Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Film Making/ Trailers: A Literature-Related Extracurricular Activity

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Abstract

Research into the use of films and film-making has documented its role and effects on learning and teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). In particular, filmmaking allows students to develop communication skills and become more active and creative in their learning compared to conventional approach. However, few studies have been conducted to investigate how students perceived the effects of making films or trailers in English classes in tertiary contexts, particularly, in literature classes. This paper therefore examines students' perceptions of the effectiveness of making short films in a literature class in a Vietnamese university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Questionnaire and interviews were conducted with English-majored sophomores in English Language and Culture Studies. The findings from the current study indicate that participating students found film-making useful as this experience encouraged them to think critically and creatively in their learning process. Implications for teachers and students are provided to pave a new way for extending the use of film-making as a tool for innovative learning experience in English as a foreign language context with particular regard to literature and existing knowledge about the film-related themes.

Keywords: *perceptions, film-making, trailers, extracurricular activity, literature*

Introduction

Film-making has documented its role and effects on learning and teaching English as a foreign language. In particular, filmmaking allows students to develop communication skills and become more active and creative in their learning compared to conventional approach (e.g., Perry, 2018; Rao, 2019; Zhang, 2013). However, few studies have been conducted to investigate how students perceived the effects of making films or trailers in English classes in tertiary contexts, particularly, in literature classes.

Education in Vietnam in the 21st century has changed into a new setting that involves putting theory into practice, especially in foreign language learning and teaching, including English at tertiary education (MOET, 2008). Particularly, in learning English language skills (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing), students are required to practice or simulate the tasks as real-world contexts. However, with particular regard to literature, it is challenging both for students and teachers to connect what is called 'theory' to actual practice or acting out of their roles in a short film. It is therefore necessary for inclusion of film-making activity outside the class hours to grapple with this challenge. The study reported in this paper provides insights into the effectiveness of making short films perceived by students who were taking Introduction to Literature at a university.

As for learning literature, students at a university under investigation were found challenging to comprehend long readings with difficult-to-understand language and sophisticated writing structures. Another barrier that could hinder students from understanding the implications or messages from cultural features reflected in the content of English literary pieces. Besides, they had to encounter the analysis of characters in the light of theories like Feminism, Reader-Response, or Marxism and the like; all of which seemed to put them under pressure as a result of the traditional lecturing of tertiary instruction in Vietnam (e.g., Nguyen, 2013). Thus, the use of films or inclusion for filmmaking activities performed or acted out by students could be the potential way to make student learning of literature more meaningful. In reality, the teachers have applied various teaching approaches to facilitate their literature learning and a series of extra-curricular activities. Particularly, in the abovementioned courses, some literary works were transcribed into films or trailers, plays,

and comedies which have been performed by students. However, studies examining students' perceptions of the effects of making short films are still scarce. It is therefore necessary to fill this gap in this area.

Literature Review

Mass media and Film-making in relation to literature

Mass media is widely known as technology that is intended to reach a mass audience. It is a means of communication to reach the vast majority of the general public (e.g., Chen, 2012). According to Kabadayi (2012), mass media is effective in every field of life by virtue of their audio-visual powers, so using short films in education is allowed among other nonconventional education methods which increase rapidly nowadays. In particular, through literature, film-making is one potential tool for bringing student learning of literary works in a more active and dynamic way (e.g., Ascher and Pincus, 2013; Yilmaz, 2012).

A short film is a film production type which demands effort to achieve its goal in a short time, and therefore this task is viewed as easy for educational or academic purposes at the time of their production and throughout the process of its consumption (e.g., Perry, 2018). Also, the use of films gains significant importance to attract attention for a long time (Dang, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2017). In the practical activities, tools and techniques have emerged based on tried and tested methods such as using the 3Cs: colour, character, camera and the 3Ss: story, setting, sound, which provides a specific structure for students to consider when writing about and developing their own films (Mumford, 2018).

Moreover, Keles (2015) contends that films make literary work easier by using audiovisual elements and the aspect of equipment as a result of the fact that films play an important role in helping students learn language and literature. Filmmaking involves a number of complex and discrete stages including an initial story, idea, or commission. Creating films entails screenwriting, casting, shooting, sound recording and pre production, editing, and presenting (Perry, 2018; Theodosakis, 2009).

English-major students find learning literature challenging and pressured because they have to deal with not only language but also culture and history embedded in the works. For these reasons, several studies have indicated potential solutions for improving the quality of student learning of literature. In particular, Kabadayi (2012) and Keles (2015) discuss the use of films in class. While Kabadayi (2012) surveyed students' attitudes in producing and enjoying films, Keles (2015) claims that films make studying literary works easier and more comfortable via audio-visual means and equipment; many pieces of literature were adapted for films. Thus, literature is an endless source of film production. Keles (2015) further indicates the relationship between films and trailers in student learning process because films and trailers can meet the class immediate learning objectives and student enjoyment or pleasure. The results of a study by Keles (2015) show that students had positive attitudes towards the use of making films and trailers that are concomitant with their learned literary works. The author also contends that short film narration with visualizing subjects could be one of effective audio-visual tools for multimedia education and that short films could yield several perspectives of university students. In particular, one perspective could be that short films provide students with storytelling skill, which allows them to perceive their surroundings and events better.

Kim (2015) did a survey on students' satisfaction with the value of educating personality and humanity reflected by the characters in films and trailers- a kind of bildungsroman. The results show the usefulness of this teaching approach to involve student inspiration with learning literature; thus, their acquisition of knowledge and motivation were much improved.

According to Franklin (2019), films and trailers play important roles in learning process for sounds, colors, images, and motions since they facilitate student learning via means of audio and video. Students were guided and allowed to play the roles of the characters learnt in the literary works or based on key elements of fiction (plot, setting, and style). Students may write a script for a film review or trailer to illustrate and concretize the abstract concepts of literature. In the process of making film, literature is concretized through a script (Davis, Gorell, Kline, and Hsieh, 1992; Mainland, 2013). In other words, a script is considered a literary text shown in a specialized display, at the same time, a film or trailer helps extend the space of transfer and impact of literature via script writing and narrating (Ghazali, Setia, Le, 2012). Therefore, the students could understand the literary work better, attain deeper knowledge and memorize it for long.

The introduction of films and trailers in Vietnam is served as an active tool to teach literature and has become popular; allowing English-majored students to produce a film or trailer with their own view is a quite new experience, however. Also, few activities or competitions in making films, trailers, or commercials in which the students can show their critical thinking and creativity, yetmaking films and trailersis suggested to help students train the skill of problem-solving and provoke their creativity (Divsar& Tahriri, 2009; Nguyen, 2019). The projects of making films and trailers satisfy the needs of exploration and discovery; the students learn to write scripts based on the stories' historical, social, and cultural backgrounds. In this process, their creativity and imagination appear to work best to send messages to related or intended audiences. Among the stages of film making process, properties preparation, film shooting, finalizing, and publishing are deemed important. According to Nguyen (2019), what challenges film makers is the quality of sounds and pictures, scenery or background, and appropriate costumes, thereby requiring big budget that they have to think. There come the stages of finalizing and publishing; film makers have to make sure the logical flow or course of the story with rising action, climax, and satisfactory resolution and positive themes or messages. These stages require careful preparation, collaboration, and team spiritof each individual. Remarkably, learning literature used to be thought of as a boring subject but has become more interesting and worth studying. In addition, students are now active and interested in making films and trailers when they are assigned to do.

Ta (2019) affirms his view that staging a literary piece may be of great interest to students because it arouses their curiosity to explore the author, the context or setting the story was written, how and why the character(s) behaved, and the theme(s)emerged. Besides, staging stimulates students' learning autonomy; directs their feelings and shape their perspectives. Likewise, Thach (2019) claims that making films or trailers based on literary works is considered a playground where the students can act as actors and actresses who cry and laugh with the characters, become creative and immersed in a joyful and artistic atmosphere; and as a result of such positive aspects, students' academic goals, creativity and English language competence development is gained.

Methodology

The overall purpose of this study reported in this paper was to examine students' perceptions of the effects of making films and trailers on their learning literature. The study took place over the first semester period of the academic year 2020-2021. To seek the answers to this question, a mixed methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies was used to gain insights into detailed information of the topic under investigation (Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012). The quantitative approach using questionnaire was designed to explore students' perspectives of the effects of making films and trailers after taking the course 'Introduction to Literature' required by the Department training program. The 45-item questionnaire was organized into three sections: personal information, students' perceptions of the nature or role of the course, and their perceptions of the effects of making films and trailers.

At the end of the study, qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven students to gain their understanding of the process of making films and trailers as well as their comments on their products, the relationship between their learning and practices in relation to the course they were taking at the time of the study. These students were the group leaders and film makers.

Participants

Participants were thirty-six English-majored sophomores of the Department of English Language and Culture Studies, School of Foreign Languages at a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. These studentswere taking the course 'Introduction to Literature' and played their roles in making films and trailers. Of the total, thirty-two (88,9%) majored in English studies and four students (11,2%) majored in English Translation and Interpretation; they all were randomly selected in Cohort 40 (2.8%), Cohort 41 (8.4%), Cohort 42 (80.6%), and Cohort 43 (8.33%)

Table 1 Cohorts and participants

Cohort	Number	Percentage(%)
40	1	2.8
41	3	8.4
42	29	80.6
43	3	8.33

The English-majored sophomores were required to take the course of Introduction to Literature which introduces them the basic elements of literature: literary devices and theories, fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. Literary devices include sounds of language and figures of speech, and literary theories. Fiction consists of setting, plot, point of view, types of characters, tone, mood, styles, themes, symbols, and structures. After learning the pieces of theory, the students were asked to put literary theory into practice (reading and illustrating) by analyzing some literary works. They had to use critical thinking, identify types of characters, figure out the elements used in the works, authors' writing principles/styles, and cultural features. Then, they were encouraged to write their reflections, discuss in groups, make presentations, play their roles, and solve problems. At the end of the course, they were trained to be active and collaborative through making films or trailers.

Generally, the students were assigned to read a short story or an excerpt and prepare questions or its relevant information before the class so that they could spend more time getting to know about authors, language, and culture. When in class, the students were organized into groups to present the work as scheduled, discuss and respond to the questions posed to them by their peers. Such teaching-learning style was thought to train the students to be self-confident, friendly, cooperative and more importantly to improve their self-study.

Findings

Students' perceptions of Introduction to Literature course

Regarding students' perceptions of the course of Introduction to Literature, Table 2 shows varying responses. 36.1% and over 60% of the students agreed and totally agreed with the statement "the course brings you useful knowledge." and no one negated it, which means that almost all students have acquired necessary and basic knowledge which is beneficial for themselves and served for other courses of literature. Similarly, the responses to the statements "the course inspires you to study the foreign literary pieces." and "the course helps you improve your critical thinking" were quite positive with nearly 50% of agreement and total agreement. Nevertheless, only 2.8% of the students did not agree with the idea that the course helps them either completely enjoy a foreign piece or improve the skills of reading, writing, presenting, and public speaking.

Table 2 Role of the course 'Introduction to English Literature

	Survey	Totally disagree %	Dis-agree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Totally agree %
s1	The course brings you useful knowledge.	0	0	2.8	36.1	61.1
s2	The course inspires you to study the foreign literary pieces.	0	0	11.1	47.2	41.7
s3	The course provides you with an opportunity to totally enjoy literary pieces.	0	2.8	11.1	50	36.1
s4	The course helps you improve your critical thinking.	0	0	11.1	44.4	44.4
s5	The course helps you improve your skills of speaking and listening.	2.8	0	50	33.3	13.9
s6	The course helps you improve your skills of reading and writing.	0	2.8	16.7	58.3	22.3
s7	The course helps you improve your skills of public speaking and presentation.	0	2.8	13.9	55.6	27.8

Students' perceptions of the effectiveness of making short films/trailers

Table 3 shows that 70% of the participants agreed that they could consolidate the knowledge learnt and applied what they have learnt in practice thanks to making films and trailers. This also meets the course aims and objectives, provides fun and entertainment and provokes the students' creativity as well. In addition, three criteria were given: mark, time requirement, and number of group members; 95% of the participants agreed with the marks (2 out of 10 marks) given to individual participation in the activity as they believed this type of

summative assessment is reasonable. A large number of respondents (15 out of 20) thought that the time requirement (8 weeks) for a film product is quite rational as a result of the fact that 15% and 30% of the respondents totally disagreed and disagreed with the idea “making films is time-consuming.” Significantly, the idea “teacher cares and comments on the process” was considered important with 70% participants saying “yes”, this means that the students needed their teachers to give them feedback and tell them how to edit the scripts so that they could limit unavoidable mistakes and save their time during their learning process. For the statement “you would like the activity to be maintained”, 18 out of 20 participants said that the practice was expected to continue whereas only one participant said he did not. 80% of the participants disagreed on the idea that joining the activity of filmmaking as a requirement of the course; as these participants found making films enjoyable and beneficial while taking the course on literature.

Table 3 Students' perceptions of the effectiveness of making films and trailers

Survey		Totally disagree	Dis-agree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Totally agree %
b1	Making films/trailers helps you consolidate knowledge.	5	10	15	50	20
b2	Making films/trailers helps you apply the knowledge learnt in practice.	10	5	10	50	25
b3	Time requirement (8 weeks) for a film product is quite rational.	5	0	10	50	35
b4	Assessment for film making is rational.	5	0	0	45	50
b5	Number for a team of film making is rational (5-7 members).	0	10	10	35	45
b6	Making films is money-consuming.	15	30	35	15	5
b7	Making films is time-consuming.	15	30	35	15	5
b8	Teacher cares and comments on the process.	0	15	15	30	40
B 9	You would like the activity to be maintained.	5	0	5	30	60
b10	You joined the activity as required in the course.	50	30	5	10	5

Table 4 focuses on students' interest in the extra-curricular activity of making films and its impacts on boosting soft skills, provoking inspiration, and enhancing critical thinking and creativity. Impressively, 80% of the participants considered the activity of making films/ trailers an opportunity to enhance the skills of group work, or soft skills needed for their life-long learning and future employment, even this matches the requirement of skills orientation of most of extra-curricular activities. Furthermore, the students said they could improve their discipline with regard to time management with 90% responses of agreement on almost all items.

Regarding the activity itself, the procedure provides the students with new interesting experience, yet other two downsides were identified as time and budget issues. Those who indicated these issues ranked them higher than the ability of managing time and group budget although 90% agreed that they could arrange and accommodate time with the group and 50% said that they could logically manage the group budget.

Table 4 Effects of making films/ trailers per individual (from film makers)

	Survey	Totally disagree %	Dis-agree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Totally agree %
c1	Making films/trailers brings you benefits.	0	5	10	35	50
c2	Making films/trailers is suitable with your competence.	5	0	10	40	45
c3	Making films/trailers inspires your interest after formal classes.	5	0	5	25	65
c4	Making films/trailers stimulates your critical thinking skills.	0	10	5	50	35
c5	Making films/trailers helps you improve your writing skills.	5	5	35	50	5
c6	Making films/trailers improves your group-working skills.	5	0	0	15	80
c7	Making films/trailers helps you develop your managerial and problem-solving skills.	0	10	10	45	35
c8	Making films/trailer strains your skills of time management.	5	5	0	55	35
c9	Making films/trailers enhances your IT skills.	0	5	25	10	60
c10	Making films/trailers helps you discover your new skills (acting, filming...).	5	5	0	35	55
c11	Making films/trailers helps you make financial plan logically.	5	10	35	30	20
c12	You really enjoy the process of films/trailers making.	5	0	10	25	60

The next finding shows the student audience's perceptions of this extra-curricular activity; although they did not join making films, their responses may help to find out some differences brought by this activity. Table 5 shows that 100% of the audience said making films arouses their interest in learning literature; they completely agreed that making films/trailers brings opportunities to develop soft skills (62.5%). Besides, it was interesting to learn that the vast majority of audience (totally 75%) like to experience this activity and achieve some accomplishment (the film product) for their group, but 50% like to enjoy and evaluate the films/trailers made by other groups. However, 37.5% did not have any ideas with the statement 'You would like to enjoy and evaluate the films/trailers of other groups', this figure may possibly mean some students were hesitant with this new learning practice which is considered to be both interesting and challenging. Moreover, other two challenges in making films were time and budget: over 30% of students had neutral idea with the time consumption of this activity and also over 56.25% had neutral idea about the budget of making films while less than 20% agreed with this item. These figures show the students' hesitation and worry with the difficulties during the process of making films; yet, this does not much affect the students' interest in this practice: the overwhelming majority of students agreed with the statement 'You expect the activity to be maintained.'

Table 5 Effects of making films/ trailers from the audiences

	Survey	Totally disagree %	Dis-agree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Totally agree %
d1	Making films/trailershelps consolidate the theory learnt.	0	6.25	43.75	43.75	6.25
d2	Making films/trailers inspires your interest in learning literature.	0	0	0	50	50
d3	Making films/trailersbrings you opportunities to develop soft skills.	0	0	6.25	31.25	62.5
d4	You are interested in making films/trailers.	0	6.25	12.5	31.25	50
d5	You like to experience this activity.	6.25	6.25	12.5	50	25
d6	You like to enjoy and evaluate the films/trailers of other groups.	6.25	6.25	37.5	25	25
d7	Making films/trailerstakes time.	0	18.75	31.25	25	25
d8	Making films/trailers is costly.	0	18.75	56.25	6.25	18.75
d9	Making films/trailers is not necessary.	25	25	37.5	6.25	6.25
d10	The activity is expected to continue.	0	0	12.5	62.5	25

The students agreed that this activity helps them develop skills of group work, self-discipline, and responsibility. In addition, this activity can boost students' concentration and memory span, deepen their understanding of literature, and strengthens personal relationship among group members.

Findings from the interviews

The findings from the interviews illustrate positive perceptions about the impacts of making films/trailers on the course. The majority of the students said that they could apply several elements of film-making from the course. The following extracts illustrate their views.

I could practice the use of sounds and figures of speech or act out the role assigned, not just what is provided in reading (Student 2, interview extract)

I think I could build up the plot structure from the film-making, the theme of the film. In particular, rising action and climax, or foreshadow when writing a script are some. (Student 3, interview extract)

One of the soft skills such as problem-solving as a learning experience in real life can be used outside the class hours (Student 7, interview extract)

The above quotes suggest the idea that content knowledge students learned from the introductory course to literature (acting, script writing, film editing, filming) was found useful since this type of learning could make them feel better.

Particularly, when asked about individual students' perceptions of film making, one student shared

Thanks to making films and setting trailers, I am able to practice the skills of dubbing, translating dialogues or sub-title, upload the film studio and managing the necessities for the process (Student 4, interview extract).

However, one student admitted:

I did not employ much the theory learnt in making films; instead, I simply based on own experience and life skills because the script was not included in the course (Student 2, interview extract)

This suggests that it was the students' life skills that could help them have positive learning views to meet the learning outcomes of the course.

Similarly, three other students shared the opportunity for them to learn how to make films in reality. One example represents their view.

Film-making, I believe, is an opportunity for me to learn how to experience dubbing, grafting sounds, translating dialogues, arranging scenes, and managing time." (Student 3, interview extract)

In the light of audience's perceptions, in response to the question as to what students expected before or after watching films or trailers or how they felt right after practicing their part, they said:

I think film 'products' are interesting stories. They are carefully and well-prepared films. I could perform well. The messages learned from the film I took part were really valuable (Student 5, interview extract)

I feel like having a sense of satisfaction after watching films and wanted to enjoy if possible" (Student 6, interview extract)

After watching films, I learn that the film makers have carefully prepared almost every single act as well as invested quite a lot of time. (Student 7, interview extract)

When asked if they were interested in the film-making activity, three interviewed audiences appreciated its effects when taking the course. Compared to oral presentation in the class, film-making was reported to provoke students' curiosity, stimulate active involvement in the course, and make the class atmosphere more interesting. Nevertheless, Student 7 shared his neutral idea,

It depends. Making films/trailers is more interesting and exciting and helps me comprehend the work more easily; but sometimes as a presenter for a group with good skill may provide me better understanding for the work.

For those who made films/trailers instead of presenting the work in class, this activity was reported to be more preferable:

Beside the knowledge learnt in class, making film/trailers brings us new experience, lively illustration of the work and makes the lessons less monotonous with theory (Student 6, interview extract)

The above comment indicates that the introductory course to literature through film-making content could help students improve the skills of presentation and public speaking. Also, the film-making activity could help them become more aware of mastering the course content (or related theory) and understanding the literary works better.

Discussion

The findings are in line with several studies in the literature on the role of short films (Kabadayi, 2012; Le, 2012; Kim, 2015; & Thach, 2019) which indicate to be effective and useful as films could help students enhance their memorization and comprehension, and creativity in the learning process. The findings also support the conclusion of Kabadayi's (2012) elaboration that group work could increase student access and use of information, their effectiveness in decision making and their views to fulfill tasks with collaboration. Interestingly, the finding is in line with Franklin's (2019) view that films/trailers could help students allay the fear of memorizing what is called 'theory' through visual aids and animation in relation to creating more learning interest in literature.

Moreover, this study confirms studies by Keles (2015) and Nguyen (2019) in ways that film-making in foreign language teaching and learning could not only develop students' linguistic competences but also train them the skill of problem-solving and their creativity. It is interesting to note that the findings fit well with Kim's (2015) survey which highlights students' satisfaction, involvement and their inspiration with learning literature; thus, their literature learning and motivation could be improved.

Conclusions

The findings from the current study provide insights into making films/trailers in support of student learning of literature in English language and culture studies. Several recommendations are made for students and teachers. As students show their interest to participate in film-making activities, they should be given more opportunities to continue practice of film-making activities. Learning literature means learning to be human beings; therefore, updating knowledge in literature from various sources of information needs to be encouraged through acting out their roles or simulate the literary tasks. Once this is properly done, students are to equip themselves with soft skills (communication, cooperation, or problem-solving). In order to instill students' interests and sustain positive attitudes towards this constructive learning experience, teachers need to design a variety of practical and interesting activities to get students involved in making their learning meaningful and creative through short film making.

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