

Addressing pedagogical dilemmas in a constructivist language learning experience

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Abstract: Educational constructivism has long been associated with advanced pedagogy on the basis that, it champions a learner-centered approach to teaching, advocates learning in meaningful contexts and promotes problem-based activities where learners construct their knowledge through interaction with their peers. Involving language learners in video projects allows a seamless incorporation of constructivist assumptions into the teaching and learning experience. However, practicing educational constructivism has been fraught with a number of pedagogical dilemmas and challenges (Windschitl, 2002). First among these dilemmas is the need to promote learner autonomy while, at the same time, maintaining a solid framework for the learning experience. Secondly, constructivist teaching and learning require proper assessment strategies that take into account the uniqueness of this educational practice. This article describes a video project implemented by Russian language learners and deliberates on possible ways to deal with these pedagogical dilemmas.

Key words: educational constructivism, student video project, foreign language learning, foreign language teaching, grading rubric

I. Introduction.

The main notion of constructivism is that people construct their understanding and knowledge of the world around them. As Phillips (1995, p.5) observed, “Humans are born with *some* cognitive or epistemological equipment or potentialities ... but by and large human knowledge, and the criteria and methods we use in our inquiries, are all *constructed*” (italics appear in the original).

In education, constructivism is to many synonymous with “progressive pedagogy” (Semel and Sadovnik, 1999) because, it champions a learner-centered approach to teaching, advocates learning in meaningful contexts and promotes problem-based activities where the learners construct their knowledge through interaction with their peers. Furthermore, educational constructivism demands that learning experiences are enriching for the learners, that they support the learners’ autonomy and stimulate the re-activation of the previously acquired knowledge (see Loyens, Rikers, and Schmidt, 2007; Oxford, 1997; Phillips, 1995). In a constructivist classroom, the teacher ceases to be the sole authority on knowledge. Instead he or she becomes “a facilitator of exploration and a provider of experiences” (Prater, 2001, p. 45). Practicing educational constructivism

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would necessitate “creating and adapting curricula to meet the needs of learners, managing more active classrooms and dealing with accountability issues regarding student learning” (Windschitl, 2002, p.134). The pertinent question that arises from this discussion is: “How can constructivist assumptions be transformed into pedagogical strategies?”

Educators and educational theorists have been aware that implementing constructivist pedagogy in practice is fraught with many dilemmas. This is due to the fact that “‘Constructivist pedagogy’ is less a model than a descriptor for instructional strategies” (Windschitl, 2002, p.136). There is no blueprint as to how classroom proceedings should be organized in a constructivist classroom. Consequently, attempts to translate constructivist assumptions into pedagogical strategies have met with numerous challenges. Among these is the need to ensure that lessons lead to solid learning outcomes while giving the students the freedom to engage in active learning. Another dilemma concerns the assessment of the students’ learning where the instructor needs to allocate marks to individual learners for their participation in a collective effort (see Johnston and Karageorgis, 2009, p.1). Indeed, one of the misconceptions about educational constructivism has been that since the learners must be given a considerable degree of freedom “no rigorous assessment strategies” are required (Windschitl, 2002, p.139).

The aim of the present study is to examine possible ways to solve these pedagogical dilemmas. It focuses on the foreign language classroom and describes a video project carried out by Russian language learners at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The paper gives a brief summary of two student-produced videos and reports the students’ opinions about the project. This study was carried out in an ethnographic manner whereby the researcher was also the teacher and the project advisor. The initiation of the video project was dictated by classroom considerations, such as the need to make language learning a more relevant experience for the students, and the desire to enhance their creativity, teamwork, and self-reliance.

II. How Learner-Produced Videos Can Promote Constructivist Pedagogy.

Studies devoted to using digital video as a medium for instruction have been an increasingly popular topic in educational research. Video projects have been implemented with the students of various academic subjects and at different educational levels (see Gross, 1998; Jonassen et al, 2003; Kearney and Schuck, 2006; Levin, 2003; Potter, 2005; Yildiz, 2003). As Shewbridge and Berge (2004) noted, “[v]ideo production has been recognized for its knowledge building capabilities and potential for application in constructivist learning” (p.36).

Constructivist views on education are built on the premises that knowledge is not only constructed by individuals but that it is constructed actively, involves social interaction between the learners and develops learner autonomy (see Jonassen et al., 1999; Loyens, Rikers, and Schmidt, 2007; Phillips, 1995). Involving a group of students in a video project creates a good platform for cooperative learning and stimulates social interaction among the learners (Goldfarb, 2002). It provides an authentic learning experience (Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves, 2003; Kearney and Schuck, 2006), helps in the development of various types of literacies and generic skills (Theodosakis, 2002;

Yildiz, 2003), introduces innovative teaching and learning modalities (Hernández-Ramos, 2006), and establishes a learning milieu close to the students' life experiences (Potter, 2005).

Some studies have been specifically devoted to the learner-produced video in the context of language teaching and learning. In the language classroom, video projects create a learning context for activities where the use of real language is imperative. As Sildus (2006) noted, "Real life language always happens in a context, and it would be logical to design classroom activities to resemble real language use" (p.55). The benefits of doing a film project in the target language are manifold: the project provides an excellent opportunity for "authentic communication" in the target language (Gareis, 2000), leads to better vocabulary retention (Sildus, 2006), encourages "higher order thinking in the language" (Carney and Foss, 2008), diversifies learning activities and enhances student motivation (Yamak, 2008), and promotes learner autonomy (Gardner, 1994). Some of the studies on student video projects have offered practical suggestions as to how the activity can be organized (Brooke, 2003; Carney and Foss, 2008; Gardner, 1994; Yamak, 2008).

III. Video Production Phases.

As Phillips (1992) observed, putting the learning in the hands of the learners may be a disturbing idea for some educators because this may be perceived as giving the students a "frightening degree of freedom". Obviously, some fine tuning is required by the teacher to ensure that lessons have solid learning outcomes while still giving students a high degree of control over their learning. For this to happen, teachers need to devise a suitable framework for the learning activity as well as having to hammer out proper assessment strategies.

Based on the available studies on student-produced video in the context of the foreign language classroom (Carney and Foss, 2008; Gardner, 1994; Yamak, 2008) the implementation of video projects can be divided in two phases: (1) the pre-production phase, and (2) the production phase. The teacher's role varies in each of these phases. In the pre-production phase for example, he or she acts as a referee who establishes a set of ground rules for the students.

The pre-production phase can be divided into several stages. First of all, the learning goals must be set and the learning outcomes must be identified. The goals and outcomes must be perceivable by the learners and concerned with the subject matter (Gardner, 1994). For a film project in the context of language learning, the main goal is to develop fluency in the target language. It is important to note here that the assessment strategy for the project will need to reflect this ultimate target.

Next, the project organization must be decided upon. Gardner (1994) suggests several possible organizational models, namely (1) the whole class is engaged in one project, (2) the "project elite" coordinates the project, selects and appoints "experts" for various production tasks, (3) small groups work on their own video, and (4) a modular design which combines elements from (1) and (3). The choice of which model to adopt can be left to the learners. However, the final decision needs to be based on several considerations, such as the availability of equipment for video making (*e.g.*, digital

cameras), the learners' technical expertise, the ability of the team members to meet regularly, etc.

Once the most viable model for project implementation has been selected, the focus shifts to the video theme. The choice of theme should relate to the course contents or the curriculum. At this stage, the teacher may want to make it explicitly clear that the learners are required to use the vocabulary and linguistic structures they had learned during the language program. This is done to counter the temptation to use 'electronic' or word-for-word translations of the conversations and narratives in the video. However, the choice of the theme for the video is best left to the learners. Finally, the intended audience for the video presentations must be identified. The audience may be limited to classmates or it may include students from other groups or courses, teachers, etc. It is important to identify the intended audience because if the video is to be shown to people who do not know the language, subtitles will almost certainly be required.

Once the issues pertaining to the pre-production phase of the project are settled the learners begin to work on their video. The students need to develop the storyline, write the script, compose conversations, discuss how and when to shoot the video, etc. This stage is characterized by learner interaction and the teacher "disappear[s] into background" (Gardner, 1994, p.48).

IV. Assessment Strategies for Student Video Projects.

A. Devising Evaluation Strategies.

The instructor needs to develop proper evaluation strategies in order to enhance the students' awareness of the expected learning outcomes and to motivate them to achieve these targets. Determining the parameters for project evaluation requires thorough deliberation. For a video project carried out as a part of language program the linguistic aspect is undoubtedly the most important. In a sense, the production of student videos can be described as placing of the "visual icing on the textual cake" (Goldfarb, 2002, p. 20) where the language output by the learners is a pivotal element.

One of the numerous pedagogical dilemmas in a constructivist classroom is allocating the marks to individual learners for their performance, participation in and contribution to a collective effort. Therefore, it is important that the evaluation scheme for a team work project is fair and effective, and perceived as such by the students (Johnston and Karageorgis, 2009). Formative assessment -- based on the 'end product' (i.e., the video itself), the teacher's informal observations of the students' work, and the feedback received from group members -- could be the most suitable method of evaluation. In order to encourage feedback from students, the instructor may insist that they keep a 'work-in-progress report', wherein team members describe their activities at various stages of project implementation, mention each group members' contribution to the team effort, and include other information related to the project. Such reports would provide additional insight into the mechanics of each group, which would in turn be of use when evaluating the students' efforts.

B. The Evaluation Rubric for the Video Project.

The students' work on the video was evaluated based on (1) the end product (i.e., the video itself), (2) the work-in-progress reports submitted to the instructor, (3) the instructor's own observations of the group's work on the video, which included discussions and consultations with the students, etc., and (4) the classroom presentations which included a short question and answer session.

The evaluation rubric was given to the students before the work on the project began (see Appendix 1). A maximum of 10 points was allocated for the video project out of a total 100 points for the course evaluation. Considering specific features of the subject matter where mastery of the language is imperative, the highest mark in the evaluation scheme (i.e., 6 points out of a total of 10) was assigned for appropriate language use. This included the use of proper vocabulary and grammar structures, employing idiomatic expressions and suitable mood register in the video conversations and narratives.

The use of language was to be determined by the contents of the video or the choice of topics from the course synopsis. The maximum mark for the contents of the video was 1.5. The same maximum number of points (1.5) was allocated to the creative aspect of the video. In a sense, producing a video is an art project. The students have to develop the storyline, write the video script and conversations, prepare physical props, act in front of the camera, select music for the soundtrack, add special effects (e.g., animations, captions, sound effects, etc). Therefore, creativity is deemed an important element and included in the evaluation rubric. Last but not least, one (1) point was allocated for the students' ability to work as part of a team. The decision to allocate only one point for team work was based on the instructor's observations (from previous projects) that the students had no difficulty in working together.

Before the project began, the students were informed that the video presentations would be done in the classroom during the last two weeks of the semester (i.e., weeks 13 and 14). The instructor also asked the students whether they knew how to shoot video and suggested holding a workshop on video-making. The majority of the students knew how to make video using their hand phones or digital cameras; some of them knew how to use special software to edit video. Consequently the idea of the workshop was abandoned.

V. Method.

A. Background and Participants.

The project involved a class of 37 students who were completing their fourth, and final, semester of Russian language study at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). UMS is a big public university located in Kota Kinabalu, the capital of Sabah state in Malaysia. Learning a foreign language (e.g., French, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish) or a local language (e.g., Kadazan-Dusun, Tamil) is compulsory for the university students who are proficient in the English language and who obtained scores in Bands 4, 5, or 6 of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET).

The participants were all below 26 years of age and included representatives from various ethnic groups in Malaysia (i.e., the Malay, Chinese, Indian, Bidayuh, Kadazan-

Dusun, and Iban). The class was of mixed gender, and the majority of the learners were science and engineering students.

B. Data Collection and Analysis.

The data sources for this study consisted of artefacts (i.e., the student-produced videos and the work-in-progress reports), the researcher's observations of the work on the project, discussions with the students at various stages of the project implementation, and the students' answers to the open-ended questions. The questionnaires were distributed to the students at the end of the semester (week 14), after all the presentations were finished. They contained the following open-ended questions: (1) "What was the most challenging part of the project?", (2) "What was the most enjoyable / fun part of the project?", (3) "Do you feel that you have benefited from being involved in this project? If 'yes', then in what way?" (4) "If your answered 'no' to Question 4, can you suggest how this project could be improved?", and (5) "Would you recommend that this type of activity be continued with your juniors? Why?", and (6) "What have you learned from being involved in this project?". A qualitative analysis of the data was carried out using the interpretive paradigm described by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007). Answers to the open-ended questions were analyzed by unitizing the data, sorting it into categories and coding each category in accordance with Stringer's (2008) recommendations.

VI. The Project.

A. Setting Project Goals.

The guidelines distributed to the students before the project commenced stipulated that (1) the video should include topics learned during the four semesters of the Russian language program (this was done with the aim of reactivating previously gained knowledge - an important principle of educational constructivism); (2) the students must use appropriate vocabulary and grammar in the conversations and narrations (this requirement was aimed at preventing the learners from using electronic translations that are readily available on-line); (3) each and every group member must participate in the role-play (in order to eliminate the 'free rider' problem ubiquitous in team work); (4) language that the students use must be comprehensible to their audience; (5) videos can be up to 15 minutes in duration (see Appendix 1).

For the rest of the project, the students were given complete freedom and took their own decisions regarding project implementation. However, they were encouraged to consult the instructor about any problem they encountered at any stage of the project. A few weeks after project commencement, before they began shooting their videos, the students were asked to submit drafts of the video scripts to the instructor for checking. After the scripts had been corrected, some groups opted for pronunciation practice with the instructor.

B. Project Organization.

The most feasible model for project implementation dictated that students work on their video in separate groups. This form of organization is closely linked to the cooperative learning framework described by Johnson and Johnson (1987, 1991), Slavin (1990), and Sharan and Sharan (1992); however, there are “virtually no models for cooperative learning methods” developed for the language classroom (Allen, 2006, p.12).

The students were given freedom to form their own teams. Though it is normally recommended that the teacher separate the students into groups, it is also accepted that learners should be allowed to group themselves for self-directed projects if they have sufficient experience in implementing group projects and are proficient in cooperative group work (Sharan and Sharan, 1992). For the work on the video project, the students were encouraged to self-organize for several reasons. Firstly, the learners were adult university students who had studied Russian together and had worked on assignments in small groups over the previous three semesters. Secondly, encouraging students to organize their own groups promotes the learners’ initiative and responsibility for learning from the onset of the project (Johnston and Karageorgis, 2009), and lends additional support to the constructivist assumption of learner autonomy. Thirdly, consideration was given to the fact that filming a short movie in the target language is, to a large extent, an artistic endeavour; hence freedom to form the creative team would boost group creativity, promote student motivation, and lead to a better outcome. The instructor only advised that the groups be not too large and that the group members be able to meet each other for regular discussions. A total of six groups were formed by the students.

C. Choosing a Video Theme.

The students themselves chose the theme for their video. They were encouraged to be creative and given freedom of choice regarding the format of their video. The following titles were proposed by the students: “Old Friends”, “Kidnapping”, “Vlad”, “My First Day at the University”, “Show Time”, and “Vkusno!” (“It’s Tasty!”).

D. Identifying the Intended Audience.

Since the videos were to be presented in the class, the intended audience included all the classmates. The instructor tentatively suggested that the most successful videos could be uploaded on YouTube. For this purpose, it was decided that English subtitles of the conversations must be supplied. The students were very enthusiastic about the idea of sharing their videos with an international audience. However, after all the videos had been presented the students agreed that some additional editing would be required before the videos could be posted on YouTube.

E. Video Presentations.

Through discussions with the students about the format of the video presentations it was decided that each group would begin the presentation with a short introduction. The introduction could include an explanation about the choice of the video theme, a brief

description of the difficulties the group had encountered while working on the video and of how the team members solved these difficulties, etc. A notebook computer, speakers, and an LCD projector were set up in the classroom for the presentations.

VII. Student-Produced Videos.

The following subsections offer a description of two videos produced by the students. In a sense, these artefacts represent polar opposites whereby one video is a successful outcome of the team effort while the other is a less satisfactory outcome.

A. The Video “Old Friends”.

In this video, which lasts 10 minutes 27 seconds, the students act as themselves. As they explained, “[It is] a story about old friends coming together after many years apart and recalling the happy times they had together, only to realize times have changed and they can never regain what they had experienced”. The events in the video take place on 28 February 2030, when a group of former classmates gathers at the Kota Kinabalu airport to welcome their friend. The English translation of the opening conversation is:

A: Welcome! Long time no see!

B: Hello, my friends. How are you?

C: And how are you? Where are you planning to stay?

B: I am thinking of staying at the five-star hotel “Luna”.

B: The service in this hotel is very bad. There are mice in the room - and bed bugs.

C: Let’s go to my place.

B: Oh, thank you!

C: Are you hungry? We can go to a Japanese, Italian or Malaysian restaurant.

B: Thanks, but I ate in the plane.

In this conversation, the students use appropriate greetings and employ the idiomatic expression “long time no see” which in Russian is literary “(how) many summers, (how) many winters!” They infuse the dialogue with humour when they discuss an imaginary five-star hotel with the mice in the room and the bed bugs! The students also made an appropriate socio-cultural ‘move’ by inviting their friend to stay in their house rather than in a hotel.

On the way home, the “old friends” remember their life as UMS students some 20 years ago. The segments where the friends recall the “good old times” are filmed in black and white and are accompanied with sentimental music. As for the “present”, the friends make plans how to spend their time, whom to visit, and which places of interest to see. One of the conversations, translated into English, proceeds thus:

A: Where do you want to go today?

B: I don’t know.

C: We could go to Kinabalu Park or Tanjung Aru beach. Or, perhaps, we could go to “One Borneo” Mall or even to the Manukan Island.

B: That’s interesting... Mmm...

A: Let's go to UMS!

B: Yes, let's go there!

In the campus, they find their former classmate who now works as a university lecturer. They share information about some of their university friends. The video ends on a nostalgic note that “what was, will never return”.

Evaluation of the Video “Old Friends”. The students produced a successful video, and received 10 points each for their work. First of all, as far as language use is concerned, the students employed an appropriate vocabulary and the correct grammar; they used the proper mood register for various situations, and employed some idiomatic expressions they had learned during the language program. They spoke fluently with good pronunciation and made very few errors in their speech. Secondly, the contents of the video were well thought through and a variety of topics were included in the storyline (e.g., meeting friends at the airport, choosing lodgings, discussing which places of interest to visit, giving directions, eating out, etc.). Thirdly, the students received a high mark for creativity because they approached their topic from an unusual perspective where they looked at the everyday reality of being university students from a point in the distant future. The soundtrack of the video conveyed to the viewers the emotions that the ‘old friends’ experienced in various situations. Finally, good team work was in evidence. In the video, all the group members participated in the conversation and spoke for periods of approximately equal duration.

The work-in-progress report prepared by the group mentioned how each group member contributed to the joint effort of the team; the tasks were equally shared by the team members. For example, each student participated in developing the storyline and wrote a part of the script in Russian. Some ‘division of labour’ was in evidence regarding the technical side of the project implementation. Thus, two students were in charge of typing the English subtitles, while one group member was in charge of “piecing together the recorded bits”; another team member was in charge of procuring the equipment to shoot the video, and one group member prepared the physical props. A section in the report that covered the problems that the students encountered gave an additional glimpse into the inner workings of the team. The biggest challenges mentioned by the group members were writing the script in Russian and solving some technical problems (e.g., sometimes the format of the recorded video was not compatible with the software).

B. The Video “Show Time”.

The duration of this video is 13 min 53 seconds. As the students explain in their report, “This is a story about a man who is determined to achieve his dream of becoming a singer”. The video begins with the story of a student who is late for an audition for the role of lead singer in a rock group. He oversleeps and forgets to bring his guitar. As a result, he performs poorly and fails the audition. Later in the afternoon he goes to a café where he meets another student who failed the same audition. The two young men become friends.

In the following episode, which takes place in the student hostel, three girls talk about their dream of joining a rock band. One of the girls suggests that they all go to café and have lunch. At the café, they meet the two young men. They chat over the meal and

decide to form their own rock band. After practicing together for some time they perform well in a band competition, and realize their dreams.

Evaluation of the Video "Showtime". The video "Showtime" received 6 points; its weakest part was the language use. Only two group members spoke fluently in front of the camera. The rest of the students paused frequently while trying to remember their lines and spoke with numerous grammatical mistakes. Another problem was that some group members talked very little in the video. The students noticed this shortcoming and commented in the report that the "dialogues were not equally distributed among the team members". As they explained, the members of the group who had little to say in the video "did a little bit more behind the scenes in exchange", such as preparing the props and the equipment.

On the positive side, the students showed good team work and creativity. Each of the group members can play a musical instrument, and in the video they performed a cover version of a Russian rock song. However, since the language use was the most important part of the video project and was allocated the highest number of points in the grading rubric, the overall mark for the video was comparatively low.

VIII. Students' Opinions about the Project.

The first open-ended question that sought the students' opinion about the project was "What was the most challenging part of the project?" Four main categories of challenges emerged from the answers, namely, (1) linguistic (n=15), (2) technical (n=15), (3) creativity-related (n=14), and (4) team work (n=7). In the first cluster of answers, the typical problems were "memorizing the script" and lacking a linguistic aptitude to realize a "lot of good ideas". In the second category, the main challenges were "shooting the video" and "editing the video". Further, "acting in front of the people", "developing the storyline" were among the most prominent challenges regarding the creative aspect of the project. As for the team work, "finding time to meet" was the biggest challenge followed by problems with "task sharing".

Two categories emerged in the students' responses to the second question, which sought to identify the most enjoyable part of the project. The most frequent answers were from the "working on the video" category (n=23) and included "shooting the video", "acting", and "going to site". This was followed by responses from the "group work" category (n=12) where the most typical answers were "getting together", "learning from others", "working with group members", and "sharing ideas".

All the students gave positive answers to the question, "Do you feel that you have benefited from being involved in this project? If 'yes', then in what way?" The biggest category related to "linguistic benefits" (n=19) which included an increased use of the language (e.g., "I spoke more Russian, as I usually don't", "(It was) a good chance to speak Russian", "I talked real Russian", "I could talk without reading the text") and improved language skills (e.g., "I improved my speaking", "I learned some new words and grammar", "I know the right way to speak Russian", "I can apply similar language in similar situations", etc.). The smaller categories were "improving one's technical knowledge" (n=5) (e.g., "Now I know how to edit video", "I became more experienced in shooting video"), and "enhancing one's life skills" (n=4) (e.g., "(I) became more

determined to complete any given task in the future”, “Now I am less shy to speak in front of the camera”, “I got some life skills from the project”).

The question “Would you recommend that this type of activity be continued with your juniors? Why?” received full support from the students and everyone agreed that the project should be continued. Most of the answers (n=19) stated that it was “a novel and enjoyable activity” (e.g., “it’s a new way to learn”, “it’s fun”, “it’s more practical and enjoyable”, “it’s enjoyable and allows us to express creativity”). Responses in the second largest category (n=13) supported the project because it helped “improving language skills”; typical answers were “they (the juniors) can practice real Russian”, “they have more opportunity to speak Russian”, and “the project gave me confidence to speak Russian”.

Finally, in response to the question “What have you learned from being involved in this project”, the students cited a variety of learning outcomes. The biggest category of answers (n=18) was related to learning about working as a team. The most frequent answers were “I learned about teamwork”, “I learned how to cooperate with the classmates”, “I learned that unity is important”, “I learned about commitment and teamwork”. The second biggest cluster of answers (n=12) pertained to the enhanced linguistic aptitude (e.g., “I learned a proper way to speak Russian in real life”, “I learned pronunciation, something that is hard for me”, “I learned to communicate more fluently in Russian”, etc.). The third category of opinions related to acquiring various “life skills” (n=8), such as being on time (e.g., “I learned to be on time (don’t let your friends wait for you to do the project)”, “I learnt the importance of being on time”, “I learned that I should improve my time management”) and being committed to the task (e.g., “I learned to never give up”, “I learned to persevere under undesirable circumstances”).

IX. Discussion and Conclusion.

Due to a fact that visual culture has become “the means of knowledge and meaning production” (Goldfarb, 2002, p.2), numerous student video projects have been carried out in various educational settings and across different academic disciplines (see Goldfarb, 2002; Goodman, 2003; Gross, 1998; Kearney and Schuck, 2006; Levin, 2003; Potter, 2005; Yildiz, 2003). The current study focused on a video-making activity in the context of language learning and argued that designing a proper framework for the activity and developing an effective grading rubric would help address some of the pedagogical dilemmas that arise in a constructivist learning situation. Among these dilemmas are the extent of the teacher’s presence in the learning activity, and the allocation of grades to individual students for collaborative work.

In the video projects the instructor might be required to take a more prominent role in the earlier pre-production phases when a set of ground rules for project implementation and the grading rubric need to be established and communicated. The rules must be aimed at “minimizing the risk of negative, and maximizing the likelihood of positive results” (Johnston and Karageorgis, 2009, p.3) while the grading rubric needs to be developed in order to help the student achieve the desired learning outcomes. In the current video project the paramount aims were to improve the students’ linguistic and “life skills”. Another important consideration when developing the rubric is to ensure that the learners produce a “*high-quality product*” through a “*superb teamwork process*” as

suggested by Johnston and Karageorgis (2009, *italics as in the original*). At the production stage, the instructor can retreat into the background in order to promote the students' autonomy as learners and to support the constructivist nature of the learning activity.

Based on the project's outcome and the findings of this study, the framework developed for the activity and the grading rubric helped the instructor to achieve her pedagogical aims. The students improved their language skills as they spoke considerably more Russian than in previous semesters. Significantly, the learners themselves commented on this fact. Furthermore, the students had an ample opportunity to engage in team work and, as was evident from their answers to the questionnaire, they liked the mode of learning. During project implementation, the students encountered various problems and had to think of the ways to solve them; also, various learning outcomes were achieved. As the students' answers to the questions attest, they had a positive opinion about the project and considered it beneficial for their learning and worthy of continuation.

However, the project could have been implemented more successfully and certain modifications are recommended. First of all, considering that "shooting the video" and "editing the video" were regarded as the biggest challenges, the addition of workshops for students who need extra technical knowledge on video making would seem a prudent idea. Secondly, all the students should be required to have pronunciation practice with the instructor before they shoot the video, even if this does necessitate a brief appearance by the teacher from the "backstage". In the project described in this article, pronunciation practice was not obligatory. Students could practice the dialogues with the instructor if they felt they would benefit from this. However, it was evident while watching the videos that there were a few students who had not realized that they needed to polish their pronunciation before talking in front of the camera.

In addition, some changes to the grading rubric are necessary. Firstly, the work-in-progress report will be included among the evaluation categories, and the number of points for the project increased to a total of 15. In the project described in this article, the students submitted their scripts in Russian to the instructor for checking and correcting. In future, the students will be required to include the video scripts written in Russian in the reports, and the accuracy of the written language will be evaluated. Secondly, a more detailed scoring rubric will be given to the students with an evaluation scale provided for each category (see Appendix 2).

To conclude, there is no blue print as to how a constructivist learning experience should be organized and evaluated. Involving the learners in the production of their own video is a viable way of putting constructivist theory into educational practice. To make the learning experience meaningful and to achieve the pedagogical agendas the instructor needs to consider educational, social, cultural and situational contexts in which the learning and teaching takes place in order to work out an appropriate framework for a learning activity and the effective evaluation strategies.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Guidelines for Your Video Project

Dear Students,

I. You are free to choose the topic of your video and to decide how you want to approach the topic. However, the following conditions must be observed:

- (1) The video must include the topic(s) that you have learned during the Russian language course.
- (2) Use appropriate language and language structures (no “electronic” translations!).
- (3) The video must include role-play (i.e., conversations/dialogues) involving each and every group member.
- (4) The language in the video must be understandable to the audience.
- (5) The duration of the video is up to 15 minutes.

II. You are required to prepare a report on your work on the project. The report will contain:

- (1) A synopsis of the video, i.e., a short summary of your video (can be written in English or in Malay).
- (2) The video script, i.e., conversations, narrations, and everything that you say in the video. The script must be written in Russian.
- (3) A “work-in-progress progress” report (e.g., the dates when the group met for discussions, issues discussed, and any other relevant information about the implementation of the project).
- (4) Information on the problems encountered by the group while working on the video, and a short explanation about how these problems were solved.
- (5) Information on the personal contribution to the project by each and every group member (such as developing the storyline, writing the script, editing the video, solving the problem(s), selecting the soundtrack, doing “special effects”, etc.).

III. The marks for the video will be calculated according to the following formula:

Language use	6 marks
Content	1.5 marks
Creativity	1.5 marks
Team work	1 mark

Appendix 2. Video Project Grading Rubric

Title of the video _____

Names and metric numbers of the group members:

You will get the maximum 15 marks for this project. The following aspects of the project will be graded:

- (1) Language use -- maximum 6 points
- (2) Report -- maximum 3 points
- (3) Contents -- maximum 2 points
- (4) Creativity -- maximum 2 points
- (5) Team work -- maximum 2 points

The highest score in each category will be given if the group's performance is considered excellent. Zero marks will be given for a completely unsatisfactory performance in the given category.

(1) Language use

Each group member speaks fluently in front of the camera, demonstrates good pronunciation, and makes no grammatical mistakes. Appropriate language and language structures are used by each student.

Score: 6 – 5 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 1 – 0

Explanation:

(2) Report

The report contains the video script (i.e., conversations, narratives, and everything that is said in the video). The script is written in Russian and contains no grammatical errors. The language used reflects what you have learned during the course. There is no clumsy “electronic” or word-by-word translation into Russian.

Score: 3 – 2 – 1 – 0

Explanation:

(3) Contents

You are free to choose the topics from the course synopsis to develop your storyline. However, not less than 8 topics must be included in the video (e.g., introducing oneself, commenting on the weather, going out to eat, describing your place of residence, etc.). The topics must blend well and be organized in a logical sequence.

Score: 2 – 1 – 0

Explanation:

(4) Creativity

The group demonstrates good creativity in the video. This may be indicated by how you approach your topic, develop the storyline, select the soundtrack or add special effects (e.g., animation, sounds), etc. Be creative!

Score: 2 – 1 - 0

Explanation:

(5) Team work

Each and every group member acts and speaks in front of the camera (i.e., the conversations). There is clear evidence in the video and in your report of each and every group member's contribution to the project including acting, development of the storyline, writing the script, editing the video, etc.

Score: 2 – 1 - 0

Explanation:

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