New Course: Using Video in the E.S.L. (English as a Second Language) Classroom

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As language teaching makes greater use of the recent advances in technology, it seems that the time has come when teachers of English as a foreign language (T. E. F. L.) might take a close look at what's available to them in terms of materials and methods, so that they might make the most of TEFL lesson planning in order to reach their course objectives. One tool that has become available to most schools, and to many private teachers, is video. The cost of a video player/recorder-and-camera set has come down to at least an accessible level for most, and I can see no reason why video shouldn't be used in classroom teaching as an integral part of the lesson.

Of course, when teaching and learning any foreign language, REALISM is what most teachers look for and try to present to their student. Especially when teaching a conversation class, one tries to present the most realistic materials one can find in order provide the student with at least an idea of how a particular gambit or phrase is used in the target language. For this reason, audiotape materials have been used extensively in the E. S. L. (English as a second language) classroom. Certainly there are hundreds of audiotape/book courses on the market, each one claiming to be "different and better" than the next. But one shortcoming of using audiotapes in class is that the medium only provides a narrow view of how the language is used, as most communication between two "native speakers" of a language is done in some non-verbal way: the expression of the face, the use of the hands, arms, etc. All this is missed when the language learner has only the voice with which to understand what someone is communicating. With the use of video, both the non-verbal and verbal elements are preserved and presented holistically to the student, and so, the language learner is able to learn the "whole" aspect of the language. It's almost as good as being there, carrying on the conversation; and in some ways, it's better, because the tape can be shown over again, or the sound can...
be turned off in order to study the non-verbal aspect or to enable the student to "speak for the speaker" on the tape.

There is an increasing number of E.S.L. video materials on the market available to the language learner, and like audiotape materials, selection in terms of quality and how well the material will meet the teacher's objectives is of paramount importance. But in addition to prepared materials, the ESL teacher has a vast resource right at his or her fingertips. This lies in the realm of actually producing something using the camera, a microphone and an idea. Sounds simple, but unfortunately, most E.S.L. teachers I've talked with simply are frightened by the gadgetry, even though they've all the equipment they need to produce good-quality materials. Many would rather spend hours cutting and pasting together pictures for a lesson on, let's say, physical characteristics discrimination and descriptions, and just don't realize (or believe!) that to do something quite similar with only a recorder, a camera, a few people as subjects, and some tape would take no more than 15 minutes to set up, shoot, and show. And the material could be much more versatile than the cut-and-paste materials.

It has been primarily this aspect of 'Fear of Equipment', when compared with (and outweighed by) the advantages of video, that has motivated the design of a new course to be given through the Faculty of Education/Department of English, through the facilities of the Educational Technology Center, at Iwate University. It is a course designed to instruct the TEFL student (upper-level students who plan on becoming language teachers) in adapting lessons and objectives to the video medium, designing and writing scripts, using the equipment (cameras, lights, recorders, sound and editing systems), in-class use of the materials (interaction between the medium and the ESL student), and perhaps more relevant to most teachers' needs and resources, how to use portable, less-expensive equipment.

This course is intended to be a semester in length, and the students will be given instruction on how to use the equipment at the beginning. After this initial orientation, they will be working in small groups, designing and producing their own materials. Throughout the course, I plan on showing some examples of how a teacher might present a lesson using video, but the students will generally be in a workshop-type of learning situation.