

【実践報告】

# Digital Research Skills: Developing a Video Production Course for English Language Learners

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デジタルリサーチスキル

——英語学習者に向けた映像制作講座の開発——

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## 1. Background

The *Digital Research Skills* course was first introduced at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University in the spring of 2018 and is available to third and fourth year Global Communication Department students. This single semester course focuses on developing technical skills to produce a short video, as well as learning to clearly communicate thematic ideas in English. Students learn the basics of writing, researching, shooting, and editing, so they can create *narrative*, *documentary*, and *public service announcement* (PSA) videos. At the end of 15 weeks, students are expected to have gained proficiency in the following areas:

- Researching an issue for a short documentary or PSA video
- Exploring topics they find meaningful and expressing their creativity
- Planning and organizing the production of a short video under the time constraints of a deadline
- Performing a range of audio and video production techniques for producing a short video
- Communicating instructions to crew members and directing performers in English
- Performing in positions of leadership and problem-solving issues that can occur during a video's production
- Discussing the thematic and technical aspects of their projects, while providing supportive feedback on the work of others

This paper provides an overview of this course in terms of its lesson structure, the video project requirements, the technical skills covered, project reflections, and an overall reflection, including planned revisions for 2019.

## 2. Lesson Structure

To clearly communicate an idea in a video project, many technical details must come together during the video's pre-production (writing), production (shooting), and post-production (editing), so each lesson focuses on one technical aspect of videomaking within these three stages (see Appendix 1). To help students understand this technical aspect, each lesson is divided into three parts: analyze and discuss, hands-on technical workshop, and production. Following this structure, we first look at several short video clips from professional films and student videos and, depending on the focus of a particular lesson, we discuss aspects of the clip's creative writing, research, camera work, lighting, sound, and editing using cinematic terms. Next, in the hands-on workshop portion of the lesson, students learn how the analyzed clips were produced and practice how to achieve similar results by writing scripts, operating the camera, or editing on the computer. Finally, the students put what they have learned to use in the production segment of the lesson. During this time, they work on developing their own video projects while receiving teacher guidance.

## 3. Producing Three Video Projects

The cycle of pre-production, production, and post-production to bring a video project to completion is repeated every five weeks, giving students the opportunity to produce three video projects in one semester. Although students are not required to produce an English-language video, English is needed to participate in the class discussions and workshops. With each completed production cycle, students are introduced to the more complex aspects of videomaking, such as color correcting shots and recording production sound. Students also become more proficient in their videomaking skills by discussing the details of their project in class and reflecting on its strengths and weaknesses in project reports (see Appendix 2). Ideally, students will overcome their shortcomings in the next production cycle and gain more confidence in the process.

As students become more proficient with the camera, the video project requirements become more demanding. For the first project at week five, each student presents a narrative short film containing no dialogue with a running time of five minutes or less. At week 10, students collaborate with a partner to jointly present a short documentary or PSA with a running time of five minutes or less, which must include background music and on-screen text for titles and statistical information. Lastly, for video project three on week 15, each student presents their choice of a narrative, documentary, or PSA video. This video must include text, background music, and at least one line of production dialogue and have a running time of five minutes or more.

## 4. Technical Skills Covered

After planning the course as described in the previous sections, the technical skills that were actually covered will be discussed.

- Creative Writing for *Narrative*, *Documentary*, and *PSA* videos

Before the students started producing their own projects, they first learned about the three different kind of videos that can be produced in the course: *narrative*, *documentary*, and *public service announcement* (PSA). More specifically, they learned that *narrative* storytelling is fictional and traditionally has a three-part dramatic arc: the main character faces an obstacle at the beginning of the story (setup), he or she then tries to overcome this problem (development), which is either successful or not (resolution). A *documentary* is non-fictional and often uses non-actors to share information about a topic, such as a person, place, activity, historical/current event, or a societal issue. As with some documentaries, a *PSA* video spreads awareness of a societal issue in hope of shaping social attitudes and behavior, but it usually has a much shorter running time (30 to 60 seconds) and tends to use actors and staged action to dramatize the message.

- Writing Conflict

An engaging story must introduce well-defined conflict in the setup, so the students learned about the four different forms of conflict present in most dramatic writing (Egri, 1960; Rea & Irving, 2001):

- *self* (internal conflict)
- *individual* (external conflict with another person)
- *society* (conflict in a social environment)
- *nature* (conflict in a physical environment).

In the example of Robert Zemeckis' *Cast Away*, we identified three forms of conflict experienced by the main character, Chuck, in the film's two-minute trailer. Chuck is lonely when he becomes stranded on a deserted island (internal conflict), he experiences a hurricane on the island without proper shelter (physical environment conflict), and after being rescued several years later, he discovers that his wife has remarried (external conflict). We also discussed the visual storytelling in short films that utilize a single location and have well-defined conflict with little to no dialogue. (i.e., Show instead of tell.) During the production portion of this lesson, the students were encouraged to keep their ideas simple, for introducing too many characters and settings would only complicate their short story and its production. They were also encouraged to write scripts on topics that are meaningful to them and to draw upon personal experiences for inspiration.

- Shooting Video

In lesson three, *Creating an Image*, the students learned how to operate one of the university's video cameras. They also received instruction on the various angles and movements that can be achieved with it to convey a certain impression to the viewer. For example, we analyzed a scene in Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* and its use of low angle shots to convey power and status in the main character. Additionally, students received instruction on how to perform basic lighting, utilize a location to its fullest, and problem solve issues that can suddenly occur during a shoot, such as equipment failure or losing a shooting location.

- Shooting at different Focal Lengths

To further help the students visually communicate their stories, they also learned about using different focal lengths (i.e., *Wide*, *Normal*, and *Telephoto*) to shift the perspective of the camera's lens. As shown in Figure 1.1, a *Wide* focal length is useful for establishing a location, in this case, a classroom. However, people or objects in the foreground become noticeably distorted. Figure 1.2 depicts a *Normal* focal length, which minimizes foreground distortion while still giving some background information, so it is more suitable for capturing a performer's facial features. Finally, Figure 1.3 depicts a *Telephoto* focal length, which isolates a person or object through a shallow depth of field (i.e., background blur) and creates a compressed perspective, making it more difficult to recognize the setting, but helps direct the viewer to notice a specific detail within the shot (Bordwell & Thompson, 2001).



Figure 1.1



Figure 1.2



Figure 1.3

- Editing Picture and Sound

After shooting their footage, the students assembled it in *Adobe Premiere Pro CS6*. This nonlinear professional video editing software gave them many creative possibilities in shaping their stories. To help them edit their projects, we practiced applying cuts, transitions, and text to shots and adjusted their exposure and color temperature. In our second editing lesson, we discussed how to select shots that advance the story and how to seamlessly match them together to create the illusion of continuity (Murch, 2001; Pudovkin, 1970). This includes inserting *Close-Ups* with detail, cutting on action, and trimming shots to create a natural rhythm. Once the students gained some proficiency in editing their picture, we continued to use *Adobe Premiere* for editing sound. They first practiced how to perform basic sound edits to background music and sound effects before learning to edit and mix their dialogue for project three. Additionally, we analyzed several short video clips and discussed how a setting or situation can be created by inserting sound effects, such as using the sound of car horns to give the impression of heavy traffic.

## 5. Project Reflections

- Video Project One

The students were scheduled to each present a narrative short film of five minutes or less on week five. Due to the amount of time needed to cover each stage of production in the lessons, this deadline was extended by a week. Although their completed videos at week six demonstrated some proper usage of the camera and editing software, there was a lack of technique used throughout their videos. They had minimal scene coverage, uninspired performances, shaky

handheld shots, and jarring jump cuts. As shown in Figure 2, one of the students originally had their performer slowly walking up a set of stairs in a shaky 15-second *Wide Shot* (WS) in a single take and had no additional coverage of this action. This lack of coverage left the student with few options during the editing process.



Figure 2

Reflecting on these unexpected results, I decided to revisit our camera workshop and streamline it with the three most essential shots needed for visual storytelling. I emphasized the use of shooting every scene in a *Wide Shot* (WS), *Medium Shot* (MS), and *Close-Up* (CU) and to shoot multiple takes with varied performances, so they can create more options in the editing room. Also, I strongly encouraged the use of a tripod for all *panning*, *tilting*, and *static shots*. A *pan* is when the camera horizontally turns left or right, and a *tilt* is when the camera vertically pivots up or down. These two basic camera movements are often used to follow the movements of any on-screen action, reveal detail, or establish a location. In the case of a *static shot*, the camera does not move, so the action is usually confined within the camera's frame.

- Reshooting Video Project One

To deepen their understanding, we then reshot video project one together on campus during class time. This collaborative process gave the students the opportunity to participate in placing the camera and directing the action. In the following class, we continued our collaboration by editing our new footage together. Having a wider range of performances from the performers covered with the three basic camera shots (*Wide*, *Medium*, and *Close-Up*) on a tripod with multiple takes, the students were now able to effectively edit the footage after discussing the shot selection, the placement of the cuts, and the rhythm of the sequence. Having these three new shots to choose from allowed us to smoothly speed up the tempo of any slow action. In the student's new sequence, the performer is at the bottom of the stairs in a 4-second *Wide Shot*, it then cuts to a 3-second *Close-Up* of her face, and then cuts to a 3-second *Medium Shot* of her reaching the top of the staircase, making the sequence a third shorter (Figure 3). Through this process, students learned that each of these shots can be shortened or lengthened to change the sequence's rhythm, enabling them to assemble a more interesting and dynamic cut. Furthermore, the addition of the *Close-Up* provides new information, which was lacking in the first cut. By seeing discomfort and sweat on the performer's face, the viewers can clearly see that the character is in physical discomfort. This detail serves the narrative's conflict for the viewer soon learns that the character has an injured foot and is in need of assistance.



Figure 3

- Video Project Two

In preparation for producing video two, we watched several PSA videos and discussed the societal issues that were addressed in them, such as animal neglect and cyber bullying. The students then discussed different societal issues in Japan and brainstormed them as potential topics for a jointly produced video. As with project one, the students were encouraged to write about a topic they find meaningful and that draws upon personal experience. On week eleven, the students presented their PSA video on the over usage of smartphones by students on campus, and it was well-produced. There were natural performances, smooth camera pans and tilts, and well-timed cuts of interesting shots, which supported the PSA's message. For example, the students shot and edited *Close-Ups* from the front and back of their performer to effectively show that prolonged smartphone usage can lead to neck pain (Figure 4).



Figure 4

- Video Project Three

In week 13, the students were introduced to the process of recording production sound for their final project, which requires one line or more of spoken dialogue. During the workshop portion of this lesson, the students were taught how to operate a shotgun microphone to capture clean audio. Also known as a super-cardioid, this type of directional microphone has a narrow pickup pattern, allowing the operator to isolate the performer's dialogue from most background noises. In the final class, the students presented their final projects and demonstrated a clear progression in their video skills. However, the production audio was not equally strong. Presumably, the microphone was improperly operated with poor placement, and a location with distracting background noise was used, making it difficult to clearly hear. Considering this was their final project, there were no additional opportunities to improve the shortcomings of their production audio skills in a follow-up lesson. As with project one, the amount of technical information shared within a short amount of time became too great for the students.

## 6. Overall Reflection

Reflecting on the progress made by the students throughout the semester, their greatest improvement came after our collaborative reshoot. From this point forward, they began asking more questions and taking more notes during the workshop portion of our lessons and spending more time with the camera and editing equipment outside of class time (Figure 5). In other words, they appeared more invested in the process of writing, shooting, and editing of their videos, despite all of its challenges. Furthermore, the students were able to recognize their improved production skills even before they received my feedback. As stated in their production reports, they were able to make “better” videos, because they shot more coverage and made more edits, and they took the time to carefully plan their productions. Finally, the students were able to express their ideas in English for the purpose of creating a video, such as discussing thematic aspects of their script and communicating technical details to their crew and performers.



Figure 5

## 7. Looking Forward

Based on the experiences of the students and the projects they produced, along with their feedback in the project reports and course evaluation, several revisions are being made to the lessons and the project requirements for 2019. Recognizing the benefits of our reshoot, the students will be required to shoot video project one on campus, so it can easily be remade during in-class workshops. This collaboration will directly address any shortcomings in the students' writing, shooting, and editing. To allow more time for this activity, the camera workshop will be simplified to learning how to shoot basic coverage with no explanation of lens focal lengths or complicated camera angles, and the editing workshop will not include color correcting. To further simplify some of the more advanced workshops, students will no longer receive instruction on operating a shotgun microphone. As a result, recording dialogue for video project three will no longer be a requirement. Students can still add speech to their video projects in the form of narration or a voice over; however, it will be recorded in Bunkyo's sound booth under teacher supervision and added during the project's post-production. Having less technical ground to cover through these changes will be a benefit to the students, as they can place more focus on developing a stronger foundation in the basics of videomaking.


## Appendices

### 1. Digital Research Skills Lesson Schedule

Week 1	Introduction to Digital Research Skills	This class will introduce the content of Digital Research Skills, explain assessments, and give opportunities for students to ask questions. Small production groups of 2-4 students will be decided.
Week 2	Writing a story	In this class, we will analyze and discuss videos related to screenwriting and have a tech workshop on dramatic writing. Students will be introduced to Video Project #1 (no dialog, ~5 minutes) and brainstorm ideas.
Week 3	Creating an image/Shooting video	In this class, we will analyze and discuss videos related to image composition and have a tech workshop on shooting video.
Week 4	Editing Video	In this class, we will analyze and discuss videos related to their editing and have a tech workshop on editing a short sequence.
Week 5	Video Project #1 presentation (no dialog, ~5 min)	In this class, students will present their video projects, and discuss aspects of their writing, shooting, and editing.
Week 6	Researching a short documentary or PSA (Public Service Announcement)	In this class, we will analyze and discuss short documentaries and PSAs and have a tech workshop on how to effectively research a topic for producing one. Students will be introduced to Video Project #2 documentary / PSA (dialog, ~5 minutes) and brainstorm ideas.
Week 7	Camera lighting	In this class, we will analyze and discuss various lighting setups and have a tech workshop on using natural and artificial light for producing a video.
Week 8	Production sound	In this class, we will analyze and discuss different sound qualities in videos and have a tech workshop on creating high-quality sound for video.
Week 9	Editing sound	In this class, we will analyze and discuss videos related to their sound editing and have a tech workshop on editing a short audio sequence.
Week 10	Video Project #2 documentary/ PSA presentation (sound, ~5 min)	In this class, students will present their video projects, and discuss aspects of their research, writing, shooting, and editing.
Week 11	Researching/Writing	In this class, students will choose a topic for a short documentary or PSA and begin researching it, or students will choose a theme for short film and begin writing the script. Students will be introduced to Video Project #3 (sound, 5~ minutes) and brainstorm ideas.
Week 12	Researching/Writing	In this class, students will continue to develop their narrative, documentary, or PSA video and prepare to shoot for it.
Week 13	Shooting video	In this class, students will prepare to shoot their video or start shooting.
Week 14	Editing video and sound	In this class, students will edit the audio and video for their final project.
Week 15	Video Project #3 final presentation (sound, 5~ min)	In this class, students will present their video projects, and discuss aspects of their research, writing, shooting, and editing.



## 2. Production Report



Digital Research Skills

Video Project #2 Report. (Please write in English.)

Name:

Date:

What is your PSA about? (What is the conflict?)	
Where did you shoot your film?	
Who was in your film?	
Were there any problems during your <u>writing &amp; planning</u> ?  (Or do you have any comments about your experience?)	
Were there any problems during your <u>shooting</u> ?  (Or do you have any comments about your experience?)	
Were there any problems during your <u>editing</u> ?  (Or do you have any comments about your experience?)	
Does your script match the film that you've made?  (Is it the same, or did you have to make changes?)	

<p>Compare your making of video project #1 and #2.</p> <p>(For example: -Did you do something differently/the same? -Was something easier/more difficult?)</p>	
<p>Is there anything you would do differently for your next film?</p> <p>(Or is there something new you'd like to try?)</p>	
<p>Do you have an additional comments that you'd like to share about the making of your film?</p> <p>(If so, please write about them.)</p>	

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