates the results of the teams’ effort and gives comments about the dishes. Another video, “Travel and Living: Kundasang” is a documentary-cum-talk-show video. It introduces to the viewers a popular tourist spot in Sabah which is called Kundasang.

The video “Old Friends” is a drama. In the students’ own words, it is “about old friends coming together after many years apart and recalling the happy times they had together, only to realize times have changed and they could never regain what they had experienced”. In the video, the students act themselves in the year 2030, when they visit Sabah and come to the university campus. Other videos that reflect the learners’ reality of being university students are “My First Day at the University”, “Da-Da, Nyet-Nyet”, “Show Time”, and “Kidnapping”. As the title of the video “My First Day at the University” indicates, it is a story about a student’s very first encounter with life in the campus. The main hero arrives at the Kota Kinabalu airport, takes taxi to the university, finds his hostel, meets his roommate, and makes new friends. Another video, “Da-Da, Nyet-Nyet” is a humorous reminder of what a student should and should not do. The video first shows some examples of undesirable actions by a student, such as oversleeping, being late for classes, chatting with the classmates instead of listening to the lecturer, daydreaming in the class instead of concentrating on

the task, etc. In the scenes that follow, these wrong actions are corrected and a proper behaviour is demonstrated.

The video “Show Time” is about a group of university students whose dream is to become rock stars. They form a rock band, practice a lot, join a rock group contest, win it, and eventually realize their dream. Their path to success is not problem-free as they encounter several failures and disappointments. The video “Kidnapping” tells a tale of a university student who is unhappy to stay in the dormitory. She wants to rent a room in town but the money allowance that her rich but stingy sister gives her is too small. One day, the heroine and her friend devise a plan to carry out a mock kidnapping. Unfortunately, the plan goes awry and the heroine is killed by her kidnapper. The elder sister is left to live a life filled with regrets and remorse. Finally, the video “Vlad” is a fairy tale about a young man who wants to marry a girl he loves. She gives him a difficult task to fulfill before she would agree to become his wife. The task sets the hero on a long journey.

### **How the Student Video Can Promote Authenticity of the Learning Situation**

First of all, as the synopses attest, the videos have real life relevance because they reflect or incorporate some parts of the learners’ experiences as UMS students. Even the videos do not explicitly describe a ‘student’s life’ were filmed in the campus or on the locations familiar to everyone in the class. The authenticity of the cooking show “Vkusno!” and the documentary “Travel and Living: Kundasang” is supported by a fact that the genres are rooted in the modern life reality of living in a media rich environment. Secondly, while developing the storylines and planning the production of the videos the students had an ample opportunity to reflect not only on the material they had learned during the language program but also to consider how to produce a ‘polished’ end product, which Herrington et al. (2003) identified as an ultimate outcome of an authentic learning experience. Further, the students needed to approach the task from various perspectives. They had to attend not only to the artistic aspect of the video making but also be efficient managers of their resources and time. As one team wrote in their report, they had to scale down the original plan for the video which included traveling to other parts of Malaysia because they realized that they would need considerable financial resources as well as an ample time at their disposal to accomplish this ambitious project.

A fact that the students presented their videos in the classroom and shared the outcome of their learning with the classmates enhanced the authenticity of the learning experience as pointed out by Jonassen (2000). The audience was enthusiastic and supportive; it often rewarded the ‘film makers’ by a loud

applause in the end of the video presentation. Table 1 lists and elaborates on the other features of the authenticity of the learning experience.

**Table 1. Elements of an Authentic Learning Situation in the Video Project**

<i>Elements of authentic learning situation</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Elaboration</i>
The task is ill-defined	There were no pre-designed teaching aids or materials to guide the work on the project.	The students had to separate the project into several stages; they needed to plan each stage of the project implementation. The teams encountered various unexpected problems while shooting the video ( <i>eg.</i> , technical problems, software incompatibility, etc).
Several complex tasks are incorporated in one project	The students had to attend to the linguistic, artistic, and technical aspects of the video project.	The students developed their video scripts and wrote the conversations in Russian. They memorized the lines before acting in front of the camera. To shoot the video, they needed to manage the time, prepare the equipment and physical props, identify suitable locations, etc.
Opportunity to collaborate	The students had to share the responsibilities and tasks between themselves equally.	Every team member contributed to the development of the storyline, writing the conversations, filming and editing of the video, writing the report. This promoted team work and collaboration between the group members.
Assessment is integrated within the task	Various aspects were evaluated.	The evaluation scheme was given to the students before the project began. The scheme included marks for an appropriate language use, video content, team work, and creativity.
Diversity of learning outcomes is possible	Linguistic and non-linguistic learning outcomes were achieved.	As the students reported, they had not only polished the language skills but also learned to work as a group, to communicate, to persevere in their task, to manage their time, to be responsible. Some students said they gained knowledge that they could use in the future, such as working with the video editing software.

### **Language Use**

The filming of the video can begin only after the scripts are ready and well-rehearsed. In a sense, the video production could be described as placing of the “visual icing on the textual cake” (Goldfarb, 2002, p. 20). This notion is especially relevant for a video project carried out in the context of language learning and teaching. While working on the video scripts the students needed to decide what message they wanted to send to their audience and how to send

this message effectively. The decisions taken by the students were reflected in the contents of the video and the language they employed.

The learners' ability to convey the intended message to the viewers through linguistic means was a very important aspect of the video project. Sending a message successfully means that the recipients are able to understand the message. In order to achieve this, appropriate language must be employed. The instructor set two conditions regarding language use, namely, (1) the students must include in their video the topics they had learned during the language program, and (2) the narratives and conversations in the video must be understandable to the audience. As language educators know, the students often feel constrained in expressing themselves in the target language as eloquently as they could do in their mother tongue. Due to a limited knowledge of the target language the learners may be tempted to use a direct word-by-word translation from their mother tongue or they may want employ electronic translation devices or the translation software available on the Internet. These 'solutions' to the problem would not only result in an inferior linguistic output by the learners but also negate the aim of the project to develop the students language skills.

The quality of language production as demonstrated by an appropriate use of the vocabulary and the grammar structures, mood registers, socio-cultural responses, etc. was assigned the highest number of marks in the evaluation scheme, which helped achieving the desired linguistic outcome. However, the students needed to exercise a good judgment as to how to support the complex narratives in the videos with their somewhat limited linguistic means. This limitation dictated the choice of themes in the videos. The students often included the following topics from the course syllabi into their storylines: introducing themselves, meeting friends, traveling, staying in a hotel or hostel, asking and giving directions, telling the time, eating out, commenting on the weather, shopping, and going to the movies. These topics are closely connected to the students' life and experiences. Therefore, the situations depicted in the video necessitated the use of the real world language. To get a better understanding of how the students employed the knowledge of the Russian language in their videos, let us have a closer look at the opening and closing scenes of the video "My First Day at the University".

The video lasts 10 minutes 19 seconds, and consists of 6 scenes. In the first scene, the main character, ST, arrives at Kota Kinabalu airport.<sup>1</sup> He introduces himself and makes several comments about his surroundings. An English translation of the opening passage could be

*Hello! My name is ST. I have just arrived in Kota Kinabalu from Penang where I was born and grew up. This is my first visit to this city. I am at*

*the airport. It is 2.30 pm and the weather is rather good today. Here is my suitcase. I have brought T-shirts, jeans, sport shoes, shirts, socks, and many books. Now I will take taxi to the campus.*

In this short passage, the students incorporated several topics from the course syllabi. Among them self-introduction, giving biographical details, telling the time, and commenting on the weather. Further, the main hero informed the viewers about his possessions (the contents of his suitcase), stated his destination, and the means of transportation.

The second scene in the video brings us to the campus where ST asks for directions to his hostel from one of the students. Asking for and giving directions is another topic learned during the language program that the students incorporated into their storyline. In the following scene, ST reaches the hostel, finds his room and meets his new roommate. They talk about facilities in the hostel. In the conversation, they use the vocabulary from the course synopsis, such as furniture items, amenities, etc.

In scene 4, ST receives a call from his friend, WJ, who hails from the same town and who studies at UMS. WJ invites ST to see a movie together. Here, the students employed linguistic structures to make invitations and used appropriate socio-cultural responses to accept, refuse or re-negotiate the invitation. In the next scene, ST and his roommate meet WJ and WJ's friend at the bus stop. The friends reach the movie theatre and contemplate which movie they would like to see while looking at various movie posters. The vocabulary they use is related to movie genres and one's likes and dislikes. They cannot agree because their tastes are different. In the end, one of the characters declares that we will go and see the movie he likes even if the others do not follow him. In the final scene, which takes place in the cinema, the dialogue translated into English develops thus:

*ST: Wow!.. What a big cinema theatre!*

*M: Yes, this is the newest cinema in town, too.*

*WJ: Let's go and buy tickets.*

*ZB: What shall we see? Oh, here is a science fiction movie. I've heard that this movie is very interesting.*

*WJ: Yes, I heard about this movie too. It seems to be interesting.*

*ZB: Let's go and buy the tickets.*

*ST: Oh, no! I don't like science fiction movies. I want to see a musical...*

*ZB: But surely this movie is much more interesting than a musical!*

*M: I think, you are wrong. It must be a very boring film.*

*ZB: I don't care what you all say. I want to see this movie!*

Saying this, ZB exits from the camera view and leaves his friends surprised at his outburst. As this brief explanation of the video demonstrates, the students devised real life situations (they even developed a minor argument) and supported it with an authentic language.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Developing the learners' ability to use a real world language is a crucial element of any language program. Authenticity of language produced by the students must be promoted through and supported by authenticity of the learning context or situation. Though Petraglia (1998) argued that a learning experience cannot be pre-authenticated, some educators contend that "pre-authentication" is possible and that it involves creating an environment that will eventually lead up to authentic learning (Stansfield and Connolly, 2009, p.47). Engaging language learners in a video project in the target language may offer such an opportunity.

In the real world, people employ rather than practice their language skills (Gardner, 1994). In the video project described in this article, instead of devising 'make believe' situations where the students practice speaking Russian in the classroom, the instructor asked a group of learners to make their own video in the target language. This gave the students an opportunity to create their own learning contexts and devise their own learning situations. In their videos, the students conveyed to their peers something that was relevant to them as a group of people, something that could be shared with their peers and communicated to the teacher. For example, the students were learning about their new university and making new friends ("My First Day in the University"), they explored the environs of the place where they live and study ("Travel and Living: Kundasang"); they joined efforts to realize their dreams ("Showtime"), cooked a meal together ("Vkusno!"), grumbled about their room in the hostel ("Kidnapping") or imagined what they would become in the future ("Old Friends"). A fact that the whole class watched the videos together and anyone could ask questions before or after the presentation enhanced the authenticity of the learning experience, as was observed in several previous research studies (Burn and Reed, 1999; Jonassen, 2000; Kearney and Schuck, 2006).

To reflect the richness of real life experiences, the students demonstrated a more complex discourse in their videos than they would be able to attain in the classroom performing role play. For example, in the videos the students combined narratives and conversations. Furthermore, they supported the storylines with the images familiar to everyone in the audience, such as the university campus, a canteen, a nearby shopping mall, the airport, etc. They selected music and songs to create a suitable atmosphere for an episode or a scene, and infused elements of humour into the narratives. Creating their own scenarios gave the students opportunities to “think, debate, and act” (Goldfarb, 2002, pp. 73–74) and to “reflect on their learning both individually and socially” (Herrington et al., 2003, 10 Characteristics of Authentic Activities section, para.7). In their videos, the students moralized about what is right and what is wrong (“Da-Da, Nyet-Nyet”), posed serious life questions (“Kidnapping”); they looked at their present reality from a different angle and realized how precious this reality and their friendship were (“Old Friends”).

An important finding of this study that could endorse the video making activity as a means to create an authentic learning experience in the foreign language classroom is that the project brought forward a diversity of learning outcomes, both linguistic and non-linguistic. From the linguistic perspective, the students reported that they were learning Russian more actively and effectively compared to the previous semesters. This is because they had more opportunities to use the language when they were writing the script, rehearsed their lines and acted out the scenes. Several students said that they felt more confident to speak Russian and that they got to know “what to say in various situations”. There were multiple non-linguistic learning outcomes as well. Among them could be mentioned enhancing one’s social aptitude and ‘life skills’. For example, some students reported that they had learned how to be a useful, reliable, and efficient team member while others mentioned that they had learned about tolerance, responsibility, perseverance (“how to never give up”), and the importance of time management. One of the unexpected learning outcomes was that the students reported a better knowledge of local culture, food, and the places of interest. Last but not least, many students said that they had fun while working on the project and enjoyed making the video despite a fact that the task was much more challenging and time consuming compared to the written assignments done in the previous semesters.

To conclude, the benefits to be reaped from involving language learners in producing their own video in the target language are numerous and diverse. Among them, as the current paper argued, is an enhanced authenticity of a learning experience that in turn stimulates the use of a real world language by

the students. Studies on student-produced digital video in the context of foreign language teaching and learning have been done in various educational settings and countries, including Japan (Carney and Foss, 2008), Hong Kong (Gardner, 1994), and Saudi Arabia (Yamak, 2008). However, there is a lack of such studies conducted in Malaysia. It is hoped that an approach to language teaching described in the present article could identify some possible vectors for developing language pedagogy in Malaysia.

#### Note

1. The students' full names are not disclosed in order to preserve their privacy.

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