

Media Work: An Authentic Context for Developing Communication Skills in English

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Abstract

Entrusting students with the responsibility of creating a programme brings into play various cognitive and linguistic abilities as well as organizational and team work skills, such as researching a topic, planning and visualizing the format and presentation, editing a collection of shots and clips into a coherent whole, interviewing people, narrating and sub-titling, as well as dealing with weather, noise, unexpected technical and human problems, and the varied personalities and abilities within a team. This article briefly discusses the kind of assignments that have been given to students of the Media and Communication programme of the EFL University (formerly CIEFL) over the years, and details some of the responses that have been generated.

Introduction

Writing and producing audio or video programmes for the media provides an authentic context for developing communication skills in English. The focus of both teacher and student is on the message, and attention to form is incidental to this larger purpose. For the student, form and content fuse together in a memorable way. Each student has his or her own message; there is no question of using prefabricated ideas or language. I shall assume, along with many contemporary linguists and psychologists, that languages are learnt unconsciously, when conscious attention is on the meaning or message content rather than on the form of the message (Krashen, 1984; Prabhu, 1987). Media work thus serves as a textbook example for current ideas about how best language is learnt: in a highly personalized way, in an authentic communicative context. The buzzword among learners of English in India today is communication.

This paper briefly discusses the kind of assignments that have been given to students of the Media and Communication programme of the EFL University (formerly CIEFL) over the years, and details some of the responses that have been generated. Entrusting students with the responsibility of creating a programme brings into play various cognitive and linguistic abilities as well as organizational and team work

skills, such as researching a topic, planning and visualizing the format and presentation, editing a collection of shots and clips into a coherent whole, interviewing people, narrating and sub-titling, and dealing with weather, noise, unexpected technical and human problems, and the varied personalities and abilities within a team.

The One-minute Radio Talk: Finding the Right Topic

One of the first assignments in our courses is for the student to write out and deliver a one-minute radio talk, keeping in mind the necessity to keep the language and flow of ideas appropriate to "talk stuff," rather than "book stuff." On one memorable occasion, after having conducted the preparation for this assignment in a fairly routine way for some years, I found myself simultaneously teaching a course in cognitive psychology in our research programme. There we were dealing with the topic of "infantile amnesia," or the fact that human beings routinely retain no memory of the first 34 or 36 months of their lives. I brought this idea into our media class, and asked the students what their first memory or memories were. Since they appeared to find it an engrossing exercise to reflect on, I suggested that they make it the subject of their radio talk.

I still vividly remember, after the space of many years, my bemusement and wonder at the sheer power and variety of those first memories that emerged in the students' writing. Here is a sample by Gulnoz, a 20-something girl from a Central Asian Republic studying for an MA in English.

The Earliest Memories

The earliest memories are sometimes the best things to remember, aren't they? I am sure everybody has the wonderful time to think over from the past. I bet you have also. What do you think about these lines?

Backward, turn backward, O Time in your flight

Make me a child again just for tonight.

Exciting, isn't it? But it is pity that there is no way back to the world, which we have already conquered except only the memories.

So, let me bring back some flashes of memory from my childhood. I remember the time when I traveled alone for the first time without my parents. I was six. At that time I was a really motivated child who couldn't sit still in one place. I was told to sit in the station and wait for my Mom and Dad, as they wanted to buy a ticket. But I was impatient. So, I stood up and walked around not worrying what my parents would do when they found out that I wasn't there. It didn't bother me at all. It was real freedom for me. I did need it too much and I was sick of restrictions and rules. I hated them. But to be honest, I was a trouble to

my parents for sure. But that day ended well. I just looked around the city and got the bus, thanks God, it was the right one, and so I was really lucky with this mess.

Now thinking about it, I feel that sometimes this event encourages me for a better life, to achieve higher steps, reminding me about a little girl who bravely found a way back home when was lost.

This unedited piece (though revised by the student herself more than once) shows some qualities of good, if not great, writing, although it is not "error-free." (For example, there is a dropped pronoun in ". . . a little girl who bravely found a way back home when--was lost," an expression "thanks God," and there are other mild awkwardnesses of sentence construction.) But compared to Gulnoz's usual convolutions on paper, the piece was remarkable for its clarity of perception: about the event or what happened, about her motives or why it happened, and about what might have happened but did not. It was remarkable for the breathtaking speed of its narration ("But that day ended well. I just looked around the city and got the bus, thanks God, it was the right one, and so I was really lucky with this mess"), and for the lack of sentimentality in the narration of the event itself. The sentimentality crept in later, in the revised opening paragraphs with their nostalgia and their poetry and their generalities ("I am sure everybody has the wonderful time to think over from the past"). The description of the pure event, on the other hand, starting from "I remember the time when . . ." rang true and clear, and it was not susceptible to revision.

These were the qualities that distinguished all the eight pieces that were submitted by that class. The remembered event was breathtaking in its clarity. It was told simply, logically, coherently, with insight and emotional honesty, and no attempt at self-justification or embroidery of the event or avoiding subjects. One (Hindu) student spoke of being expelled from a Catholic school when in Class 2 because he had seen the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, and had been so impressed by the wizard that he decided to portray Jesus Christ in the wizard's image. Another Central Asian Republic student, Bahrom, told us about a visit in his father's car across a frozen river to some relatives. On the way back the ice was thinner. The family got out of the car and walked across the river; the father drove the car ahead of them, and the ice started to crack . . . the tale ended happily, but it had us all sweating in that air-conditioned studio classroom as we listened.

The Earliest Memory

Winter. The weather was very cold. It was snowing everywhere. Even the water, which was flowing in the river, was frozen.

We had some relatives on the other side of the river. We were invited to their house for lunch. My father, mother, aunt and me went to visit them. When we came to the river there was no bridge because of ices in the river. Then we saw everybody was driving his or her car on the

frozen river. That much the river was frozen. Then we also decided to pass the river in the same way they did. We passed well but on the way coming back the weather was little warm but still the river was frozen. Then my father said that he could drive, but we had to walk to cross the river. We said 'ok'. My father reached the half of the river and we were walking about ten meters behind the car. That part of the river was not frozen that much so car could pass. Then we saw, the ice broke and the car started sinking and my father was trying to get out of the car. Almost half of the car sank already. Finally my father got out the car and then car sank into the river totally. We never forget the day on which my father was saved, because it happened in front of our eyes.

This episode taught me as a teacher that finding a sufficiently vivid and engaging topic to write on is the first and perhaps the only requisite for good writing. The great writers seem to have the capacity to feel and experience reality as the child does at its first encounters with it. I am ashamed to confess I have not replicated this teaching experience, as I have wandered into other areas of teaching. But I would be very interested in knowing what other teachers of writing think.

The Television Feature: Research and Interview

The basic course in television production begins with an introduction to shot sizes and camera movements, and to programme formats. The first assignment arises out of the types of interviews: studio, location, walking, and even the car interview, each for a minute or ninety seconds, using a Sony Handycam®. Sometimes these interviews then add up to a feature. We have even had cooking programmes masquerading in the interview format.

On one occasion, the class and I had a slight argument over whether newspapers were read by anyone at this point in time. I suggested that each student in the class interview ten people at random over what sources they chose for their news, and bring back a tabulated statement to the next class. The results were varied and yet patterned enough to suggest that they formed the research base for a series of interviews on the preferred sources of news for particular individuals, which could then be built up into a feature. We saw generational, occupational, and nationality factors influence the choice of the Internet over other sources of news. Foreign students at our university, for instance, relied on the Internet for news about their home countries. [1]



Audio Clip 1. Internet about Home Countries

Ahmed: I get news about my country from TV channels, like CNN and BBC . . . I also get some more news from the Internet, where I can scan

news from the official newspapers, like . . . so these can cover the whole news about my country; and maybe about my city also.



Audio Clip 2. "Are you satisfied...?"

Question: Are you satisfied with those channels like CNN, BBC . . . ?

Ahmed: Actually, no, not very much, you know, because these channels will cover the international news about the world; so they don't give specific news about countries, unless they are very, very important.

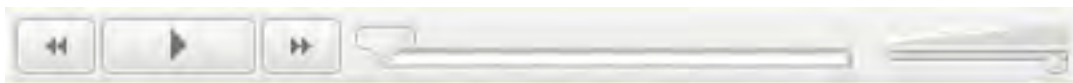
Those working in computer-related professions also relied on the Internet, with easy access to it and unconventional work times being influential factors. Housewives preferred the radio, which could be left to speak on while they got on with their work. For certain age groups and social strata, the newspaper had an iconic status within the household and the family.

Another such series of television features built around the interview format had for a theme the phrase "A day in the life of --- ." One of the most impressive features built around this theme was "A day in the life of a gamer."



Video Clip 1. Second Life: A Gamer

In addition, we had the opportunity to look into a number of other equally interesting days: for example, in the life of a domestic helper in the ladies hostel, a foreign student couple from Indonesia studying at our University, and even into the life of the resident hostel adopted stray dog!



Audio Clip 3. "Hello, this is . . . "

Hello, I am Sonba, this is my wife -, my lovely wife. We are second year students here for MA in Literature. Everything is wonderful here, the weather, the people and then – the facilities.

Obviously, not all the resulting features were in English--but for those who chose to do so, it provided a great opportunity to exercise their communication skills in English.



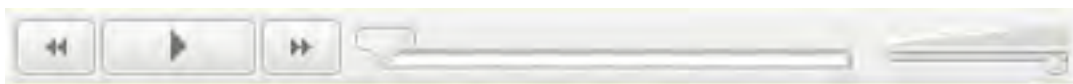
Audio Clip 4. "I always thought . . . "

Meghna: "I always thought you couldn't read if you couldn't see, and studying literature was not even an option. It was when I saw Arvind's passion for literature that I realized how wrong I was . . . So Arvind, when did your love for reading really begin?"

Arvind: Well it began when I was a very young kid. Since I was in the first standard itself my mother read stories for me--fairy tales, Enid Blyton books for children like Noddy and so on, and as we went along we read all the books that other kids read, and that's how I developed my interest in literature.



Audio Clip 5. "So when did you decide to turn your hobby into a serious academic interest?"



Audio Clip 6. "For those who've been born in the Indian subcontinent . . . "

Megha: "For those who've been born in the Indian subcontinent and wonder what life is like abroad, let's talk to Archi Gupta today. She's a first year M.A. participant who's studied at the University of Mauritius. . . . "

What went into the production of these brief features was a lot of interaction between the media students and those they chose to star in their videos. Some--like the young man who manages the campus shop--were clear favourites, who did not grudge our students the time they had to spend in front of the camera, with novices behind it, working with obsolete and not always optimally functioning technical equipment. Some--like the young woman in this clip--had clearly had enough!



Video Clip 2. "Rani—I want to talk . . . "

A: Rani! You want to talk to me?

B: Are you talking to me? Really ?

A: Are you going to ignore me now?

B: I'm not going to ignore you – just not looking into the camera

A: Look, no!

B: No camera !

But whatever may have been the attitude of potential performers, the problems during the shooting, or even the end product, it was the process of creating the video feature that was unique to this course. It led to a close and sustained interaction between various kinds of people who would not ordinarily speak with each other, and encouraged the use of language for genuine communication in our multilingual society where everyone aspires to speak English, and foreigners come to learn this "alien"

language that we have now made our own. Let me end with the following anecdote to illustrate this.

Reviewing a Central Asian student's video of a car interview, I was surprised to see at its wheel the spouse of my current graduate student in Applied Linguistics. It turned out that my media students had spent their morning at the nearest petrol filling station trying to persuade those driving up to give them some time for an interview. After repeated brush-offs, they were very glad to have a young man agree to their request. Neither they nor he were aware of each other's identities, but perhaps his indirect connection with us had clued him into our preoccupation with communication. In any case, he cooperated with a couple of young foreign women with a camera and very little English!

Notes

[1] Because of video compatibility problems between the camera used for some of these projects and compression formats, some of the video did not render on the DVD provided. We have used the audio clips for those inclusions. The original had both video and audio. —Editors.

Acknowledgement

This paper owes its provenance to the many students with whom I have worked over the years, and some of whose work is on display in the illustrative audio-visual clips. My heartfelt thanks to them all.

About the Author

R. Amritavalli has been writing and producing television and radio programmes for English Language Education for over three decades. Her research interests are in first and second language acquisition and theoretical linguistics. At the time of writing this article, Amritavalli was Professor in the Department of Media and Communication at the EFL University. She has since relocated to the Department of Linguistics at the same university as Professor and Dean, but continues to retain her affiliation to the School of Media and Communication.

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