

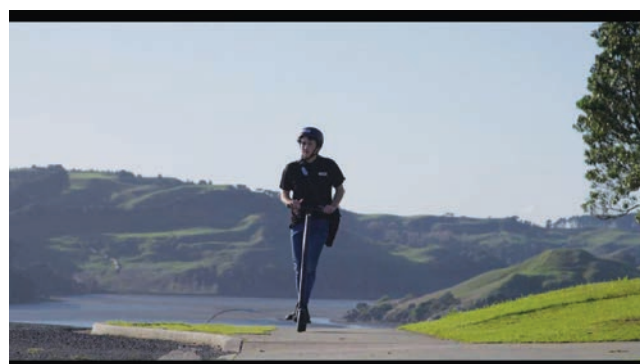
Days Crossing: inside the process of producing dramatic ELT video content

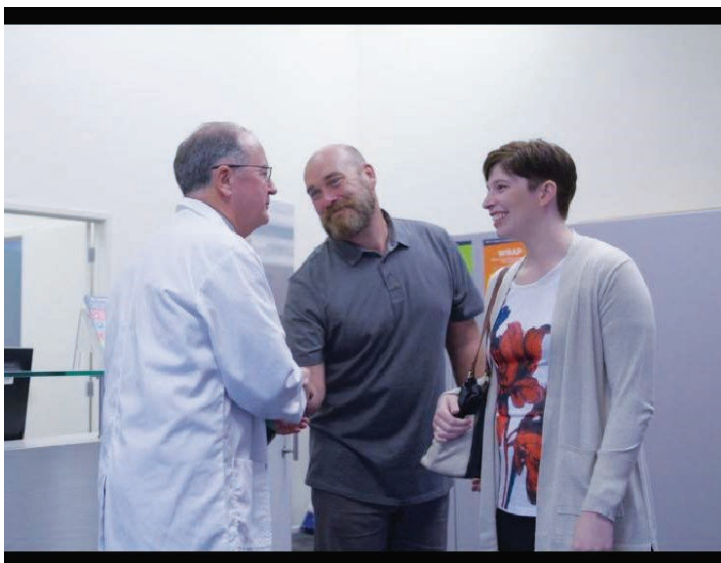
Jonathon Ryan describes a new project and hints at what ELT video could become.

How do you make small talk? Would you chit chat with a shop assistant? And if so, what exactly would you say? How do you offer a compliment without sounding smarmy and respond to one without sounding conceited? For the language learner abroad, such questions can be the most troubling, knowing that they may be judged harshly for inadvertently transgressing 'hidden' conversational norms. But there are few places to turn for advice. When teachers and textbook writers do attempt to address the issues, they are often let down by their intuitions (Wong & Waring, 2020) since what we *think* we do in conversation and what we *actually* do can be strikingly different (Golato, 2003).

A number of writers have therefore recommended the use of commercially available films, claiming that these are not only entertaining and motivating, but provide models of natural speech. While this idea has been popular, it has not held up to scrutiny; rather than speaking in an ordinary and authentic manner, film characters tend to say the most extraordinary things even for the most routine tasks (Ryan & Granville, 2020). After all, we watch films to be entertained (*So witty – I wish I'd said that*) rather than to overhear the mundane and rather dull talk of everyday lives. It would therefore hardly be surprising if an L2 movie-goer knew exactly what to cry out when arresting Hannibal Lector (*Drop the weapon! Spread 'em!*), but little idea how to initiate small talk with a neighbour or shop assistant. In other words, the things that movie characters need to say to advance a storyline are not the types of thing that my learners need to say to get their shopping done, buy a bus ticket or get to know their neighbour.

A useful goal of ESL video, then, would be to show what it looks like 'to be ordinary' when speaking English. However, this presents a quandary: The conventions of commercial film and television demand the distillation of usually days-long storylines





into just 90–120 minutes of screen time, and so additional conventions have arisen to facilitate this. In particular, dialogues are stripped of the chit chat and other routine interactions of daily life. As the author Colum McCann (2017: 42) advises young writers ‘No need for *hellos* or *howareyous*. No need for goodbyes either.’ For a filmmaker to ignore such advice is to run the risk of creating a mind-numbingly tedious viewing experience; if such a video had any artistic merit at all, it would likely be consigned to the dustiest corner of the ‘Festival’ section. The challenge for ELT video, then, is to present natural, ordinary interactions but to do so within a narrative that retains the entertainment value of commercial films.

To meet this challenge, I have been working with a team to reimagine what a new subgenre of ELT video might become. Our new series, *Days Crossing*, represents one potential approach. It is based on a narrative structure that draws on Richard Linklater’s classic indie film *Slacker*, where the camera captures one character going about their daily life, who then crosses paths with a second character; the camera then follows this second character, who crosses paths with a third character, and so on. Tying these characters together is an interweaving narrative set within a small, fictional beachside town in New Zealand. The idea is that this will enable us to present snapshots of ordinary interactions – buying a drink, delivering news, making an invitation, farewelling a host family – while maintaining interest through smooth shifts in narrative perspective and several overarching storylines. As will be discussed in the following section, to ensure a suitable naturalness, scenes were written with reference to the research literature, and underwent rigorous peer-review.

What do natural interactions look like?

Since our intuitions may fail us, where should we turn for guidance on natural patterns of language use? For language teachers, an obvious starting point is Wong & Waring’s (2020) *Conversation Analysis and Second Language Pedagogy*, newly released in its second edition. To give a sense of what conversation analysis is about, consider how the language function ‘making invitations’ is typically taught. Typically, this goes no further than presenting a choice between different expressions (e.g. ‘Can you come to dinner tomorrow?’ and ‘Would you like to go to dinner?’) and perhaps instruction on how to respond. The learner may come away with an impression that these can be simply dropped into conversation.

However, in real life, invitations are often handled much more delicately (Wong & Waring, 2020). An unwelcome invitation creates a sticky situation that may leave us floundering for a valid reason to decline and unable to

avoid embarrassment on both sides. For this reason, we often foreshadow our intentions through ‘pre-invitations’ such as *Have you got any plans for Thursday?* These provide forewarning and an opportunity for the hearer to give a green light (*No, not really*), a red light (*Yeah, I’ve got my sister coming over*), or hedge their bets through an amber light (*Not sure yet. Why?*). After a green light and invitation, things don’t simply end there. If the hearer accepts, they may need to follow up with a show of enthusiasm or appreciation; if they have already stated their availability but then decide to decline, a simple *No thank you* won’t do – they’ll have to work a lot harder. At the very least, they’ll need to explain why. Other complexities follow on from the red and amber lights.

In short, then, simply teaching a range of functional expressions won’t equip learners for the real-life business of dealing with invitations, nor will it for making requests, compliments, apologies and so on. With this in mind, with *Days Crossing* our plan was to present examples of this kind of authentic detail within the narrative and then to supplement it with worksheet exercises and additional video examples. The production process is briefly outlined in the following section.

The development process

As mentioned, the goal of *Days Crossing* was to create a series based on natural English conversation within a narrative of interlocking storylines. Once the general concept for the series had been fleshed out, a brief was prepared specifying a diverse cast of characters engaged in relatively ordinary daily events. While we could have been more prescriptive in specifying which social actions would be involved, we left this fairly open in the early stages.

Importantly, the ordinariness of the events would need to be balanced against audience expectations for entertainment. There would have to be some give and take. To achieve this, Scott Granville wrote a script incorporating familiar story beats drawn from the rom-com genre. This employed the recognisable

progression of ‘x meets y, falls head over heels, lacks the courage to express it, and stumbles through a series of misadventures building to a heightened moment of will he or won’t he?’. These scripts were then passed on to director Ben Woollen for an appraisal of their visual feasibility, and to me for an initial analysis and modification of the dialogues. The concept was further shaped until we were confident that we could create a series that was entertaining, presented authentic models of language use, and was both logistically and technically achievable.

The next stage was likely a first in ELT video production. Professors Jean Wong and Hansun Zhang Waring were brought in as expert consultants on the series, providing detailed peer review on the scripted dialogues. Confirming the earlier assertion about not trusting ordinary intuitions, they were able to draw on their extensive knowledge of the academic literature and their decades of experience analysing the minutiae of conversational data. Their feedback pointed to levels of detail that we found astounding. Ideally, they would also have been on set to provide in-time feedback to the actors on their delivery, but with the borders closed this was impossible. Adopting Plan B, I took on this role of dialogue supervisor myself, continuing through to the post-production stages where details such as the length of pauses were scrutinised.

Undoubtedly, there are aspects of *Days Crossing* that are closer to film-reality than ordinary reality (such as the ‘tidiness’ of the talk, with little overlapping speech or so-called performance errors), but the overall result is a four-episode series that I feel finds a happy balance between entertainment and naturalness, and with plenty of scope for developing valuable study materials.

To develop the learning materials, we got the four episodes viewed and mapped to see exactly what aspects of language were clearly available, either spoken or seen, or suggested. Each episode is made up of ten or eleven scenes, each of which contains interactions containing elements of functional language, grammar, aspects of

pronunciation or vocabulary. There is also scope at each stage for speculation from the viewers/learners about characters and plot. A team is currently working on materials for classroom use and self-study based on this mapping exercise.

Final thought

While its potential has been recognised for decades, ELT video has developed a rather tainted reputation for cheesy dialogue and dull storylines. The time now seems ripe for a rethink of what ELT video could become. The approach of the *Days Crossing* series, with natural interactions within intersecting storylines, seems laden with potential to both engage learners and provide valuable models of authentic language use.

Days Crossing will soon be available through www.chasingtimeenglish.com

References

- Golato A (2003) Studying compliment responses: a comparison of DCTs and recordings of naturally occurring talk. *Applied Linguistics* **24** (1) 90–121. doi:10.1093/applin/24.1.90
- McCann C (2017) *Letters to a Young Writer: Some Practical and Philosophical Advice*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Ryan J & Granville S (2020) The suitability of film for modelling the pragmatics of interaction: Exploring authenticity. *System* **89** 1–13. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2019.102186>
- Wong J & Waring HZ (2020) *Conversation Analysis and Second Language Pedagogy: A Guide for ESL/EFL Teachers* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.



Jonathon Ryan is a teacher and researcher at Wintec, NZ and co-author of the video textbooks *Fortune, Adrift* and *Skippers Pass*. His current interests include L2 listening and conversation analysis, and his research has appeared in journals including *Language Learning*, *Language Teaching Research*, and *System*.