

## 4. How the best was won: a learner-made video

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### Introductory remarks

This article describes an example of making a video in the language classroom by adapting a short story for the screen. The discussion seeks to show that, in filming a text, it is useful to consider the study of the written source document and the making of the video not as separate events, but as parts of the same continuum. It also underlines the importance of giving time to talking about the project in class: stating and re-stating objectives, on the one hand; listening to the anxieties of the camera-shy, on the other.

Burron and Denneville's study of the use of video filming in the classroom (Burron and Denneville, 1995) goes into detail on the issues of the learner self-perceptions which are at the heart of this type of work. They point out that there is often a tug between the subject's wish for the camera to show them a *flattering image* of themselves, and their fear of only receiving a *rejected image*. In order to work with the video camera in the classroom, the teacher needs to be aware of this tug and to be ready to help learners perceive it so that they can work it through for themselves.

### The Project and the learners

The objective for the four-week project, which concluded the school year, was to make a film version of the short story "Compassion Circuit" by John Wyndham featured in the class coursebook *Channel, Second Language Book 2* (Morel and Bushnell, 1989).

"Compassion Circuit" is a science fiction story about a society where robots do all the housework. One of the main characters, Janet Shand, who does not want a robot in her home, does all her own chores and becomes exhausted. Janet and her husband, George, finally give in to modernity when the doctor prescribes a robot. However, with the arrival of the robot housemaid, Janet grows even weaker. In response to information received by its compassion circuit regarding Janet's condition, the robot decides to send her to hospital, believing modern surgery can help. When Janet comes home, George discovers that his wife has been fitted with

a compassion circuit, making her a robot, too. In his panic and dismay, George falls down the stairs to a mysterious end.

The video project was carried out with a group of twelve French 14-15 year-olds at the end of their second year of studying English three hours per week. For these pupils, in their fourth year of learning either Spanish or German, English was their second foreign language. Their levels of competence in English lay at points between "shaky" to "confident" lower intermediate.

The approach used in making a video outlined here may also be of interest to colleagues teaching on the French Ministry of Education workshop programme, *les parcours diversifiés*, introduced this year for pupils in their second year learning English as a first foreign language.

### **Project challenges**

*Mixed ability levels.* Some of the learners were educational achievers, and relatively comfortable with the English taught on the course, in spite of having only recently started to study the language; others were non-achievers for whom English, and school study in general, were not sources of any obvious satisfaction.

*The short story was more difficult than anything the learners had worked on in detail to date.* The entry points to the text would have to be carefully identified in order to make the film feasible.

*This was the group's first use of the video camera.* Since the idea behind the film was for the group to make it, they would also have to come to terms with using the camera sufficiently well for the final results to be rewarding.

*There were no editing facilities available, so the film would have to be made in sequence.* The learners would have to aim at getting things right the first time, as constantly rewinding the cassette in order to reshoot could erase scenes already filmed.

*Institutional rules meant that all the filming had to be done in the classroom.* This would require discipline and energy, arriving in class with the firm intention of getting furniture moved, props in place, filming, and then putting everything back again afterwards.

*The film had to be finished by the end of term as it was the learners' final year in the school.* They could not put things off until September if they got behind schedule. In real terms, the project ran from May 27th to June 20th, 1997: 10 class hours, and not, due to circumstances beyond our control, the theoretical 12 hours which the group should have had.

*There would be no official assessment of the quality of the work done.* For administrative reasons related to deadlines for the completion of report cards and school records prior to their departure for the *lycée*, no more official marks could be given to any of these learners. They would be working for their own reward, plus the success of the project for the class team. For some, this need to maintain motivation and produce results without any formal assessment was the biggest challenge of all.

### **Entering the text**

In view of the linguistic difficulty of the short story, it was important not to begin by announcing the video project, which would have coloured our work from the outset. We first needed to find our bearings and collect insights which would be of use when it came to adapting the story to the screen.

### **Brainstorming the title**

"Compassion Circuit" was an odd title, and seemed a good entry point for people new to the story. The group immediately pointed out that the two words did not go together. *Compassion* made them think of feelings, Third World relief and, well, passion! *Circuit* suggested Formula One racing, motorbikes and electronics. All these words went up on the board under the title. People then skimmed the text to see which of these ideas, if any, were present in the story. As a result, we were left with *electronics* and *passion*, which felt like a good start, despite the still-puzzled faces.

### **Reading and responding**

The group were asked to read the short story again, carefully. They were not to use the vocabulary index in their books — there would be time for that. On finishing, they were to write a sentence giving their response to the story: the sentence could be a summary of the plot or a reaction to the topic. The resulting sentences were a mixture of both of these, some in English and others in French. One or two were limited to saying how incomprehensible the story was, but as everyone took turns

reading aloud what they had written, and had their hypotheses confirmed by the teacher when appropriate, understanding began to move forward.

### **Listing the characters**

The next activity was within the grasp of the whole class, and allowed us to work analytically on the story at a linguistically simple level with a single correct set of answers. For this reading exercise the learners scanned the text looking for the characters in the story. Some were typographically easy to find by virtue of capital letters (Janet, Hester and George), whereas others were buried in often complex sentences (the doctor, friends and neighbours). All these characters were also future screen-roles, so it was important to see who was who in the story as told by the author.

### **Identifying reporting verbs**

The next phase, begun in class and finished at home, involved scanning the story-text for reporting verbs to be put in a three-column table, using the vocabulary index if necessary. The column-headings were:

*Past form — Infinitive — Translation*

There are a total of nine different reporting verbs in the story, with *said* dominating (14 occurrences), followed by *told* (five) and *asked* (three), plus only single occurrences for *instructed*, *agreed*, *protested*, *began*, *suggested* and *cried*. Picking these words out from the forest of the text got the learners to focus on the position and quantity of the oral exchanges between the characters we had listed in the previous exercise. These were exchanges which they would be adapting when they wrote the dialogue for their film. Also, being familiar with some of the less usual reporting verbs gently encouraged them to notice speakers' moods and intentions.

### **Main and minor characters**

The learners were now able to state characters' importance to the plot by simply counting the number of things they said. Beside the list of characters drawn up earlier, they wrote *Main character* for those who said a lot, and *Minor character* for the others. This gave us :

*Main characters: Janet Shand, George Shand, Hester the Robot*

*Minor characters: neighbours and friends, the doctor*

The group would later add a *nurse* and a *neighbour's robot* to the minor characters when adapting the text, because their presence, although only implicit in the original, had to be made explicit when filming in order for two scenes to work. The existence of the above list meant that the frame for these later additions was ready and waiting as a result of the reading exercise.

**Describing the robot**

From our reading thus far, Hester, the robot housemaid, was clearly a main character. The learners were told that, if they wanted to really understand the story, they would need to see who Hester was. Work begun in class and completed for homework was therefore to glean as much information about Hester from the text as they could. In the next class, the result was put on the board in the form of an identity card, with different categories of information to be completed :

<b>Name:</b>	Hester
<b>Age:</b>	Ageless. This robot doesn't grow old or deteriorate, and it doesn't need to sleep.
<b>Weight:</b>	Three times human weight. Approximately 200 kgs.
<b>Physical appearance:</b>	A big doll. Cold, perfect skin.
<b>Components:</b>	Metal, plastic and electronic circuits.
<b>Operation:</b>	Control switches at the back. Small panel that opens.
<b>Special features:</b>	Ability to talk like a human. Equipped with a compassion circuit for feelings — this gives the story its title.

This work had allowed us to visualize the Hester-character. And visuals took us into the world of film. It was now time to announce the project.

**Moving from text to film**

The suggestion that we could make a film of this short story brought mixed reactions, but the overall mood was positive. What would making a video involve, technically speaking? They only had slight lexical difficulty coming up with the list

of *director, camera operator, screenplay writer, sound engineer, set designer, costume designer* and *make-up artist*.

### **The camera-shy and the camera-happy**

In the ensuing 25 minutes of discussion in French concerning assignment of these tasks, things took an unexpected turn. Rather than simply picking tasks, the learners went straight into the question of being camera-shy or camera-happy.

One student, Thibault, definitely did not want to act at all, but definitely was interested in taking on a technical task, like director. Like to be director? He would just love to. Géraldine knew how to use a video camera and wanted to film because she had no intention of acting. Anna definitely wanted to act; in fact, she wanted to be an actress. Did it matter if her English was a little shaky? The others said that it did not, but that she would have to rehearse. Anna said that rehearsing was part of acting; she knew that. Thierry had just filled in an application for a vocational course to become an architect's assistant, so he would design the scenery, because he definitely did not want to act. This declaration disappointed Charlotte greatly, but also brought us to her own role. She did not really see what she could contribute to the project. Did she want to act? Well, that was another question. Alice and Carole said that they would write the screenplay as they did not trust the others to do it properly, and anyway neither of them wanted to act. In spite of his natural exuberance, Yann said he would definitely not be acting in the film. He would help Thierry. So would Thomas, who didn't really see himself as an actor. Mickael also wanted to film. So did Cécile. Anne was silent; she was thinking, she said.

Working with a group of 12 learners has advantages in terms of trying out a project like this. However, our discussion had underlined how camera-shy these teenagers were. Would the results have been different in a larger group? Experience making limited-dialogue videos with a noisier group of 19 students in the same *collège* suggested that being in a larger group made it easier for outgoing students to take the plunge and volunteer as actors. With that particular class I could now see how peer-pressure had helped. This smaller group were used to working in a quieter, more intimate way.

They were less afraid of speaking English or forgetting their lines than they were of forgetting themselves in letting the camera show them an image which they would not be able to control. The risk of the rejected image, which would show them as ungainly or even ridiculous, carried far more weight than any promise of a flattering image. ("De toute façon, je suis moche... Je ne

supporterais pas de me voir... On ne me photographie jamais...”).

It was time to clearly state the objectives of the project. We were going to make a film of a short story. I had chosen to do this project with them because I believed they could make something they would enjoy and be proud of. They would be responsible for all aspects of the filming and the acting, and I would be there to help whenever they needed. I would not force anybody who did not wish to be filmed to take on an acting role, but I did expect everyone to take on an active role. As a teacher, I had been filmed on several occasions; I was not always happy with what I saw of myself on the screen, but I had learnt that those images were part of me. The best of ourselves was rarely given, it had to be won. Did they still want to go ahead with the film? They did. We would discuss this again in the next class. For the time being, it was time to go back to the short story.

### Counting the scenes

We counted the scenes in the story. Answers ranged from four to 14. We analyzed this together and listed the settings on the board. The learners added the names of the characters appearing in each scene for homework. At the start of the next class we agreed to the following :

*Scene 1:* At the Shands' home. Janet and Meryl, a neighbour.

*Scene 2:* At Meryl's home. Janet, Meryl, her husband, their robot.

*Scene 3:* At the doctor's. Janet, George and the doctor.

*Scene 4:* At the Shands'. Janet, George and Hester, their robot.

*Scene 5:* At the Shands'. Janet and Hester.

*Scene 6:* At the hospital. George and a nurse.

*Scene 7:* At the Shands'. George and Hester.

*Scene 8:* In the Shands' bedroom. Janet and George.

*Scene 9:* The Shands' staircase. George and Hester.

From this new reading of the text we had a fuller list of characters, and it was time to turn to the question of who was going to play which role.

Almost everybody spoke up. Alice was about to write the screen play (“Et je ne peux pas être partout...”). Anna would play Janet (“Alors, il faut beaucoup répéter, Anna...”). Mickael would be the doctor, and Carole would be the nurse (“Ce n’est pas trop dur. Mais c’est tout. Je ne fais pas autre chose. A part les dialogues...”). Charlotte had thought a lot and decided that she wanted to play Hester (“Je parle

anglais comme un robot déjà!"). Cécile would play the neighbour, Thomas her husband ("Mais je vous préviens, je lis le journal pendant toute la scène..."), and Thierry their robot ("Je serai un robot muet!"). Still no one to play George, though. Thibault categorically refused ("Je suis metteur en scène déjà, et je me vois mal me diriger! Yann peut le faire, il n'arrête pas de parler..."). Yann? ("C'est trop dur, monsieur. C'est vous qui devriez jouer George. Vous seriez super!") This young man certainly was a tough negotiator. I made a note of who was taking which role. The project was moving forward.

### **Script, rehearsal and matters technical**

The learners spent the rest of the hour and the following class-period in special interest groups. One group worked on the script. Another got familiar with the school's video camera; not just handling it, but also teaching themselves how to insert blanks on the cassette when filming sequences back-to-back — this would be our safety net against accidentally erasing work recorded in case we had to reshoot any unsatisfactory scenes. The last group tackled the issue of scenery: the challenge of filming everything in the classroom sent them looking for ways of transforming it so that it would look like the Shands' living room, a neighbour's house, a doctor's surgery and so on.

Once this work was done, we had five hours of classes left to finish the project. The schedule would be tight, but we had no choice.

### **Making the film**

#### *The schedule*

The directors — Thibault had now been joined by Alice — prepared the schedule. The whole thing could be filmed in four hours, which would give us the fifth hour to watch and enjoy the film. Sounded great.

We had no notion at this point of total screen-time for the finished video. I decided to give the issue of the number of hours of filming priority over how long the final product was to last. It ultimately lasted eight minutes, but when agreeing to a schedule this seemed less important than simply getting the work done in time.

### **Shooting the film**

*Day 1:* The classroom was transformed into the Shands' house. Thierry had negotiated the loan of armchairs and a table from the school library. All the posters in the room were covered by sheets tacked to the walls. People had even brought

in ornaments from home to make the set look homely, following directives from the set designers who also roped in all willing hands to get everything in place. Scenes 1 and 2 were finished with only two hitches: the batteries on the camera gave out after 10 minutes in spite of being recharged, and two of the boys had to beg for an extension lead from the school electrician; the actors had not learnt their lines, so they had placed ingenious prompt-cards all over the room. Still no George. His first scene was tomorrow.

**Day 2: Scenes 3 and 4.** Yann finally agreed to play George. Fabulously convincing doctor's surgery, complete with examination couch consisting of two classroom desks and a sheet borrowed from the infirmary. Géraldine was absent today, and we missed her firm hand on the camera. The problem of finding a big enough box to put the robot in was solved by using the cloth cover from a television set in storage. Charlotte got the giggles in her first scene, which consequently had to be reshot twice, partly erasing Scene 3 in the process. People almost knew their lines. Welcome to showbiz.

**Day 3: Scene 5** was extremely long because the dialogue had been taken literally from the original source-text. The actresses did not know their lines, did not know what they were saying when they did know them, and spoke so softly that the mike was not picking up what they were saying. Alice got cross for the first time all year. The group got a big shock when I stated that the students with the best English were all on the wrong side of the camera, and that, if it was too late for them to take on roles already assigned, it was not too late for them to help the others improve. I then sat on a chair and theatrically sulked. They finished the scene.

**Day 4:** No filming today due to open day at the local Courts of Justice to which the class were invited. One day left, and 4 scenes to shoot! At breaktime, Alice and Carole came to the staff room, on their own initiative, to say that they would change the script in order to make the final scenes shorter. They said that George was going to commit suicide when he found out that his wife was a robot, and that Thierry, Thomas and Mickael had prepared the stunt for George's falling down stairs to certain death. I was impressed with what this sense of initiative said, not only about their concern for feasibility, but also about their need to see the project through.

**Day 5:** Miraculously fast filming. Everybody knew exactly what to do. Anne and

Cécile's home-made compassion circuit for Janet was very impressive in close-up. We even had time to watch the whole film — all 8 minutes! — twice at the end. Excellent atmosphere during the playback. The project had become the group's property. It was the first time we had been able to review some scenes since filming due to pressure of time in class. People laughed at themselves more than they laughed at each other. Those who did criticize their own performances were given immediate support by those who praised those same slips of the tongue. We laughed at obvious readings or misreadings of prompt-cards. We visualized what had been happening off-camera. We even applauded at the end.

### Conclusion

Camera-work aside, making this video involved a range of activities which addressed issues of language-learning, classroom attitude and learning relationships.

From a language-learning point of view, the group carried out an interesting series of modifications to the original written text in order to produce a screen-version of it. Firstly, adapting the text meant changing the past narrative of the original into the here and now of the action we filmed. Secondly, much of Wyndham's literary dialogue was unsayable for the actors, so a great deal of thought had to be put into saying the same things differently. Both of these affected learners' attitudes towards the target language, which was no longer simply English to be got right in class, but very definitely the text of the screenplay to be got right for the camera.

Another radical change concerned the learners' attitudes to the classroom. Initially experienced in terms of imagination, because the project encouraged them into perceiving the classroom as Peter Brook's *empty space* where all things are possible, their creation of the succession of film-sets for each of the scenes made their imaginings become real. They made the classroom their own space. The filming process took us into discussions of how we saw ourselves, how we saw our learning and how individual qualities can contribute to the success of a community project. The group-voice learned to express reservations, enthusiasm, impatience and, ultimately, satisfaction. We also learnt how mother-tongue discussion could help us use English more successfully.

As a teacher, I learnt that the best is always won and never given, and that trust in the group's capacity to succeed — perhaps I should say faith in that capacity, for there were many occasions when the leap of faith was all we had — and willingness

to help them bring that capacity into its own, whatever the objective quality of the final product may be.

It goes without saying, but I'll say it just the same, that the group changed during this adventure. We spent 4 weeks in the world of images and we came through. I will always remember the discussion in which so many of the group declared that they had no intention of acting, and I see the final video as proof of Bourron and Denneville's observation on how the subject can be brought to change his or her point of view about his or her own image :

*Malaise, peur de son propre jugement et celui des autres, plaisir narcissique et satisfaction d'être contemplé, sont les deux faces d'un rapport ambigu à l'image de soi. Il ne faut, en effet, pas grand chose pour que l'image "crainte" soit appréciée — après tout je ne suis pas si mal — ou que l'image "espérée soit dépréciée" — ce photographe est mauvais. (p. 23)*

This pedagogical narrative has attempted to illustrate just how complex and rewarding that process can be.

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