

Interactive use of filmed sequences in the EFL-classroom, or how to surprise your students!

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In our seminar “Kompetenzorientierung” we talked about findings from neuroscience with regards to possible consequences to the EFL-classroom (optimization of the teaching and learning of a foreign language). We discussed recent studies on the effects of body-movements coupled to the learning of new vocabulary (Hille/Sambanis et al. 2010, Sambanis 2011, Macedonia 2011 etc.), we talked and read about the plasticity of the brain, took a look at brain mechanisms, discovered that we all possess an inbuilt novelty-detector, and examined the question how emotions influence learning. In this connection, we also discussed the enormous potential of storytelling and the creating of stories with EFL-classes.

All students participated actively in the course, taught by Prof Sambanis, and contributed as experts or expert teams to different topics. One of those expert teams consisted of three students from Spain (ERASMUS-program), attending the above-mentioned class in English didactics at the FU Berlin: Miriam, Miquel and Iván. They opted for the topic “creating stories/using media” and managed to surprise us all with a really good, curiosity-evoking and effective idea that can be used in various ways and applied to different teaching settings. We would like to share it with you, which will be done as interviews with those who were lucky to assist.

Q: Miquel, Iván and Miriam, can you tell us briefly how you used previously filmed sequences to surprise us all and to get our full attention?

A: We used a video consisting of several scenes that had been filmed one morning at different locations in the center of Berlin, such as Brandenburger Tor, Tiergarten or Potsdamer Platz. It was our aim to use the videoed scenes later in the classroom for a conversation between Iván, whom we wanted to be actually present in the classroom, and the two of us (i.e. Miriam and Miquel) only visible on the screen. By means of person-medium-interaction – Iván conversing with “the video” –, we wanted to create an illusion for the audience. The audience was meant to be absorbed by this seemingly natural conversation that happened in the classroom, and, at the same time, by means of media-use, at numerous different spots in town.

Before shooting the scenes, we had to come up with a script to guide us. As it turned out, we had to simulate the conversation we wanted to take place later in the classroom, i.e. Iván discussing aspects of storytelling with us (Miriam and Miquel), while recording the parts including speech as well as pauses for Iván to fill in later during the actual presentation. The idea was very simple: the filmed sequences should be one part of the dialogue, the “unreal” part so to speak. Iván would fill in the “real” part: he would talk to “the video” as if he were talking to attendants.

Q: How did you come up with the idea?

A: This idea came up while watching a presentation of some classmates in Barcelona. That presentation was made with PowerPoint and some videos from the web. We realized that we could do something different, and as we like making short movies, we came up with the idea of creating an

interactive short movie-presentation. We were looking to enhance the impact of PowerPoint and wanted to catch our classmates' attention by making something different and unexpected, something that the novelty-detector in the brain would classify as "remarkable".

PowerPoint is a good support tool, and that holds true for videos, too. Nowadays, if we think in terms of interactive presentation, these tools are the first that come to mind, but they are already overused. So, if you want to make a real interactive presentation, you have to rethink the role of your "support tools": make them one of your team! U2 did it in the early 1990s. During the Zoo TV Tour, screens were placed onstage and created the illusion of an expansion of the band. In a specific part of the show, Lou Reed made a big-screen appearance and sang a song along with Bono. Obviously, Lou Reed's part was recorded beforehand, so that, during the show, Bono had to perform with exact timing in order to create the perfect illusion of him doing a live performance together with Reed right there.

Steven Spielberg used a similar technique with Jurassic Park. In the movie, John Hammond, who created the park, shows the visitors a documentary to explain how they re-created the dinosaurs. Hammond even speaks to a cartoon character in the documentary with the help of a little script, just to make this introduction more interesting.

We thought that using media in a comparable way in the classroom would make our presentation more exciting. And we thought of a special highlight for our presentation, something that did neither happen in the U2-shows nor in Spielberg's movie: the moment when two of us left the classroom and reappeared mere seconds later on the screen. Somehow it was really magic. The screen was almost like a window to the world outside.

Q: What were your aims?

A: We came to Berlin looking for different ways of doing things knowing that if you want to find something new, sometimes you have to try something new – be inventive and creative. Maybe that was our main intention: to show that you can do things differently, and, looking back, we can say that it was a great experience and fun, too.

Q: How did you prepare the presentation?

A: The hardest part was to finish the video. It's always the same: computer problems, lost videos etc. but once we were done with this part, the rest wasn't that difficult. Iván had to do some rehearsals to get the right timing. To make this task easier for him, we had used a few signals in the video that were meant to help him, like specific sounds or gestures of Miquel and Miriam. In order to navigate smoothly through the conversation with his digitalized pals and in order not to get lost, Iván memorized important words or sentences. It worked well.

Q: Julia and Stefan, as spectators, please try to explain how they did their presentation. How did they manage to use the normally static medium of filmed sequences as an interactive tool?

A: After finishing a short preliminary introduction on story-making, Iván asked Miquel and Miriam to help him create their own story, whereupon Miquel and Miriam took their coats and left the room. Meanwhile Iván opened a video file on his laptop. We, the audience, did not know what to expect and were surprised to suddenly see Miquel appearing on the screen standing in the corridor, dressed in the same way as he had been before in the classroom when contributing to the introduction. Iván

and Miquel, the former in person with us in the room, the latter on the screen, started a conversation about story-making, discussing how to create an ideal atmosphere and how to find a suitable setting for the story. In search of interesting locations, Miquel left the corridor and reappeared in a different location shortly after, namely at “Brandenburger Tor” – a historic setting that is meant to be highly inspirational for story-making.

Iván and Miquel were constantly talking to each other, Iván being in our classroom and Miquel still on the recorded video. After another change of settings, Miquel stood in the middle of a forest, a setting which may serve as a relatable location for story-making since it is unspecific enough to be known to everyone. That in return enables students to easily associate something, like feelings, memories, etc. with that setting. After a couple of minutes, Miriam surprisingly appeared on the screen or, more precisely, in the forest, too and immediately engaged in the discussion on story-making methods. Finally, they took the subway to another destination: Sony Center at Potsdamer Platz. In between, they decided to insert different film scenes in order to develop characters for their story which, as they stated, could either be animals, fantasy characters, or human beings.

Eventually, they had to end their presentation in a plausible way. To this purpose, Miriam and Miquel complained about the freezing cold so that Iván could graciously “allow” them to return to the classroom. And that’s exactly what they did: they came back to the classroom joining the audience. When we thought the presentation was over, everyone was surprised to see Iván popping up on the screen: Iván (on the screen) asked Iván (present in the classroom) if he could give a final conclusion which Iván (in the classroom) allowed him to do. With that, the presentation ended and was followed by the audience’s applause.

Q: Luise, will you remember this presentation in the long run and if so, what will you remember about it?

A: I will definitely remember this presentation in the long run. It was one of the best presentations I have ever seen so far because it was completely unexpected and surprising: a new way of presenting something to the audience. At the beginning, we all thought that the interviews were happening for real. Until the very end of the presentation, I couldn’t be sure about what was real and how they’ve done it. It seemed so realistic because they chose places in Berlin that are very close to each other. They could have run from Brandenburger Tor to Tiergarten and to Potsdamer Platz. They even pretended to have difficulties understanding each other and thus, having to think of an answer. It was unbelievable and really great!

Q: Anja, how did it feel to you?

A: It was unbelievable how they managed to “take” us from university to the city. It was as if I were really there. I’m still impressed by the presentation. They made it seem so manageable, but I think they put a lot of work in it. It was worth it! It felt like being part of that story.

Q: So, Anja, did you like it then?

A: Yes, I definitely enjoyed watching this kind of presentation. It was something special and surprising! The change of different perspectives was really impressive. I was wondering how they came up with such a wonderful idea for an exceptional mode of presentation. Thumbs up!

Q: Agnieszka and Sophie, do you think you can use this idea as an English teacher at school, too? If so, please specify:

A: You can use the given film to inspire your students. If students are supposed to do a film project, they may have difficulties at first to come up with own ideas or when developing them. They also may be too shy to express themselves in front of the camera. The film can show the pupils that they can create a story in almost any environment and that it is important to choose different characters to make a story more interesting. The characters can be inspired by fiction or reality.

The film could also be a trigger to start a film project, even in cooperation with Drama and Computer Science. To help the students to decide on a topic for their own films, the teacher can give them a general theme which they have to include in their films. Such a project would also support and enhance their media competence as they themselves would experience how a film is made. This would also help them to deal with media more critically. Students can also improve their language competence as they have to think about how to get across a specific message to their audience. The process of making a film can also be helpful for them to work on their rhetoric and presentation skills.

Q: Michaja and Katerina, would you use this technique as an English teacher at school?

A: Yes, absolutely. We have plenty of ideas how to use this technique in the English classroom. Our first idea is to use it in a "Landeskunde" unit. You can record videoed sequences from a holiday trip to an English speaking country. This is a captivating way to introduce sights, everyday life, and food from a different perspective. You could interview native speakers, ask them what they think about Germany and so on. This may provide insights and thus enhance intercultural competence, it offers a change of perspective, and may help students to explore stereotypes.

The technique could also be used in a film analysis unit, since you could show the class interactively how a film is produced instead of explaining camera angles for example, and pupils could experiment with the camera themselves. Also, filmed sequences can make boring grammar lessons more interesting. The teacher could provide filmed sequences that show short communicative interactions in which certain grammatical phenomena are used authentically and prototypically at the same time. Especially with younger students, you can also teach new vocabulary and basic language items with the help of filmed scenes that you use interactively like Iván demonstrated it during their presentation. You could think of short formats, something like Sesame Street, where the teacher interacts with a character on the screen. Filmed sequences can be used for CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) as well: you can bring art galleries or historical museums to the classroom. To sum it up, it is a great technique to escape the everyday routine of the English classroom. It seems to be a "brain-friendly" approach for it contains all the necessary elements, like emotion, and novelty, and it is really cool!

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