

EXPLORATIONS

A Mini-Unit for Communicative Language Classes: Student Created Short Films

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This paper explores the use of movie-making as a tool for language learning, through informal action research cycles. The piece will describe a mini-unit in which students develop original short movies within a communicative English class, and it will reflect on the refinements made in the light of teacher observations. Naturally, these were classes where students were learning English. Therefore, the focus was not on producing films of a professional standard so much as using the movie-making process as an engaging way to learn and practice authentic English communication. Consequently, the mechanics of script writing, directing, or editing were not taught in detail. The activities in these lessons instead embraced a DIY ethic where students learned by observing and then mimicking the professionals' endeavors on the screen. However, classroom tasks were carefully structured to highlight the practical production processes and language features the students should reproduce to create successful work. Thus, the paper will also investigate a learning style biased more toward learning through action and observation than explicit teacher instruction.

To give some background, I was teaching a Media English course that focused on using English to produce media outputs rather than one that analyzed media artifacts. Hence, it was practical and communicative,

focusing on discussions and communicative activities. One area of media I had always been enthusiastic about was movies, and it seemed that my students were also interested in the format, as they often discussed movies in class. However, the media course had no specific movie section, even though it seemed like an ideal topic to stimulate student interest and provide a vast source of authentic communicative English.

There are many documented benefits of movie use in the classroom, including students' exposure to natural language in an appropriate cultural context. A study by Kaboocha (2016) found that by using movies, students could learn how proficient English speakers "initiate and sustain a conversational exchange, negotiate meaning, and nonverbal communication" (p. 254). Thus, movies can help students navigate the gulf between their experiences of English in the classroom and the English they encounter in real-life situations, with its wide variety of accents/dialects, pacing and colloquial expressions. Studies have shown that exposure to movies can increase student motivation and interest in L2 culture (Baratta & Jones, 2008; Kaiser, 2011; Zhang, 2013). Moreover, movies help students improve vocabulary, listening skills, and critical thinking as long as the films are paired with pedagogically sound tasks to encourage these abilities (Curtis, 2007; Goctu, 2017; Ismaili, 2013).

With these benefits in mind, I set out to create a film unit consisting of three mini-units. The first two sections were based

on film reviews, which taught students useful descriptive and colloquial vocabulary. The movie review sections practiced this lexis with discussions that promoted student autonomy by allowing learners to self-select content. The students enjoyed the activities and assimilated the language, which improved their communicative ability incrementally. For the third section, I wanted to focus on language production by creating a movie-related output. I experimented with various formats, such as movie trailers and "sweded" film versions (where students created a short, unedited, and comical take on an existing film). However, I felt these formats were not able to support and reinforce the learning of previous sections satisfactorily. The film reviews in sections one and two focused on narrative movies, whereas the trailers and the sweded versions are promotional tools and reinterpretations or parodies, respectively. Consequently, this final section did not allow students to practice the language and understanding gleaned from the film review sections as cumulatively as I wished.

The creation of original short movies with students seemed like a more natural conclusion to the unit. However, having no movie-making experience, I was unsure of what to teach the students. Nonetheless, an approach I had used for other topics was to have students learn from professionals in the given field. I would choose exemplary content within the desired format and guide learners to extract the features that made the example successful. The students then mimicked these effective verbal and non-verbal techniques to produce their own original work. However, it proved surprisingly difficult to find good examples of short movies to use as models for students. The films needed to be readily available and short, ideally with a maximum length of five to six minutes, as well as containing appropriate content. While many short films were freely available on YouTube, for example, the ones I found were either too

long or contained unsuitable material for the classroom.

Nevertheless, I was determined to explore this idea of the short movie project, as I was convinced it would be an effective way to complete the film unit and also solidify the learning of the Media English course. Therefore, I persevered until I found enough suitable examples to create this short movie-making unit. This paper will now describe the iterative creation of the materials and their implementation, as well as reflect on the unit's refinements and the overall effectiveness of these explorations.

The Movie-Making Unit

This unit was created for classes of second-year English majors with 16 – 24 members of pre-intermediate to intermediate level (from around TOEFL ITP 450 or CEFR B1), which met for two 90-minute lessons each week. All the students used iPads and had access to Wi-Fi. This unit took around six to eight classes, plus homework. However, these students had previous experience with project-based tasks and video production. Therefore, an extra two to four lessons for the movie production phase might be necessary for students without this type of knowledge. Alternatively, learners could be given a foundational task, such as the production of a video diary or video introduction (of a favorite thing or place), for example. The short movie course outlined in this paper was developed over five years until I changed institutions and ceased teaching the course. The following sections describe the details of how the lessons and activities were implemented.

In the first lesson, I introduced students to short movies using the film *Vicky and Sam* (Rocha, 2010), which is somewhat longer than five minutes. Nonetheless, it illustrated so many points about the nature of short movies and the creative process that it proved invaluable. The first point I wanted students to understand was that short movies are not just truncated "Hollywood" movies.

Short movies usually have an unusual concept or striking set-up that drives the movie's storytelling rather than relying on special effects or famous actors. Therefore, the genre can be accessible to anyone with a camera phone and a good idea. The other key point was that a short movie still needs a narrative arc: a beginning, a middle and an end. *Vicky and Sam* clearly illustrated these points and depicted the creative process in an engaging and relatable manner, as will be described in the next section.

I used an observation quiz to foreground relevant structural elements exemplified by the movie and help students focus on the film while enjoying a competitive activity. The class was divided into groups of four. After viewing the film, learners were asked 10 questions (Figure 1), with the fastest correct answer earning points for their group.

After the quiz, the story was reviewed to ensure the students had understood the key points illustrated by the film. In the movie, the main characters are writing a screenplay in a diner. As the writers discuss the plot, the lead characters from their story enter the diner. Next, the lead characters start acting out the writers' suggestions in real-time, and the story unfolds on two levels. This contrivance was highlighted and discussed with students to give them a concrete example of how a reality-bending concept can drive novelty and increase impact. The film also modeled the writing process by depicting the writers discussing, rejecting, and accepting ideas rather than showing a single person sitting alone at a keyboard. This feature was underlined and discussed with learners, and I specifically encouraged them to copy this approach when creating ideas for their films. I believe this step was crucial in making the lessons enjoyable, interactive and task-based. Furthermore, through the movie, the students had this fun yet focused, collaborative process modeled for them.

Vicky and Sam is an excellent model of the creative process for short movie-making. However, I wanted to give students examples of storytelling and language patterns from different styles, genres, and cultures. To provide learners with the maximum exposure in the minimum amount of time, I opted to split the students into small groups and allocate one short film to each team from the following selection: *Happy Sushi* (Green, 2010), *The Right Place* (Sekine, 2005), *A Thousand Words* (Chung, 2008), *The Plan* (Kalish, 2010) and *The Elevator* (Glienna, 2010). The movies would then later be shared in a quiz activity. Each of these movies was chosen based on the criteria that they were available on YouTube, were around five minutes or less, and would be interesting for the students. The final feature is, of course, subjective. Still, within this criterion, I tried to choose films that I personally liked, that had an impact (either conceptually or comically), and either contained interesting language or could challenge students to use language thoughtfully in discussing the movie.

Each group watched their film and then created a short observation quiz in the style of the one modeled by the *Vicky and Sam* activity in Figure 1. This task directed students' attention to salient features of the movies while practicing listening, writing, and speaking engagingly. The students' observation quizzes could sometimes seem trivial; however, many learners still detected deeper structural and linguistic techniques in the movies, as demonstrated when the learners discussed the short films in more detail later in the process. It appeared to be the close attention required to play the quiz activity that helped students absorb the valuable characteristics.

Figure 1

Vicky and Sam Quiz

Vicky and Sam Quiz

1. What are the names of the lovers? (1pt)

Vicky and Sam

2. Where does Vicky work? (1pt)

Video store

3. Who are the people in the diner? (2pts)

Writers of the movie

4. Where is the loudest/noisiest writer from? (3pts)

Scotland

5. How does Sam show his interest in the girl? (3pts)

He rents videos for which the first letter of the titles spell out 'LOVE YOU'

6. How does Vicky reply to Sam's interest? (3pts)

With a movie titled 'Meet me in St Louis' with a post-it note covering 'St Louis' and saying 'my place'

7. Where is their first kiss? (3pts)

On a swinging chair on Vicky's porch

8. What happens after the couple walk into the diner? (4pts)

They act out the writers' words

9. What happens to the couple in the end? (4pts)

They split up

10. What are the last words of the movie? (5pts)






'We need a rewrite'

Figure 2

Worksheet: Student Short Movie Quizzes

Round 2

- Watch the movie assigned to your group (5min)
- Then create 4 quiz questions for the class on (15 min).
- You choose how many points to give each question.
- Keep your questions and answers secret.
- You will ask the class each of your questions one by one.
- Each member will be the quizmaster for one question.
- **Please keep score on the whiteboard.**

Group 1 - Happy Sushi	Group 2 - The Right Place	Group 3 - A Thousand Words	Group 4 - The Plan	Group 5 - The Elevator
				

Students used the worksheet in Figure 2 to locate the videos and write their questions. I used Google Classroom to distribute the materials. However, the activity could be managed with paper worksheets by asking the students to search the movie titles on YouTube using their smartphones.

If there was time at the end of the lesson, I led a class discussion on the movies, asking students which movie they liked and encouraging them to elaborate on the positive and negative points. The students were usually quite enthusiastic in this discussion as many had never seen these kinds of movies before. Consequently, learners were typically curious and offered interesting perspectives on the movies, frequently giving unique or novel interpretations of the content.

In the second lesson, students analyzed the movies more thoroughly in a group discussion and an individual homework task. I found that combining individual and group work was more successful, with students creating a higher volume of quality ideas and observations. Students began with the two-part worksheet illustrated in Figure 3.

First, learners were allocated to groups of four, and then there was a warm-up activity to prepare students for their English discussion. Next, students were given roles in each group, as described on the worksheet. I discovered that the added responsibility focused students' attention on the task and encouraged participation. Figure 3 is a shared Google Doc with a text box provided for each group to write their answers. Consequently, the opinions of each

team were gathered together in one place and could be reviewed conveniently in the next stage. After the discussions, the spokesperson from each group outlined their answers to the class, and I asked questions or gave comments to help expand the explanations.

Next, students were shuffled into their final movie production groups and watched examples of previous students' movies (some of the highest-graded and most popular films of previous classes). This exercise really helped motivate students and stimulated their imaginations by seeing what peers had achieved. Naturally, students must consent to the use of their movies, so it took a few cycles to build up a stock of good example videos. However, this step undoubtedly improved the unit's effectiveness, so in my experience, this element proved indispensable. While building this stock, I used additional professional short movies, which were a valuable stop-gap. Alternatively, finding examples of student short movie projects online might be possible.

After watching the example student videos, the groups conducted a discussion similar to that in Figure 3, but with an alternative final question: "Did you get any ideas from the student movies that you want to use in your own movie (language, story or production)?" Finally, for homework, students were given a worksheet, Figure 4, where they could consolidate their ideas individually. Students then copied and pasted their answers from the individual worksheet into a shared document, which I edited and distributed to the class before they began creating their movies.






In the third lesson, I gave students the project instructions sheet, Figure 5, and the edited version of the shared document from

the homework task. Students could choose from four predetermined roles within their group (lead writer, director, editor, fixer/facilitator). In the first instantiation of this project, I did not define these specific roles but just emphasized that these activities were crucial to complete the movie. Gradually, it became clear that designated roles would enable students to converge on the task. In addition, it seemed to help students develop skills in a particular area and become increasingly invested in the project. However, it also proved vital to remind students of the first video, *Vicky and Sam*, illustrating the collaborative, overlapping nature of the movie production process. Otherwise, students could tend to become siloed in their roles and forget the need to communicate continuously in English to complete the task effectively.

I gave students the remainder of Lesson 3 to begin planning their movies, in English, while I spoke to each group individually, helping them brainstorm or develop ideas. Groups were each given a template document for their notes (to plan their storyline, script, locations, camera angles, and music). Students used these documents to prepare a rough outline, which they presented to the teacher informally in the next lesson. When the project was initially developed, I gave students a storyboard document to detail ideas for each of their main scenes. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching this element over Zoom became impractical, so I cut this part of the process, which ultimately appeared to have no detrimental effect on the quality of movies produced. Therefore, after this experience, I permanently discontinued this practice.

Figure 3

Worksheet: Successful Features of Movies

Group 1 - Happy Sushi	Group 2 - The Right Place	Group 3 - A Thousand Words	Group 4 - The Plan	Group 5 - The Elevator
				

Short Movie Discussions - Class 1

Round 1: warm-up (2 minutes each question)

1. If you could meet one famous person, who would it be? Why?
2. Who is your favourite actor/actress? Why?
3. Do you like Hollywood movies or Japanese movies? Why?
4. What is your favourite genre? What genre do you dislike? Why?

Round 2: Analyse the short movies

Janken for the following roles:

- A. Leader (start/end discussion, decision-maker & timekeeper)
- B. Facilitator (keeps the discussion going, makes sure everyone participates)
- C. Notetaker
- D. Spokesperson

Group 1

1. What was your favourite short movie and why did you like it? (5 min)

2. What stood out about your favourite movie (language, speaking pace, gesture, facial expressions, humour, music, sound, colour, camera shots, editing,)? (5 min)

3. What key features make a good short movie, in your opinion? (5 min)

Figure 4

Worksheet: Individual Analysis of Movies

Short Movies - Analysis

1. Which professional short movie did you like best and why?
2. Which student short movie did you like best and why?
3. How did your favourite movies use the affordances (language, speaking pace, gesture, facial expressions, humour, music, sound, colour, camera shots, editing) to tell the story?
4. What are some things from question 3 that you would like to try in your movie?
5. Think about all the short movies you watched and answer the following question.

What are the key features that make a good short movie?

After you finish copy and paste your answers to the shared doc and submit

Figure 5

Short Movie Project Instructions



Make a Short Movie

You will make an **original** short movie in groups of 3 or 4 (review the good short movie document and re-watch some of the movies and the student examples). This activity is a review of all the techniques we have learned on the course, so be sure to check them and use them in your video, for example:

- Advertising (text and subtext, double meanings, grabbing attention)
- Photojournalism (use of images to convey narrative, storytelling, impact and themes)
- News articles and movie reviews (clear structure - understandability)
- Youtube videos (using effects, style and register to hold attention)
- Movies (plot, impact, filming styles)

To make the movie

1. Write an outline of your story (check the movie, *Vicky and Sam*)
2. Plan your movie (plan/storyboard, script etc)
3. Shoot your movie
4. Edit your movie

Notes

- Think about how you can use the **affordances** of the short movie (narration, dialogue, music, sound effects, location and shooting style, camera angles, colours etc) to tell your story and bring out your themes.
- You can use other people but make sure your group do most of the speaking
- **Each person in the group must speak in the movie**
- Scenes can be shot separately or as a group and the editor puts them together

Suggested roles

- Lead writer (script and story)
- Director (decides shots, style, locations)
- Editor (edits the shots together)
- Fixer/facilitator (fixes problems, communicates with all the team members). Groups of 3 students don't need this role.

Essentials

- The time limit is 5 minutes
- The deadline is xxxxxxxxx
- 1-2 classes to plan, 1-2 classes to shoot, 1-2 classes to edit (use the classes as you like)
- You will need to use homework time to finish the project
- Denver will check your progress in the next class. Please be ready.

An enduring part of this lesson, though, was to give learners the project grading rubric (Figure 6). The idea was to direct students' efforts to the fundamental language and movie production features needed to produce high-quality movies. I concluded that the rubric and the discussions of good short movie features, along with the example student videos, were perhaps the most critical elements in enabling students to produce successful short movies in a relatively short period.

At this stage, I reminded students that all their story elements did not yet need to be finalized, as some details could be resolved during filming or editing. Nevertheless, it was crucial to keep students focused on deadlines and ensure they scheduled enough time for each production phase. After Lesson 3, there was one more class to check students' outlines and develop their plans (Lesson 4). Then, the groups began their filming as a homework assignment.

If this project was attempted with students who were inexperienced with video production and project-based learning, then the teacher could schedule between two and four extra classes here to allow learners to develop their stories under greater supervision. The teacher could help the students create a shooting schedule/plan and allow lesson time for filming, if appropriate. A further possibility could be to build a rehearsal into the activities, where each group demonstrates and explains their story in a live-action role-play before they commence the filming, with the teacher giving feedback on the students' efforts.

For these experienced groups, I scheduled the shooting period to coincide with a break from classes, such as the winter vacation, to give students more time and freedom to work on the project. After the break, the groups began the editing process in the classroom in Lesson 5. The edits could have been conducted as another homework task, but I found that it helped students to

manage the filming schedule if they were expected to edit their movies in class on a particular day. I did try to build some flexibility into the scheduling, so students had a degree of autonomy over how much time they spent on each phase. Hence, I allowed groups to record extra material, such as narration or an additional scene, if necessary, during this class. This autonomy helped the groups stay fully occupied and allocate their time appropriately according to the demands of their particular stories.

During Lesson 5, groups discussed ideas in English, and the editor led each team to create their film using Apple's iMovie software. This application was chosen because it is intuitive to use and freely available on the students' iPads. The members of these classes had used iMovie in previous tasks. At that time, I gave learners a concise two-page guide (Figure 7) and a short tutorial introduction. The instructions took a little time to prepare, but they improved outcomes and helped the lessons flow more smoothly.

The final lesson (Lesson 6) was framed as a film festival. The groups presented their movies to the class and explained their motivations. In addition, there was an awards ceremony where the class members voted for their favorite films in various categories. Initially, at the end of this project, the groups just presented their movies, and the class members commented on the work. However, I felt there could be a more dynamic, interactive way to celebrate the students' achievements. Therefore, I developed the lesson plan iteratively, gradually adding and refining elements to arrive at the format presented in Figure 8.

Figure 6

Short Movie Grading Rubric

Short Movie Rubric					
	Language	Fluency	Video presentation	Affordances	Narrative / story
1	Very basic vocab Many grammar mistakes.	Poor. Long pauses. Stop-start hesitation. Can't finish sentences.	Poor. Timing is not smooth. Background noise. Sound not balanced.	No interesting use of sound, music, camera work, setting, colour etc.	Poor - difficult to follow. Boring. No conclusion.
2	Basic. Can't communicate well. Some mistakes - tenses, articles (a, the).	Basic. Some pauses and hesitation. Not smooth.	Some mistakes on-screen with the sound, text or timing that spoil the movie.	Some interesting use of sound, music, camera work, setting, colour etc. Doesn't match the story.	Some interesting points but a bit confusing and unclear.
3	Small vocab. A few new vocab words. Grammar simple. Can communicate. Small mistakes.	Ok. Quite smooth. Some hesitation Uses fillers.	Ok production generally, with just small problems.	Ok use of sound, music, camera work, setting, colour etc. Matches the story.	Ok structure. Quite easy to follow. No underlying message, themes or subtext.
4	Good vocab. Many new vocab words. Grammar is simple but there is good use of tense, articles and verbs.	Good. Smooth speech. English fillers. Appropriate pauses.	Good production. Everything is neat and smooth, enhancing the content.	Good use of sound, music, camera work, setting, colour etc. Enhances the story and themes.	Good. Easy to follow. Story flowed well. Enjoyable. Some underlying message, themes or subtext. Some originality.
5	High-level vocab. More complex grammar (relative clauses, perfect tenses, for example).	Excellent. Very smooth. English fillers. Changes in timing and volume to give variety and impact.	Excellent production that enhances the content and makes it very professional.	Excellent use of sound, music, camera work, setting, colour etc. Tells the story well and expresses the themes in surprising ways.	Excellent. Very easy to follow. Builds to a climax. Message, themes or subtext clear and interesting. Very original.
Comments:					

Figure 7

iMovie Basic Guide

iMovie Basics

Open iMovie / click / select movie.

- Select **Create Movie**

To take video or photos, tap (select *Retake* or *Use Video/Photo* when finished).

To insert video or photos select , navigate through your photo or video library to find existing media. Double click the desired file or tap and click to add. (More complex overlays, split-screen or screen in screen options are available from the three dots .

Video and pictures will appear in the lower panel with the movie length shown on the right of this.

To insert music from your ipad, select **Audio** and use sound effects or theme music or your own music, saved to your ipad.

To add narration / voice-over, tap and select record, press stop and accept when finished. The sound file will be added as a blue (background) or green (foreground) line beneath the video.

To edit video and sound elements

Tap the video or sound file and it turns yellow. A number of tools become available on the bottom panel.

For video

- Actions:** *split, Detach audio, Duplicate.*
- Speed:** *slider - speeds up or slows down, freeze frame.*
- Volume:** *slider, fade.*
- Titles:** *add text to screen in a number of styles. Position text with "Center" or "Lower".*
- Filters:** *Adds various screen effects.*

For photos

- Actions**
- Titles**
- Filters**

For sound

- Actions**
- Speed**
- Volume**

To delete video or sound files - tap and hold the desired file, then swipe up.

To reposition video, sound or photo files tap and hold the file then drag to the appropriate position.

To cut part of a video or sound file – drag the file or play until it reaches the desired edit point (should be on the horizontal white line). Select the file to turn it yellow. Select: actions, split and then swipe up the unwanted part to delete it.

Note: the edges of the files can also be dragged so that they don't play the beginning or the end.

To change transitions between video or photo files, tap the box between the files and select: *None, Theme, Dissolve, Slide, Wipe or Fade.*

Figure 8

Film Festival Information Sheet



1. The director introduces the movie: title, genre, setting, 1-2 sentence summary
2. We watch the movie – (turn off the screen, turn on when finished)
3. Q&A
 - a. **Lead writer**
 - i. Inspiration / how did you come up with the story?
 - ii. Were there any parts you struggled with?
 - iii. What was the theme / subtext / meaning / message?
 - b. **Director**
 - i. Describe some choices that you made
 - ii. Eg: shots, locations, music, acting styles, clothes
 - iii. Why did you make the choices described?
 - c. **Editor**
 - i. Describe some choices you made
 - ii. Eg, music / sound, filters, colours, titles, cuts
 - iii. Why did you make the choices described?
 - d. **Fixer**
 - i. What were some of the challenges you faced making the movie?
 - ii. What did you learn?
 - iii. What would you do differently?
4. Student Questions (Class Wheel if no volunteers)
5. Repeat for all movies
6. Vote
7. Announce the winners (10pts for each winner)

The groups presented their film with each member speaking about their role, their creative ideas, and the communicative intent of their decisions. Then, the group took questions from the other class members. I noticed that a limited number of students would ask the majority of the questions, so I introduced the rule that everyone must ask at least one question, which noticeably improved this Q&A section. At the end of the lesson, I used a Google Form to conduct a vote in the following categories: best story, best use of English, best sound/music, best filming, best overall movie and best actor/actress. The top three from each category received class points (separate from their project grade), which were points awarded throughout the semester, contributing to students' class participation scores. Finally, the videos were submitted and graded using the rubric in Figure 6, with some elements scored as a group and some marked individually.

Conclusion

Overall, this exploration into the use of movie-making proved fruitful; this mini-unit was well received and was always one of the most popular projects with learners in my Media English classes. As part of the broader film unit, students wrote a learning reflection; class members often stated that the project initially daunted them, but they ultimately enjoyed the task, producing something much better than originally imagined. Many students also cited the collaboration with their group as especially enjoyable and stated how happy

they were to be recognised by peers in the awards ceremony. One of the challenges students described was maintaining English communication throughout the classes to discuss complex creative ideas. Some students admitted reverting to L1 at times of difficulty. However, as evidenced by classroom observation, all members persevered and maintained a majority of English use throughout the lessons. As a result, many students were surprised by the level of ideas they could convey in English. In addition, the quality of many groups' movies was surprisingly accomplished.

The project investigated how students could learn from observing and mimicking experts in a field, such as by watching directors make short films and then making their own. The results demonstrated how, with engaging content, students could challenge themselves to accomplish complex tasks in English. Through this project and similar explorations, I have learned that while detailed instruction can be critical, at times, it is not always necessary to explain every detail explicitly to students. A well-chosen model can be highly effective in helping learners develop their skills autonomously, particularly if students' attention is concentrated on carefully considered activities. Hence, this iterative journey has convinced me that it can be extremely valuable to stimulate students' creative curiosity and then provide student-directed tasks that allow their abilities to bloom in the target language.

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