

Empowering language learners through filmmaking: A qualitative case study of project-based media creation in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how student-led filmmaking shapes language learning experiences in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Situated within project-based and multimodal learning frameworks, the study investigates how learners perceive the opportunities, challenges, and linguistic transformations associated with collaborative film production. Participants consisted of twenty-eight undergraduate EFL students enrolled in an intermediate-level language course at a university. Over an eight-week period, students engaged in all stages of film production, including scriptwriting, rehearsing, filming, editing, and public screening. Data were collected through reflective journals, semi-structured focus group interviews, classroom observations, and project artifacts. Drawing on thematic analysis, the study examines how learners negotiated language use, constructed collaborative relationships, developed communicative confidence, and navigated technological and creative challenges throughout the filmmaking process. The findings reveal that filmmaking creates a meaningful environment for authentic language use by encouraging sustained interaction, contextualized vocabulary acquisition, and increased learner autonomy. Participants reported that adopting dramatic roles reduced speaking anxiety and enabled greater experimentation with language. At the same time, challenges related to technology, time management, and group dynamics emerged as important dimensions of the learning experience. The study argues that filmmaking transforms language learning from a predominantly instructional activity into a socially situated practice in which learners actively construct meaning through creative production. The findings contribute to current discussions on multimodal pedagogy and project-based language learning by highlighting the pedagogical value of student-generated media in fostering engagement, agency, and communicative competence.

Keywords: Filmmaking, project-based learning, multimodality, EFL, learner agency, qualitative research, language pedagogy

Introduction

Literature Review

The intersection of cinema and language pedagogy has a long-standing history, though the nature of its deployment has drastically evolved. Historically, films have been used as passive instructional inputs or "pedagogic aids" to provide learners with comprehensible target language exposure, naturalistic pronunciation models, and intercultural insights (Sánchez-Auñón, Férrez-Mora, and Monroy-Hernández 2023^[20], 3-5). Empirical research focusing on these passive, consumption-oriented approaches indicates that integrating commercial cinema or short clips into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms can enhance listening comprehension, enrich contextualized vocabulary acquisition, and spark student motivation (Kaboocha 2016^[10], 248-250; Pavithra and Gandhimathi 2024^[17], 12).

However, as active learning paradigms and constructivist models of education have taken hold, scholars have increasingly criticized the unidirectional nature of pure film consumption. Treating students merely as consumers of pre-packaged media limits their opportunities for active meaning-making and language production (Li Hu and Mi Song Kim 2026^[9], 4). In response to these critiques, a distinct body of literature has begun exploring the pedagogical value of transitioning students from passive viewers into active producers through Student-Generated Videos (SGVs) and digital storytelling (Yang and Wu 2012^[27], 340-342).

This transition from consumer to creator aligns with a growing body of localized research examining the affordances of digital spaces and creative media for EFL learners in the region. Critically, Murad, Assadi, and Badarni (2023^[15], 1190-1192) demonstrated that digital storytelling projects serve as an exceptionally powerful lever for target language speaking improvement, allowing students to systematically construct complex meaning while mitigating public performance anxiety. Furthermore, the baseline necessity of shifting toward interactive digital environments is underscored by Assadi, Murad, and Hassan (2025^[3], 33-35), whose investigation into the Arab educational sector in Israel revealed that despite institutional bottlenecks, the communicative and linguistic benefits of integrating digital production tools far outweigh structural drawbacks. When properly leveraged, digital media transforms the classroom into a space of active production rather than rote absorption.

When language learners engage directly as filmmakers, the creative pipeline becomes a dynamic site for meaningful language output and intensive interaction, operationalizing Swain's (2005^[23], 471-473) Output Hypothesis and Long's (1996^[12], 415-418) Interaction Hypothesis. During the initial scriptwriting and storyboarding phases, students are compelled to push their linguistic boundaries to express original, abstract narratives. This stage builds heavily upon the conceptualization of descriptive writing as a fundamentally communicative and reflective act rather than a mere mechanical exercise. As argued by Assadi and Murad (2026^[2], 3-4), utilizing visual and cinematic prompts

enables EFL learners to align precise vocabulary and creative textual organization with a concrete communicative intent. This iterative process requires continuous negotiation of meaning, peer-mediated feedback, and collaborative text editing, forcing learners to notice gaps in their interlanguage and modify their output accordingly (Amoah-Ramey and Essien 2024^[1], 137).

Furthermore, the actual filming and rehearsal stages provide an embodied linguistic experience. By adopting specific dramatic personas, learners are afforded a psychological "safe space" that reduces foreign language speaking anxiety, lowers their affective filters, and empowers them to take stylistic and pragmatic risks in spoken English (Cavalcante, Pereira, and Faciola 2025^[6], 1-10). This dynamic is particularly vital given the documented socio-affective challenges—such as performance anxiety and systemic speaking barriers—faced by Arab Palestinian students in higher education contexts when speaking English (Murad and Assadi 2021^[13], 58-60).

Despite these theoretical and empirical affordances, incorporating student-led filmmaking into language curricula introduces non-linguistic complications. These include technological barriers, steep learning curves with editing software, intensive time-management pressures, and fractured group dynamics during collaborative decision-making (Li Hu and Mi Song Kim 2026, 7; Murray *et al.* 2023^[9, 16], 89). Moreover, because much of the existing research remains heavily focused on the technical quality of the final product, the highly nuanced, messy, and socially situated lived experiences of the learners during the creative pipeline remain underdeveloped.

Statement of the Problem

While EFL literature heavily documents the benefits of commercial cinema as passive instructional input (Sánchez-Auñón, Férez-Mora, and Monroy-Hernández 2023^[20], 6), minimal attention has been paid to the lived experiences of language learners operating explicitly as film creators. This leaves a critical gap in our understanding, as passive media consumption differs fundamentally from active, multimodal production (Li Hu and Mi Song Kim 2026^[9], 4).

This empirical gap is particularly acute regarding the socio-affective and logistical realities of the classroom. Arab Palestinian EFL university students frequently encounter severe speaking anxiety and performance barriers in academic spaces (Murad and Assadi 2021^[13], 58). While alternative digital tasks like digital storytelling offer low-stakes spaces that improve speaking skills (Murad, Assadi, and Badarni 2023^[15], 1191), long-form filmmaking introduces unique interpersonal, creative, and technological pressures. When student groups independently navigate scriptwriting, acting, and editing, these creative workflows inevitably collide with group friction and steep software learning curves (Murray *et al.* 2023, 89; Assadi, Murad, and Hassan 2025^[3, 16], 34).

Furthermore, within modern teacher training frameworks like Theory and Practice (TEFER) courses, pre-service teachers require an internal understanding of these workflows before they can effectively bridge pedagogical theory with clinical classroom execution (Murad and Assadi 2023^[14], 145). Without qualitative data capturing how students negotiate language and manage technological stress across the creative pipeline, the integration of multimodal pedagogies remains largely theoretical. A focused

qualitative inquiry is necessary to understand how the operational challenges of filmmaking can be balanced against its communicative rewards to foster true learner agency.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how undergraduate EFL students at an academic college for teacher education experience the holistic process of collaborative, student-led filmmaking. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how these learners perceive the influence of project-based media creation on their language development, communicative confidence, and engagement, while critically documenting the technological, interpersonal, and situational challenges they encounter throughout the creative pipeline.

Research Questions

1. How do undergraduate EFL students experience and navigate the collaborative process of filmmaking in the language classroom?
2. What linguistic, social, and affective benefits do students perceive during their active participation in filmmaking projects?
3. What specific challenges—technological, interpersonal, or logistical—do students encounter throughout the progressive stages of scriptwriting, filming, editing, and presentation?
4. How do students describe the role of student-led filmmaking in shaping their confidence, autonomy, and communicative practices in English?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a complementary framework that merges sociocultural and interactionist theories of second language acquisition (SLA) with contemporary theories of multimodal literacy. Together, these paradigms explain how collaborative media creation facilitates linguistic, social, and affective transformation.

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky)

Rooted in Vygotskian (1978)^[26] sociocultural theory, language learning is conceptualized not as an isolated cognitive process, but as a socially mediated practice that develops through interaction, dialogue, and collaborative activity. Within this framework, the filmmaking group functions as a micro-community or a site for peer-mediated scaffolding. As learners work together to solve creative and narrative problems, they co-construct knowledge within their shared Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), moving from dependent participants to autonomous language users.

Cognitive-Interactionist Perspectives (Swain and Long)

While Vygotsky addresses the social dimension, cognitive-interactionist models explain the mechanical linguistic gains achieved during film production. The initial stages of scriptwriting and storyboarding heavily operationalize Swain's (2005)^[23] Output Hypothesis. To write an original script, learners must push their linguistic boundaries to express complex ideas. This forces them to notice gaps in their interlanguage and consciously modify their output. Furthermore, the iterative process of rehearsing, filming, and editing aligns directly with Long's (1996)^[12] Interaction Hypothesis. The complex demands of a film set create

natural, high-stakes opportunities for students to negotiate meaning, receive immediate peer feedback, and repair communication breakdowns in real time.

Multimodality

Finally, this study rejects a purely print-centric view of literacy, drawing instead on the theory of Multimodality (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) ^[11]. In a filmmaking project, meaning-making is recognized as a complex orchestration of multiple semiotic resources. Language learning is deeply enriched because the verbal text (the script) is actively integrated with non-verbal modes, including physical gestures, visual imagery, spatial composition, sound design, and digital media editing. This multimodal engagement allows learners to anchor abstract vocabulary in concrete visual and auditory contexts, deepening both language retention and communicative competence.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study research design to explore the holistic, socially situated experiences of EFL learners engaged in a collaborative filmmaking project. A case study approach is uniquely suited for this inquiry because it allows the researcher to conduct an intensive, bounded investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life classroom context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident (Yin 2018 ^[28], 15).

Rather than isolating specific variables, this design prioritizes a holistic understanding of the complex, multi-stage interactions and socio-affective shifts that occur over time (Creswell and Poth 2018 ^[7], 96-98). The "case" in this study is bounded temporally by the eight-week duration of the film project and spatially within a single intermediate-level English language classroom.

Participants and Context

The participant cohort consisted of twenty-eight (N=28) undergraduate EFL students enrolled in an intermediate-level language instruction course within the English Department at an academic college for teacher education in Israel. Purposive sampling was intentionally utilized to select this specific group, as they were directly involved in the comprehensive implementation of the filmmaking curriculum, making them information-rich participants uniquely positioned to illuminate the study's central research questions (Creswell and Poth 2018 ^[7], 142-144).

The participants were predominantly pre-service teachers navigating the complex intersection of acquiring advanced target language competence while simultaneously evaluating multimodal pedagogies for future clinical classroom application. English served as the primary, mandated medium of communication across all collaborative production stages, including script negotiation, conceptual rehearsals, spontaneous on-set directing, and post-production editing workflows.

Context of the Study

The study was embedded within an intensive, eight-week collaborative filmmaking project. This project was explicitly designed as a task-based, student-centered curriculum where participants had full creative autonomy over their final products, while the instructor transitioned into a facilitative,

supportive role. To ensure a structured progression from concept to screen, the project was organized into five distinct, sequential phases that required continuous multimodal and linguistic negotiation.

The structural progression and operational demands of the project are detailed in the timeline below:

Phase 1: Conceptualization & Storyboarding

Weeks 1–2

Students formed small production teams (four to five members per group) and brainstormed original narrative themes. They engaged in intensive group discussions to collaboratively negotiate storylines, map out character arcs, and design visual storyboards. During this phase, focus was placed on aligning abstract visual ideas with concrete narrative structures.

Phase 2: Scriptwriting & Language Modification

Week 3

Teams developed complete, original screenplays in English. This stage required students to translate conversational ideas into formal text, draft authentic dialogue, and write precise visual scene descriptions. Peer-editing sessions and instructor feedback forced students to notice gaps in their grammatical and pragmatic accuracy, leading to iterative script revisions.

Phase 3: Casting, Rehearsal, & Embodied Practice

Week 4

Students assigned roles within their production teams (e.g., directors, script supervisors, actors). They conducted extensive reading rehearsals to perfect pronunciation, intonation, and emotional delivery. This phase served as a low-stakes verbal testing ground, allowing students to familiarize themselves with the language before recording.

Phase 4: Principal Photography & Post-Production Editing

Weeks 5–7

Teams transitioned to active filming, utilizing personal smartphones and basic recording equipment across various campus locations. Spontaneous on-set communication, directing cues, and technical problem-solving were conducted in English. Following filming, students used accessible digital editing software (such as CapCut or iMovie) to sync audio tracks, arrange scenes, and integrate English subtitles.

Phase 5: Public Screening & Peer Evaluation

Week 8

The project culminated in a classroom film festival. Each production team publicly screened their completed short film to their peers. Following each screening, the creators participated in a live question-and-answer session, orally defending their thematic choices and reflecting on their collaborative experiences in the target language.

Throughout all five phases, English served as the official and primary medium of communication. This requirement transformed the target language from a static subject of study into an active operational tool, as students were required to use it for authentic interpersonal management, artistic expression, and technical problem-solving.

Data Collection

To ensure the trustworthiness and validity of this qualitative case study, a comprehensive data triangulation strategy was employed (Creswell and Poth 2018^[7], 150). By gathering data from multiple perspectives and distinct sources over the eight-week period, the researcher was able to construct a dense, contextualized account of the participants' experiences.

Data collection methods were divided into four main streams:

Reflective Journals

Participants maintained weekly individual reflective journals throughout the eight-week project, yielding a total of 224 journal entries. Students were provided with open-ended prompt choices to guide their writing without restricting their expression. These journals captured immediate, longitudinal data regarding the students' personal linguistic hurdles, moments of perceived communicative breakthrough, emotional fluctuations, and evolving views on learner autonomy.

Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

At the conclusion of the filmmaking project, the researcher conducted six semi-structured focus group interviews (comprising four to five participants per group). Focus groups were chosen over individual interviews to mirror the collaborative nature of the project and to allow participants to trigger memories and build upon each other's insights (Dörnyei 2007, 144). The interview guide targeted specific areas:

- Perceived gains in communicative confidence.
- The socio-affective impact of adopting dramatic roles.
- Interpersonal tension and resolution mechanics within the teams.

Participant Classroom Observations

The researcher acted as a participant observer during the scheduled classroom sessions across the eight weeks, compiling extensive field notes. Observations focused systematically on:

- Naturally occurring language choices (e.g., target language maintenance vs. first-language use during intense creative debates).
- Peer-to-peer scaffolding and negotiation of meaning.
- Behavioral indicators of speaking anxiety or engagement during rehearsals and filming.

Project Artifacts

To supplement the self-reported data from interviews and journals, physical and digital project artifacts were collected from each production team. This dataset included:

- Initial brainstorm notes and visual storyboards.
- Preliminary and finalized scripts highlighting peer and instructor text edits.
- The completed digital film files, including student-generated subtitles.

Summary of Data Sources and Analytical Functions

The table below outlines how these diverse data streams were mapped to the study's primary areas of inquiry:

Table 1

Data Collection Instrument	Data Type / Volume	Primary Analytical Function
Reflective Journals	Qualitative text (224 entries)	Tracking individual, longitudinal socio-affective shifts and linguistic breakthroughs over time.
Focus Group Interviews	Transcribed audio (6 sessions)	Capturing collective retrospective reflections on collaboration, anxiety, and identity.
Classroom Observations	Researcher field notes	Documenting real-time behavioral interaction patterns and spontaneous target language use.
Project Artifacts	Multimedia text, video, layouts	Verifying the actual linguistic output, text modifications, and final multimodal presentation quality.

Note on Trustworthiness

Collecting these overlapping data streams allowed the researcher to cross-verify student perceptions (interviews and journals) against documented behaviors (observations) and concrete outputs (artifacts), minimizing individual bias and strengthening the overall qualitative validity of the study (Richards 2003^[18], 102).

Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data—comprising interview transcriptions, weekly reflective journals, classroom observation field notes, and written scripts—were analyzed utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006)^[5] six-phase framework for thematic analysis. This method was chosen for its flexibility, allowing for a rich, detailed, and complex account of the qualitative dataset by identifying, analyzing, and reporting recurring patterns of meaning across data sources.

The analysis was executed recursively, moving back and forth between the phases described below:

Familiarization with the Data

Phase 1

The researcher repeatedly read through the entire dataset to ensure deep immersion. Audio recordings from the focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim, and written reflective journals were compiled into a centralized digital text repository. Initial thoughts, striking remarks, and recurrent impressions were noted in a separate research log during this phase.

All participant quotations are presented in English. Journal entries and interview excerpts were transcribed and lightly edited for grammatical clarity and readability while preserving the original meanings and intentions of the participants.

Generating Initial Codes

Phase 2

Open, line-by-line coding was systematically applied across the textual dataset. Descriptive codes were assigned to meaningful text segments that shed light on the research questions. For example, text segments highlighting peer

corrections during rehearsals were coded under "linguistic monitoring," while expressions of stage fright were coded as "affective anxiety."

Searching for Themes

Phase 3

Once the entire dataset was coded, the individual codes were organized and clustered into broader, conceptually distinctive categories. During this phase, codes like "pronunciation monitoring," "collaborative editing," and "negotiating script vocabulary" were grouped into an overarching candidate category labeled "Peer-Mediated Linguistic Scaffold."

Reviewing and Refining

Phase 4

The candidate categories were subjected to a two-level screening process. First, the coded data extracts were checked to ensure they formed a coherent pattern within each category. Second, the validity of individual categories was checked against the entire dataset to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' overall experiences. Categories that lacked sufficient data evidence were collapsed, while overly broad categories were split.

Defining and Naming

Phase 5

The refined themes were finalized by identifying the conceptual core of what each theme captured. Definitive, theoretically grounded names were assigned to the final themes (e.g., transforming the descriptive category "Peer Collaboration" into the conceptual theme "Negotiating English Through Collaboration"). Sub-themes were also delineated to capture the internal nuances of each theme.

Producing the Report

Phase 6

The final analytical narrative was constructed. This involved weaving together vivid data extracts (direct student quotes) with researcher interpretations and relating the empirical findings back to the guiding theoretical framework (such as Vygotskian sociocultural theory and Swain's output hypothesis).

Methodological Trustworthiness

To establish the rigor, credibility, and overall trustworthiness of the findings, specific qualitative criteria were applied (Creswell and Poth 2018^[7], 256-258):

- **Data Triangulation:** Confirmed that themes were consistent across independent data sources (e.g., student claims of reduced anxiety in journals matched the researcher's behavioral classroom observations).
- **Member Checking:** Preliminary interpretations and theme summaries were shared with a subset of the participants ($N = 6$) to verify that the analytical findings accurately mirrored their lived experiences.
- **Prolonged Engagement:** The researcher maintained an active, immersive presence in the research site over the full eight-week duration of the filmmaking project, minimizing observer effects and developing a deep understanding of the classroom culture.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the dataset revealed five interrelated themes that capture the linguistic, social, affective, and technological dimensions of the eight-week filmmaking project. Together, these findings illustrate how transitioning from media consumers to media creators reshapes the language learning experience.

Theme One: From Language Learners to Story Creators

The first major finding highlights a profound shift in how participants conceptualized their role in the classroom. Students described the filmmaking process as a transformative experience that moved them away from being passive recipients of decontextualized language instruction and repositioned them as active authors of meaning. This structural shift fostered a deep sense of learner agency. Instead of executing pre-packaged textbook exercises, students took full ownership of their linguistic output, manipulating syntax, register, and narrative structure to serve their unique creative visions.

In their weekly reflective journals, participants frequently contrasted the agency experienced during filmmaking with their prior histories of rote language learning. One student explicitly noted the empowering nature of this transition:

"Normally in English classes we answer questions and study grammar. During the film project, we needed English for everything. We talked about the story, wrote the script, and practiced the scenes. I think I learned more new words because I needed them for the movie" (Journal Entry, Week 2)

This sense of ownership was especially evident during the scriptwriting and storyboarding phases, where abstract thoughts had to be systematically translated into concrete linguistic choices, reinforcing the notion of writing as a fundamentally communicative act.

Theme Two: Negotiating English through Collaboration

The second theme underscores the extensive target-language practice that occurred through collaborative negotiation. Because the project required a unified final product, students engaged in continuous dialogue throughout scriptwriting, filming, and editing. This collaborative environment encouraged peer-mediated scaffolding as learners monitored language use, negotiated vocabulary choices, and revised texts together.

Classroom observations revealed that English functioned as a practical tool for communication rather than an artificial classroom requirement. Many participants reported that collaborative discussions helped them improve their vocabulary and express ideas more effectively. One student reflected:

"Working on the script was not easy because everyone had different ideas. We discussed the scenes for a long time and sometimes disagreed about what the characters should say. When we were not sure about a word, we searched for other options and talked about which one sounded better. These discussions helped me learn new vocabulary and feel more comfortable using English." (Journal Entry, Week 3)

However, collaboration was not always smooth. Several students described moments of frustration when group members struggled to reach agreement or when some participants contributed less than others. One participant commented:

"Sometimes we spent too much time discussing small details. A few group members talked a lot, while others stayed quiet. It was difficult to make everyone agree, especially when we had different ideas about the story." (Journal Entry, Week 3)

These tensions occasionally slowed progress, yet they also required learners to negotiate meaning, justify opinions, and manage disagreements in English. As a result, collaboration functioned simultaneously as a source of linguistic growth and interpersonal challenge.

Theme Three: Performing Confidence

The third theme addresses the significant affective changes observed throughout the project, particularly regarding speaking anxiety. Participants reported that adopting specific dramatic roles and performing behind or in front of a camera provided a protective psychological buffer. This dramatic framing temporarily detached students from their authentic identities, allowing them to lower their affective filters and take greater pragmatic and stylistic risks in spoken English.

This finding is particularly meaningful given the widespread performance anxiety that many EFL students experience within formal academic settings. Acting allowed participants to view mistakes not as personal language failures, but as part of character development:

"I am usually shy when I have to speak English in front of the class. During the film project, I felt less nervous because I was focusing on my role and the scene. If I made a mistake, we could repeat it, so there was less pressure. I think this helped me become more confident when speaking English." (Journal Entry, Week 5)

The repetitive nature of rehearsals further reinforced this confidence, transforming spoken production from an unpredictable source of stress into a practiced, embodied, and successful linguistic experience.

Theme Four: Technology as Challenge and Opportunity

The fourth theme highlights the technological challenges that emerged throughout the filmmaking process. Students frequently encountered difficulties with video editing software, subtitle synchronization, file management, and technical troubleshooting. For many participants, these tasks represented unfamiliar territory and generated considerable stress.

One student noted:

"The editing stage was challenging because we were not familiar with the software. We had some problems with subtitles and organizing the scenes. When we got stuck, we searched for information online and discussed possible solutions as a group. It took a lot of time, but by the end of the week we were able to solve most of the problems and complete our work." (Journal Entry, Week 6)

While many students eventually developed confidence in using digital tools, others expressed frustration with the amount of time required to learn technical skills. Some felt that technology occasionally distracted them from language learning itself. One participant explained:

"Sometimes I felt that we were spending more time fixing technical problems than practicing English. It was frustrating when something did not work and we had to repeat the same steps again." (Journal Entry, Week 6)

Despite these challenges, students generally reported that overcoming technical obstacles increased their sense of

achievement and expanded their digital literacy. The findings suggest that technology functioned both as a barrier and as a catalyst for problem-solving and communication.

Theme Five: Building Community Through Creative Production

The final theme captures the social relationships that developed during the filmmaking project. Participants reported that the shared responsibility of producing a film encouraged cooperation, mutual support, and stronger interpersonal connections. The common goal of completing a successful project fostered a sense of collective responsibility that extended beyond individual grades.

One participant reflected:

"Working on the film helped us build better relationships with each other. We spent many hours planning, filming, and editing, so we had to cooperate and solve problems together. Sometimes group members supported each other when someone was struggling with a task. By the end of the project, I felt more connected to my classmates and more comfortable participating in class activities." (Focus Group 5)

At the same time, not all group experiences were equally positive. Several students reported tensions related to uneven participation and differing levels of commitment. Some felt that a small number of group members carried a disproportionate share of the workload. One student commented:

"I enjoyed the project, but sometimes it felt like a few people were doing most of the work. When deadlines were close, it created some tension in the group." (Focus Group 4)

Although these challenges occasionally generated frustration, students generally described them as opportunities to develop communication, negotiation, and teamwork skills. The findings therefore suggest that community building emerged not through the absence of conflict but through students' efforts to manage disagreements and work toward a common goal.

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative case study demonstrate that student-led filmmaking functions as a complex form of project-based language learning that extends beyond many traditional communicative classroom activities. By shifting learners from media consumers to media creators, the eight-week project created a socially situated environment in which language use became inseparable from creative decision-making, technological problem-solving, and collaborative negotiation. Consistent with sociocultural and interactionist perspectives of second language acquisition, language development emerged through participation in meaningful social practices rather than through isolated linguistic exercises (Vygotsky 1978; Long 1996)^[12, 26].

A primary contribution of this study lies in its illumination of the distinctive forms of interaction generated by filmmaking. Previous research on digital storytelling has demonstrated that multimedia production can enhance learner engagement and oral communication (Murad, Assadi, and Badarni 2023; Yang and Wu 2012)^[15, 27]. However, filmmaking differs from digital storytelling in important ways. Whereas digital storytelling often centers on individual narrative construction, filmmaking requires sustained collective decision-making across multiple stages,

including scriptwriting, rehearsing, filming, editing, and public presentation. Participants were therefore required not only to create language but also to negotiate creative disagreements, manage production roles, and solve technical problems through the target language. Language functioned simultaneously as a medium of communication, collaboration, and project management.

Similarly, the findings suggest that filmmaking offers affordances beyond those associated with traditional role-play activities. Role-play typically involves short, bounded interactions designed to practice predetermined linguistic functions. In contrast, filmmaking extends performance across an extended period of time and situates language within a larger process of planning, revision, and production. Students did not merely perform characters; they designed narratives, revised dialogue, evaluated recordings, and reflected upon audience reception. The repeated cycles of rehearsal and retake transformed language use into an iterative process of refinement, allowing learners to revisit linguistic forms in ways that conventional classroom speaking activities rarely permit.

The findings also extend scholarship on Project-Based Language Learning (PBL). While project-based approaches frequently emphasize collaboration and authentic tasks (Beckett 2002; Stoller 2006) [4, 22], the filmmaking process introduced a multimodal dimension that intensified learners' engagement with meaning-making. Students were required to coordinate spoken language with visual representation, gesture, sound, spatial arrangement, and digital editing. Meaning was therefore constructed across multiple semiotic resources rather than through language alone. This supports multimodal theories of literacy (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) [11] and suggests that filmmaking may create richer opportunities for communicative development than projects that rely primarily on written or oral output.

The findings further provide insight into the socio-affective dimensions of language learning. Consistent with previous research concerning speaking anxiety among Arab Palestinian EFL students (Murad and Assadi 2021) [13], participants described feelings of nervousness and fear when speaking English in formal classroom settings. Conversely, the adoption of dramatic roles appeared to create a psychological distance between the learner and the language performance. Unlike conventional oral presentations, where students are evaluated directly as speakers, filmmaking redistributed attention across the collective production process. Participants frequently reported that the possibility of rehearsal, repetition, and retakes reduced the pressure associated with immediate public performance. This suggests that filmmaking may provide a particularly supportive environment for learners who experience communication anxiety.

At the same time, the study complicates overly optimistic accounts of project-based media production. Although participants generally valued the filmmaking experience, the findings also revealed moments of frustration, unequal participation, technological stress, and interpersonal conflict. Some students expressed concern that a small number of group members assumed disproportionate responsibility, while others reported that technical difficulties occasionally diverted attention away from language learning goals. These findings indicate that collaborative media production is not inherently

empowering. Rather, its educational value depends on careful instructional design, realistic timelines, and active facilitation by instructors.

Finally, the study suggests that technological challenges should not necessarily be viewed as distractions from language learning. In many cases, troubleshooting editing software, synchronizing subtitles, and searching for online solutions generated additional opportunities for authentic target-language use. Technical obstacles became communicative events that required explanation, negotiation, and collaborative problem-solving. This finding supports emerging perspectives that view digital literacy and language literacy as increasingly interconnected rather than separate domains of learning.

Overall, the study indicates that filmmaking represents more than an engaging classroom activity. It constitutes a multimodal, collaborative, and extended communicative practice in which language serves simultaneously as a tool for expression, coordination, reflection, and problem-solving. The pedagogical significance of filmmaking lies not simply in its ability to motivate learners but in its capacity to create forms of interaction that integrate linguistic, social, technological, and creative dimensions of language learning within a single educational experience.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this qualitative case study offer several concrete, actionable implications for language practitioners, curriculum designers, and teacher educators seeking to integrate multimodal and project-based learning into EFL contexts.

1. Curricular Integration of Long-Form Project-Based Media Creation

Language departments should actively move beyond short-term, isolated digital tasks and integrate long-form, project-based media creation—such as collaborative filmmaking—directly into the official curriculum. Rather than treating media production as an optional, extra-curricular activity, structuring it as a core multi-week module ensures that students have the temporal space required to navigate the full linguistic pipeline.

As the findings demonstrate, the true linguistic value of filmmaking is not achieved in a single session; it accumulates across the progressive stages of conceptualization, iterative script revisions, reading rehearsals, and post-production text integration (such as subtitling). This sustained engagement transforms the target language from an academic subject to be memorized into a necessary operational tool for collaborative problem-solving.

2. Implementation of Low-Stakes Performance Buffers to Mitigate Anxiety

Given the severe speaking anxiety and performance barriers frequently observed among EFL learners in formal academic spaces, instructors should deliberately leverage the socio-affective affordances of drama and media production. Classroom activities should incorporate role-play, character building, and behind-the-camera directing tasks to provide students with a protective psychological buffer or "mask."

By separating the student's authentic identity from their performance persona, educators can lower the learners' affective filters, encourage stylistic and pragmatic risk-

taking, and turn oral production into an experimental, collaborative effort. Providing a camera lens as a protective boundary helps convert what would normally be a high-stress public speaking event into a low-stakes, highly practiced, and motivating verbal experience.

3. Institutionalizing Multimodal Pedagogies in Teacher Education

The success of student-generated media projects depends heavily on the instructor's ability to transition from a traditional lecturer to an active learning facilitator. Therefore, teacher training programs must explicitly embed multimodal pedagogies and digital literacies within their clinical training frameworks, such as Theory and Practice (TEFER) courses.

Pre-service teachers should not only study constructivist learning theories conceptually; they need to experience the operational realities, collaborative friction points, and technological hurdles of media production firsthand during their own training. Providing future educators with this internal understanding prepares them to confidently design, scaffold, and manage complex, technology-driven projects in their future classrooms, effectively bridging the gap between digital theory and active classroom execution.

4. Redesigning Assessment Frameworks for Media Projects

To prevent technological barriers from discouraging learners, assessment frameworks for student-generated media must be radically restructured. Rubrics must prioritize the collaborative process and linguistic development over cinematic or technical perfection.

Educators should adopt a holistic, process-oriented assessment strategy that evaluates:

- The depth of target language negotiation during script development.
- The quality of peer-mediated scaffolding observed during rehearsals.
- Active target-language maintenance during collaborative tasks.
- Individual critical reflection submitted through weekly journals.

If students know they are being evaluated on their linguistic journey, collaborative problem-solving, and reflective growth rather than their software editing skills, they will focus their energy on meaningful communication and view technological troubleshooting as a natural, low-stakes extension of the learning process.

- Integrating filmmaking into language curricula can enhance learner engagement.
- Project-based media creation supports authentic communication.
- Language teachers should receive training in multimodal pedagogies.
- Assessment should emphasize collaboration, reflection, and language use rather than technical perfection.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study offers rich, qualitative insights into the lived experiences of EFL learners engaged in collaborative filmmaking, several intrinsic methodological boundaries must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

1. Single-Site Institutional Context

A primary limitation of this inquiry is its deployment as a single-site case study conducted within a specific English Department at an academic college for teacher education in Israel. Because the institutional environment, student demographics, and clinical teacher-training structures are highly localized, the findings may reflect specific cultural and institutional dynamics that are not universally present in other higher education systems.

2. Bounded Sample Size

The participant cohort was limited to twenty-eight ($N = 28$) undergraduate students nested within a single intermediate-level language classroom. While a sample size of this scope is methodologically appropriate for developing the dense, rich descriptions required by qualitative case study designs, it limits the variety of student experiences that could be observed across different proficiency levels or institutional tracks.

3. Qualitative and Context-Specific Transferability

In line with the constructivist paradigms governing qualitative ethnography and narrative inquiry, the findings of this study are inherently context-specific. They are intended for conceptual transferability rather than statistical generalization to a wider population. The subjective nature of self-reported data from reflective journals and focus group interviews means the insights represent the unique socio-affective and creative journeys of these specific participants.

Suggestions for Future Research

To expand upon the boundaries of this exploratory study, future research should consider the following directions:

- **Cross-Institutional and Comparative Designs:** Future studies could employ multi-site qualitative designs comparing how students from diverse academic disciplines (e.g., computer science vs. humanities majors) or different cultural backgrounds experience the filmmaking pipeline.
- **Longitudinal Tracking of Pedagogical Transfer:** Longitudinal tracking would be highly valuable for pre-service teachers to determine if experiencing a filmmaking project during their university preparation directly influences their willingness and ability to implement multimodal media projects during their future school practicums and clinical teaching careers.
- **Proficiency-Based Variations:** Future inquiries could investigate how varying levels of initial language proficiency (e.g., beginner vs. advanced EFL learners) impact group dynamics, script negotiation strategies, and technological problem-solving workflows.
- Because the study relied primarily on self-reported reflections and interview data, participants may have emphasized particularly memorable positive or negative experiences while overlooking more routine aspects of the project.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study demonstrates that student-led filmmaking can function as a powerful form of experiential, multimodal, and project-based language learning within

higher education EFL contexts. By shifting learners from passive consumers of media to active creators of meaning, the eight-week filmmaking project transformed language learning into a socially situated process in which communication was embedded within creative production, collaborative decision-making, and technological problem-solving. The integration of scriptwriting, storyboarding, rehearsals, filming, and editing created multiple opportunities for learners to engage with English as a practical tool for achieving meaningful goals rather than as an abstract academic subject.

The findings reveal that filmmaking supported the development of learner agency by providing students with substantial control over both the content and process of their work. Participants described how creating original stories, negotiating dialogue, and shaping visual narratives encouraged a greater sense of ownership over their language use. At the same time, the collaborative nature of the project fostered sustained opportunities for peer interaction, negotiation of meaning, and collective problem-solving. These interactions enabled students to refine their linguistic choices, expand their vocabulary, and engage in authentic communicative practices that extended beyond traditional classroom exercises.

The study also highlights the important socio-affective dimensions of filmmaking. Many participants reported that performing dramatic roles and working within a production team reduced the anxiety often associated with speaking English in formal academic settings. The possibility of rehearsal, repetition, and retakes allowed students to experiment with language in a lower-pressure environment, contributing to increased communicative confidence and willingness to participate. These findings suggest that filmmaking may provide valuable support for learners who experience apprehension during conventional speaking activities.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that the benefits of filmmaking should not be viewed uncritically. Participants encountered a range of challenges, including technological difficulties, time-management pressures, unequal participation within groups, and occasional interpersonal tensions. These challenges sometimes generated frustration and required considerable effort to overcome. However, rather than undermining the learning process, many of these obstacles became opportunities for negotiation, reflection, and collaborative problem-solving. The findings therefore suggest that the educational value of filmmaking depends not only on creative production itself but also on careful instructional design, realistic expectations, and ongoing teacher support.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to sociocultural, interactionist, and multimodal understandings of language learning by demonstrating how linguistic development emerges through participation in extended, collaborative, and technology-mediated practices. The findings further suggest that filmmaking offers affordances that differ from those associated with digital storytelling, role-play, and more conventional forms of project-based learning because it requires learners to coordinate language use across multiple stages of creative and technical production.

Overall, this study highlights the potential of student-generated filmmaking as a pedagogical approach that integrates language learning, creative expression, digital

literacy, and collaborative inquiry within a single educational experience. By documenting both the opportunities and challenges associated with filmmaking in the EFL classroom, the study provides a richer understanding of how multimodal projects can support authentic communication, learner agency, and meaningful engagement in contemporary language education.

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