

## **Show or Tell? Video for Living and Learning**

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### **ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>**

Adjusting to life in a different country is a challenge for many international students and one that may be of more immediate concern to them than success in their studies, at least in the early stages after their arrival. *Access UK* has, therefore, been developed as an online, video-based resource focusing on practical and social situations international students often encounter. Its focus is on language and the wider cultural context. This paper identifies the need for such a resource and how this need has been addressed. Techniques such as active viewing and structured improvisation are outlined and an evaluation, based on feedback from learners, is given.

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### **The Niche**

‘Life outside the classroom’ has been identified by the *Higher Education Academy* as one of five key stages in what they describe as the ‘International Student Lifecycle.’

For international students travelling to study in the UK ... their success depends not just on what happens at university but also in the broader university or local community; they travel to study not just for an academic qualification but also for the language and cultural experience... They need to feel a ‘sense of belonging’ in their new environment and access to good support services and networks to ensure their academic success and positive experiences during their study.  
(HEA, nd.)

However, many international students whose first language is not English find spoken communication for practical and social purposes particularly challenging. Many language centres in Higher and Further Education run courses in ‘Survival English’, but there is little published learning material available of direct relevance to the campus setting or which is offered in the modular format in which such courses are often presented. One of the few relevant resources is the *University of Southampton*’s website, *Prepare for Success*. Although impressive, this focuses primarily on the study situation and its use of video is restricted to ‘talking head’ interviews with no attempt to tap into the broad visual potential of the medium.

### **The Project**

Over the past three years, two members of *Centre for English Language Teaching* at the *University of York*, Chris Copland and Huw Llewelyn-Jones have, therefore, been developing a series of video-based teaching and learning materials to fill this niche. What began as a personal project, squeezed in between the authors ‘real’ work, and intended only for local

students, quickly gathered momentum and in the spring of 2011 *Clarity English*, the ELT software consultants, offered the team a publishing contract. The result, *Access UK*, is now available online as a commercial product to both institutions and individuals.

There are two strands to the programme. One is for use in the classroom and provides a full set of lesson material from a single online location: streamed video and audio, with printable task sheets for learners and notes for teachers. The other strand is for individuals working independently and supports the videos with interactive activities, as well as practical and cultural briefing on the themes the films illustrate. In York, the classroom version is used as the basis of an in-session course in 'everyday speaking' and as a supplementary resource on pre-sessionals. The self-access version is used both to consolidate class work and as a stand-alone resource for new arrivals.

### **Why video?**

The dimension this medium adds to spoken language is that of context. Body language and action can give insight into the relationship between characters, while the location, whether in a pub or on a bendy bus, provides an overall cultural backdrop.

From the advent of VHS tape, the technique of 'active viewing' (Stempleski, 1990) became a staple in English language teaching. This used simple techniques, such as freeze-frame and silent viewing, to stimulate discussion of unfolding video scenes and, through follow-up activities such as role play, challenged the perception of video as a passive educational medium. It is ironic then that there are fewer video materials available now for language learning, despite the ease of production and delivery of digital materials and the familiarity with the medium of the *YouTube* generation.

The scenes featured are not scripted but generated through a process of 'structured improvisation.' Actors work to a plan but do not have a script; rather they ad-lib the language and behaviour they might use. Most scenes involve interaction between native and non-native speakers, a feature that learners identified in feedback as being particularly useful. All roles are played either by students or by those with direct experience of the situations. For example, a doctor agreed to play himself conducting a consultation at the university health centre.

### **Local Response**

The reception from learners at York has been a positive one. Forty learners from four different in-session classes were surveyed and a clear majority agreed the materials were useful, stimulating and user-friendly. A focus group of two learners was consulted and several teachers asked for written feedback. The response was similarly positive, one teacher giving this verdict:

'I think the slickness of the materials presented a good image of the lesson and attracted learners to the work. A video is a particularly engaging way of engaging!!

Very user friendly - really enjoyed the fact that there were teacher worksheets and a student version online, that could prep from home easily, that I could project the answers so students could see correct spelling etc.'

Over the past year, *Access UK* has become a standard part of pre-sessional and in-sessional courses in York and is now being rolled out through other university departments. *Education*, *Health Sciences* and *Human Rights* feature the self-access version on their transition sites. It is featured on the welcome pages for new undergraduates and *International Recruitment* are making it available to every applicant who accepts a place at the university.

### Widening the Picture

The next stage of the project has been to share skills that have been developed with colleagues in the sector. In the autumn of 2012, *CELT* offered a one-day practical workshop in *Making Video for ELT*, in collaboration with the *Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies*. This focused on the methodology of devising and using video materials for language learning and an introduction to the practicalities of shooting a scene. The emphasis was not so much on equipping participants with a full range of technical skills but in guidance on finding appropriate professional support and identifying reasonable expectations. Seven trainees from six universities took part, the limited size of the group allowing all members to get hands-on experience. Two scenes were filmed by trainees during the day, one in English and one in German. The feedback from participants ranged from good to excellent and *CELT* hopes to repeat the workshop in the autumn of 2013.

A heartening stage has been reached in the project with *Access UK* being given the 2012 *English Speaking Union President's Award*, celebrating the use of technology in the teaching and learning of English. The panel's verdict was that 'this is an innovative, multifaceted resource for making everyday life in UK less daunting for international students. Unlike many ELT resources, the developers weren't afraid to use regional accents, and scenarios felt wholly natural.' The ESU press release closed with this upbeat comment, 'An indispensable resource for students new to the UK, covering real situations with a local flavour.'

### To find out more

For a demonstration of *Access UK*, go to:  
<http://www.clarityenglish.com/program/accessuk.php>

The team will be presenting at the Norwegian Forum for EAP Summer Seminar on EAP and Technology Enhanced Learning in June 2013. Details at: <http://blogg.hioa.no/nfeap/>

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## References

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<sup>i</sup> This article relates the process of developing *Access UK*, a resource for international students, which has won the 2012 English Speaking Union President's Award.

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