

Author: Collins, Timothy.

Title: Video Recording and Playback Equipment.

Source: Gerd Bräuer (Ed.): Body and Language. Intercultural Learning Through Drama. Westport, Connecticut & London 2002. P. 113-124.

Publisher: Ablex Publishing.

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Timothy Collins

Video Recording and Playback Equipment

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Many exciting technologies, such as computers, DVD players, and video recording and playback equipment, have become more widely available to language teachers in recent years. These technologies offer tremendous benefits to language learners and teachers.

Teachers can use these technologies for purposes such as providing access to authentic material and native speaker models, providing visual reinforcement, and offering learners immediate feedback. Video recording and playback equipment, in particular, let teachers and students do many activities that in the past were difficult, if not impossible, such as watching movies on videotape, viewing programs taped off the air, and taping the students performing in their new language. Yet using this technology effectively presents many challenges to both learners and teachers. It requires planning, involves hard work, and demands new skills from both teachers and students. As a result, teachers wonder whether the benefits are worth the extra effort. This chapter reports on one of the author's successful experiences using video recording and playback equipment in a beginning college Spanish class at a major university in the midwestern United States.

As teacher of this class, I used a video camera to record and play back role-plays my students prepared and acted out. The students and I agreed that the project was very beneficial, both in improving their Spanish skills and in increasing their motivation to continue learning the new language. The students gained self-confidence, developed teamwork skills, and had fun. In this chapter, I first detail the steps I followed with my class. I then discuss the benefits of the project, including the positive impact it had on my learners and my own views of teaching and learning a new language. Third, I give suggestions on how teachers can set up successful projects of their own. Finally, I discuss ways that using the medium of television transformed the drama techniques I employed with my students.

THE SETTING

My class was one section of Spanish 101, the first of a sequence of four Spanish courses designed to satisfy the university's foreign language requirement. Though students had no choice but to study a foreign language, they had the option to select a particular language. Students had numerous options, including French, Italian, Portuguese, German, Russian, Arabic, modern and ancient, Greek, Polish, and several others, in addition to Spanish. As is the case at most U.S. colleges and universities, Spanish was the most common choice. When asked to explain their choice of Spanish, learners usually said that they selected it because they anticipated using it in the future when traveling outside the United States. The students also commonly stated that they chose Spanish because they believed that Spanish was easier to learn than other languages. The students approached the course

with mixed feelings. Most students admitted that they would not take Spanish if it were not a foreign language requirement. Nevertheless, many students were motivated to get good grades for reasons such as maintaining financial aid, getting into a graduate school, or achieving personal goals.

I was one of nearly twenty teaching assistants teaching Spanish 101 that semester. The department's director of lower-division courses oversaw the course. Each TA used the same book, *Habla Español?* (Allen et al., 1981), followed the same syllabus, and gave the same exams. In this course, each TA was responsible for creating and giving eight to ten quizzes. The textbook and the class followed a grammar-based syllabus, and the book included activities for listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and numerous grammar exercises.

THE PROJECT

I chose to have my section of Spanish 101 do a video project for several reasons. First, I wanted to enliven my class and provide some variety for the learners. Creating scripts and acting them out before a TV camera would be a real change of pace from the usual routine of my classroom. In addition, I wanted to give them the opportunity to see themselves using Spanish in order to gain a sense that they could use Spanish successfully. Nevertheless, I did not want the project to stray too far from the materials in the textbook that learners would be tested on. Therefore, I chose to have learners work from one of the dialogues in the textbook. To meet students' expressed desire to develop language skills that would be useful while traveling, I tried to choose a dialogue that would allow for the development of social language students might use when in an Hispanic country. I also tried to select a dialogue that would allow the students to expand their knowledge of Hispanic culture.

In the dialogue I finally selected, two female American college students explore the Ramblas of Barcelona (a wide pedestrian boulevard with many cafés, pet shops, and news stands) with a Spanish friend who is showing them around the city. At the café, they drink sangria, hear a *tuna* (a group of strolling madrigal singers), and have an encounter with another Spanish male, Omar. Omar is fascinated by women and cannot stop himself from saying *piropos*, a kind of flirtatious sexual compliment some Hispanic men direct

toward women. (An example of a common *piropo* is a man saying the word *guapa* ["beautiful"] to a woman he perceives as attractive as they pass in the street.)

Preparation

To get started on the project, I approached the director of lower-division courses to gain her approval. I explained the advantages of the project and told her that I expected to divide the class into three groups and have each group prepare a role-play on one of these topics: what happened before the dialogue in the book, an expanded version of the dialogue in the book, and what happened after the dialogue in the book. My supervisor stated that I had to get the agreement of my class, that students could not use class time preparing for the project, and that the activity could not interfere with completing any material in the syllabus. She agreed that I could count the activity as four quiz grades, in order that the students be rewarded appropriately for their hard work on the project.

To gain my class's agreement, I presented an overview of the project and informed the class that rehearsals and all other preparations had to take place outside of class and indicated that the project would count as four quiz grades. I also let them know that the activity was not a requirement, and the decision to complete it was contingent upon their unanimous agreement to participate. I allowed the students to discuss the project among themselves, and in a few days, the students informed me that they had agreed that they would do the project. They said that the project appealed to them because it offered a change from our normal activities. They also said the video project sounded like an effective way to improve their grades because they believed that they could earn higher grades on the project than on the quizzes.

Once I had the students' agreement, I prepared an assignment sheet. A copy of the assignment sheet is in Appendix A. The assignment sheet lists the roles for group members (director, scriptwriters, actors, and actresses) and gives due dates for scripts, rehearsals, and meetings with me. The teams had to assign themselves roles and then prepare three written products in Spanish: a script treatment (a brief prose plot summary) and first and final drafts of the script. I used the treatments to make sure that the completed scripts would make sense individually and within the larger group. I had students meet with me twice to discuss scripts, hold two rehearsals, complete a report

form after each rehearsal, and hold a dress rehearsal with me. A copy of the rehearsal report form is in Appendix A.

The students' completed scripts expanded on the original dialogue in imaginative ways. The first group's script dramatized what happened as the first three characters in the dialogue walked down the Ramblas to the café. The Spaniard explained the Ramblas to the Americans as the visitors listened and asked questions. The friends chatted, visited one of the open-air pet shops, and picked out a café. The second group's script focused on the characters' conversation in the café. The script expanded the dialogue in the textbook, particularly the part of the flirtatious Spaniard and one of the American females. In my students' version, this young woman responded more positively to Omar's overtures than in the original: When her more demure compatriot warned that Omar is a "Don Juan," the more brazen female responded, "I'm a Dona Juana." This group also included musical sound effects, replacing the original version's madrigal singers with a flamenco guitarist, added a part for a waiter, and included details on ordering and paying. The final group concluded the encounter with information on how the females finally rebuffed Omar, returned to their car, and made plans for meeting the next day.

The students' completed dialogues contained a lot of valuable cultural information not part of the original, such as detail on the Ramblas, Spanish music, the social meaning of *piropos* in Hispanic culture, culturally appropriate ways of responding to *piropos*, ordering and paying in a café, greetings, and leave-takings. The second group's decision to have one of the characters respond more positively to Omar's flirtation was particularly interesting, because it gave the students an opportunity to reflect on different ways one might behave when trying to get to know a person from a different culture and to evaluate their own values. (The students' version of the dialogue was also certainly an example of students using the Spanish they knew creatively in order to achieve their own intents and purposes!)

The Taping

Because of all the preparation, the taping went smoothly. The recording session took place in a special classroom large enough to accommodate my class and the television equipment and lasted an entire fifty-minute class period. We had a single camera mounted on a rolling tripod and two monitors, one for the director and one for students to

see themselves. I acted as director; a student operated the camera. The students all knew their parts, had all the props and sound effects they needed, and acted their parts with aplomb. Students had to watch each group tape its role-play and applauded vigorously after each group's performance. One female student felt nervous because she was afraid she would not perform well in Spanish, and students in her and the other groups gave her a lot of encouragement at the taping.

The Follow-Up

The follow-up consisted of two parts. First the class viewed the tape, and then we discussed it. I used a list of questions to guide the discussion. Then students completed an evaluation form as homework. This form asked learners to summarize the aspects of their individual and group performances that were best and those that needed improvement. A copy of the discussion questions and the self-evaluation form are in Appendix B.

I scheduled the playback and discussion for the day following the taping. Though I usually conducted the class in Spanish, I chose to have the discussion in English so that students could express themselves fully. The students were clearly agitated about seeing themselves on TV. One male student made a mask out of a large paper grocery bag and put it over his head at the start of class. The female student who felt nervous about the taping appeared mortified at the idea of seeing herself on television. To calm the students, I decided to abandon my original plan of viewing the tape right away, and instead began class with a discussion of their feelings about making the tape. I reassured the students by saying that I had seen all of the role-plays as the students performed them and that I thought they were very good. I also reminded the class that they had rehearsed their role-plays extensively, and asked them to reflect on whether they thought that students in the other groups had performed well. The students all agreed that the performances they had seen the day before were quite good, thus reassuring one another and themselves that they all had no reason to feel embarrassed about their work and making themselves feel more secure about viewing the tape. We then watched the role-plays and discussed each one using the questions in Appendix B to guide the discussion. The discussion questions focused on students' language skills, their knowledge of Hispanic culture, and the value of rehearsal in language acquisition. Then we watched all three role-plays again without pausing, and we talked more. I last distributed the self-evaluation form for the class to

complete as homework. Several themes emerged from the students' comments in the discussion and on the evaluation forms.

- *Students agreed that their language skills had improved.* All the students remarked that they felt surprised about how comfortable they looked speaking Spanish on the tape. They and I noted that they spoke fluently and without pauses. In the class sessions after the taping, I noted that the gains in fluency continued. Students felt more confident about their ability to use Spanish, so they spoke up more willingly in class. Because they felt less anxious, they performed better, speaking with more ease and expressiveness. The students also learned a lot of important social language, language that would be key to having social encounters in an Hispanic country. In general, this activity represented a real breakthrough for the students because previously they had considered Spanish as a struggle, an academic requirement that had few tangible results. For many of them, the most significant result of this activity was the realization that success in learning their new language was within their reach.
- *Students learned about Hispanic culture.* To write their scripts, the students carried out research on Barcelona, the Ramblas, Spanish cafés, Spanish music, *piropos*, and male-female relations in Hispanic culture. In the course of their investigation, the learners found out that *tunas* were not a normal part of the culture in Barcelona, but were more common in other parts of Spain, especially Castile. For that reason, the group changed the music from a *tuna* to a flamenco guitarist. Though they knew that flamenco was more typical of southern Spain, they found out that this type of music was performed on the Ramblas for tourists and therefore included it in their scripts. The students also were curious about *piropos*, because they found this custom different and surprising. They were amazed to learn that *piropos* were not considered socially incorrect and were also glad to find out the appropriate way a woman should deal with *piropos* (usually, by ignoring them).
- *Students learned that culture, body language, and communicative competence are as important as vocabulary and grammar.* In order to write and act out their role-plays, students had to use proper intonation, gestures and other body language, and cultural information. In addition, as mentioned previously, they had to use proper greetings, leave-takings, and other social language. Students' comments demonstrated that their appreciation and awareness of the skills they needed in order to be communicative, including sociolinguistic competence, had increased.
- *Students learned the value of rehearsal.* In the course of the discussion, the students at first remarked that they found the amount of rehearsal unrealistic. They felt that in real life they could never be as successful as they had been on the tape because they would not be able to rehearse as much. This comment launched a discussion of rehearsal, including the amount of rehearsal we do in our L1, such as going over what we are going to say before an important or stressful conversation. The discussion made students realize that they rehearsed in English much more than they had ever thought and concluded that they could transfer this strategy to Spanish.
- *Students' self-esteem increased.* After viewing the tape the students felt more confident and in charge of their learning. Several students indicated that seeing themselves speaking Spanish helped them believe for the first time that they could become successful speakers of Spanish. They felt that they could make sense of the new

cultural information and use a foreign language with success to achieve real-world outcomes.

- *Students' anxiety levels went down.* Though students had a lot of anxiety before, during, and after the taping, their anxiety about performing in a foreign language declined significantly after viewing the tape. For example, the female student who had expressed so much anxiety about the taping told me that she felt much better after seeing the tape. She said that the activity had been very hard for her, but she was glad we had done it. I also noticed that after the project she participated in class more freely and had more self-confidence. I also noticed that the other students also felt more secure about their abilities in Spanish and participated more confidently in classroom activities in the weeks following the taping.
- *Students' teamwork skills increased.* Because the students had to work together to create the scripts and rehearse, they developed valuable teamwork skills.
- *Students noticed that they could enjoy learning and speaking Spanish.* The students obviously enjoyed watching the tapes they had made. The dialogues were fun and engaging, and the students all agreed that though the project had involved a lot of hard work, the end result provided a lot of satisfaction.

Students rated themselves on their self-evaluation forms and gave themselves letter grades and percentage grades on a 90/80/70 scale. Most grades were A's, but only a few students gave themselves 100 percent. When I probed as to why students rated their work in this way, students' answers indicated a certain amount of self-effacement. They seemed reluctant to acknowledge the outstanding nature of their work out of a concern of appearing self-important or, in the words of one student, "stuck up." I, however, was convinced that everyone's performance had been outstanding and gave everyone 100 percent for both individual and group effort. In addition, in this course, TAs were allowed to raise student's final grades if they were between two Letter grades. In order to do so, the TA had to present evidence of the students' outstanding work to the supervisor. I used students' work in this project to justify the higher grades, which my supervisor approved without question.

DISCUSSION

This activity had a number of benefits for my class. Learners' language skills, self-confidence, and cultural knowledge all increased. Because the students had to dramatize specific aspects of Hispanic culture, they delved into the cultural information much more deeply than if they had merely read for example, a text about *piropos*. Learners agreed unanimously that seeing the tape made them feel that they could succeed. As a consequence, they became more relaxed, self-confident, and successful in subsequent

classes, though their anxiety levels went up during the preparations. This was clearly a case of "seeing is believing," and the improvements in classroom atmosphere, learner participation, and fluency throughout the rest of the course were remarkable. The students also commented very favorably on the activity in the end-of-course instructor evaluations. In addition, the students discovered that they knew enough Spanish to accomplish many of their own intents and purposes, including socializing with peers from different cultures. They realized that Spanish is not merely an academic exercise involving grammar and vocabulary but rather a communication System that they could use successfully to accomplish real-world goals.

The activity also provided a number of benefits for me as a teacher. I really liked seeing my students enjoying themselves speaking Spanish. It made me feel that even a required course could become interesting and engaging instead of being experienced as a chore. It also let me prove to myself that I was able to organize lessons that incorporated new technologies in ways that benefited learners. The activity also provided real-world verification of many beliefs I was forming about language acquisition. For example, the results provided concrete proof that increased self-esteem facilitated language acquisition. The project also demonstrated to me that it was possible to teach students effective communicative skills and provide them with vivid cross-cultural experiences even in a foreign language classroom in an isolated university town in the Midwest. The project also helped me increase my self-confidence as a language teacher. I realized .hat I had the ability to implement innovative teaching methods in my class, thus making me feel empowered to continue taking risks with other innovative teaching practices. In subsequent semesters, I brought in music, helped students prepare Hispanic foods, had students act out dialogues and conversations more regularly, and had classes videotape panel discussions and debates.

This project also helped me develop a list of tips for organizing successful projects of this sort. I believe that my class project was successful for several reasons.

1. The project was related to the goals of the course. The dialogue came from the book and students knew that the material was relevant to what would be on the course's tests
2. I got the support of my supervisor and kept her posted. I made sure that she understood what I wanted to do, honored the conditions she placed on the project, and gave her updates as work progressed.

3. I got the agreement of my class. I presented the projekt to them, including the amount of work and the benefits, and let them decide as a class whether they would participate. This was especially critical in a course that had many sections taught by different TAs. The students could not complain that they were being singled out for extra work but were rather agreeing to an optional bonus.
4. I built in success by breaking the project into manageable tasks and including checkpoints to make sure that the students did not go too far in a wrong direction without feedback.
5. I included plenty of follow-up, such as a discussion and a written self-evaluation, in addition to viewing the tapes. The discussion and questions elicited students' reaction on their language skills, knowledge of culture, and language acquisition issues. This way, I kept learners' attention focused on issues broader than just the dialogues they created, and learners were able to focus on the learning strategies they used and the educational outcomes they achieved.
6. I built in rewards commensurate to the amount of work and learner achievement by weighting the grade appropriately and giving high grades to reward students' hard work and outstanding achievement.
7. My students' anxiety showed me that monitoring feelings and emotions was very important and something I should have done better. I was sorry I did not find out about the students' fear earlier, and I resolved that in future projects I would informally speak with all of the students individually to make sure they were feeling all right. I also resolved to let students know that it was OK to feel anxious and to talk to me privately if they felt intimidated or needed special accommodation.
8. Using technology, especially the first time, was a lot of work. The meetings, rehearsals, and preparation took extra time and energy. For that reason, anyone who undertakes this sort of project should make sure he or she has the resources needed to carry it out successfully.

Finally, this project gave a number of indications of ways television as a medium transformed the dramatic techniques the class used. For example, because the camera only captures a limited amount of detail, students had to express their emotions and feelings very vividly so that they would be clear to the television audience. The medium of television also affected proxemics: As the students acted, they had to stand more closely together than they would normally on stage (or, indeed, in real life) so that they would all fit into the camera shot. Using the medium of television also introduced the role of camera operator and director as intermediaries. During the taping session, a student from a different group acted as camera operator, while I took the role of director of photography. Because neither the camera operator nor I were very familiar with the scripts, we did not always get the best camera shots. For example, there were moments when close-ups on one of the characters were needed, but we did not zoom in quickly enough because we

did not immediately realize that that particular shot was required. If I were to repeat this project with future classes, I would give learners the opportunity to rehearse with the camera and allow members of their own groups to act as camera operators and directors.

Using television allowed the actors to become their own audience, something that cannot happen on the stage. As a result, students were able to observe themselves from the outside, which provided them with insight into the progress they had made in learning Spanish. However, the opportunity for students to observe themselves in this way resulted in a second, less desirable, result: initial anxiety, or stage fright, especially as students anticipated taping and viewing their work. However, students' anxiety lessened once they were able to watch the tape and observe their success performing in Spanish firsthand. Another unanticipated consequence of using television was increased concern relating to body type and self-image, issues that are of particular importance to young adults such as my students. Many people feel anxious about their weight, and people often appear heavier on TV than they do on stage or in person. Several of my students had such concerns about their appearance, which caused them anxiety I had not been aware of until after the taping took place. In retrospect, I should have been more sensitive to these issues in planning the project.

The experience of having my students create and view videotapes resulted in a number of concrete benefits to my class, allowed me to reflect on the effectiveness of communicative language teaching and use of technology in the classroom, gave me the opportunity to develop a number of strategies to make use of video recording equipment more effective, and gave insights on ways that television transformed the dramatic techniques my students were using.

APPENDIX A

The students received this assignment sheet.

On Wednesday, April 1, our class will be videotaped performing role-plays based on the dialogue, "Las Ramblas" in our textbook. The class will be divided into three groups:

Group 1: Will write and present a dialogue based on what they imagine happened before the dialogue in the book.

Group 2: Will write and present an expanded, original version of the dialogue in the book.

Group 3: Will write and present a dialogue based on what they imagine happened after the dialogue in the book.

Each group should assign one of these jobs to each student:

- Director
- Scriptwriter and head script writer
- Actors and actresses

Deadlines

- March 3: Director informs teacher in writing of each group member's job.
- March 6: Each head scriptwriter turns in a brief treatment (plot summary) of the dialogue in Spanish.
- March 9: Head scriptwriters meet with the teacher outside of class.
- March 13: Scripts due at the end of class.
- March 16: Teacher meets with head scriptwriters outside of class.
- March 20: Revised scripts due at end of class.
- March 27: Two rehearsal reports due at the end of class.
- March 30: Dress rehearsal with students outside of class.
- March 31: Directors meet with teacher after class.
- April 1: Taping takes place in class.
- April 2: Class views tape in class.
- April 3: Completed self-evaluation forms due at the end of class.

Rehearsal Report

Director Name:

Rehearsal Number: 1 2 (circle one)

Date:

Time:

Place:

Students Present:

Students Absent:

1. How did the rehearsal go overall?

2. Did the script need any revisions? Explain.
3. Are there any music or special effects needed? Did they work OK?
4. Is your role-play interesting? Fun?
5. Do you feel your group is ready to perform or is more rehearsal needed?

APPENDIX B

Discussion Questions

Before Watching

1. What are your general reactions to this project?
2. Do you feel pleased about your performance? What about your group's performance?
3. What went best during the taping?
4. What would you like to change about the taping?
5. What do you think the taped role-plays will be like?

After Watching

1. What are your reactions in general?
2. What were the role-plays like? Funny? Interesting? Entertaining?
3. Was there anything you didn't understand? Was the reason linguistic: Cross-cultural? Dramatic?
4. What did you understand best?
5. Did you learn anything new about the Spanish language? Hispanic culture? Your language abilities? Your other talents?
6. How did you feel seeing yourself and your friends speaking Spanish? What is the value of seeing yourself and your friends speaking Spanish?
7. The groups all rehearsed. Is rehearsal a part of other kinds of interaction? Do you ever rehearse in English? When? Why?
8. Did you enjoy this activity? Why?
9. Is viewing an action different from participating in it? Why?
10. Would you recommend that other classes do this activity in the future? Why?

Evaluation Form

Self- and Peer Evaluation

1. What was strongest in your individual performance or contribution? Why?
2. What was strongest in your group performance?
3. What needed the most improvement in your individual performance or contribution? Why?
4. What needed the most improvement in your group's performance? Why?

Self-Rating

Rate your performance and your group's performance. Give grades on a scale of 100.

Yourself: Your group:

Teacher Evaluation

You: Your group:

REFERENCE

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