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Encouraging students' independence through motivating interactive tasks in a virtual classroom

ABSTRACT

This paper is devoted to students' motivation and the use of videoconferencing, ICT technology and social media tools for creating a community of practice communication within which authentic and meaningful tasks and activities in multicultural ESP and EAP classes can be carried out. It focuses primarily on tasks, which work both in an intercultural virtual classroom as well as in a standard homogeneous class. Samples of end-of-course feedback reflecting students´ experience, and their personal and professional feeling of achievement at the end of the course are also included in the text.

INTRODUCTION

Creating a relaxed atmosphere and fruitful environment, in which students' willingness to communicate, cooperate and exchange ideas can be generated and supported, is a challenging task for every ESP teacher in tertiary level courses and others.

There may be a number of reasons why teachers consider using modern ICT technology in their classrooms. It may be the fact that students like technology, they come to classes with their smart phones, tablets and laptops, they use it a lot for study and private purposes and are usually familiar with the communication style when using social media tools. It is natural for students nowadays to be on-line 24/7 and communicate via Facebook and other social medial tools. They may seem to communicate less face-to-face. In ESP classes, we try to exploit ICT skills for reaching the goals set in courses designed to support development of all four language skills through meaningful activities that will be interesting and appealing for students.

As a teacher of legal English since 1996, I have been observing changes in terms of the use of technology in the classroom on the side of a teacher, changes in the course materials and types of activities. We have adjusted and modified the whole approach to teaching and methodology in ESP class. The whole course uses the best of what technology can offer, and thus we as teachers stay up-to-date.

I have had the opportunity to run courses with videoconferencing elements and thus have observed communities of practice made up of students at the Faculty of Law, Masaryk University (MU), Aberystwyth University (AU), and the University of Helsinki (UH). Mutual videoconferencing (VC) classes were held as part of English for specific purposes (ESP) and English for academic purposes (EAP) courses at the above-mentioned institutions. There are a large number of differences between their courses. For instance, students in virtual classrooms do not share the course syllabus, the number of contact hours is different, the focus varies, and students have various professional/personal

backgrounds and command of the English language. Nevertheless I strongly believe there are many advantages of incorporating VC into existing courses, as we explore how students gain knowledge of multicultural communication through VC, and discuss the motivating impact of real-life simulations created in VC classes.

Incorporation of VC does not exclusively mean synchronous communication (i.e., communication occurring in real time during a class). There is strong asynchronous communication support. In reality, it means that students are practising negotiation and argumentation, discussing case studies, preparing and delivering presentations, as well as completing mock trials in their virtual classrooms. All that is supported by reading and writing on different levels of formality and genres via closed Facebook groups and Wiki, respectively. This paper includes only some activities, which are closely linked to using ICT in classes with the VC element. We also use other ICT based activities, e.g. written tasks on which students collaborate on Google Disc but I will not intentionally deal with those.

This paper also contains extracts obtained from written feedback of Czech students over a period of three years in classes with a VC element. The students provided feedback on perceived advantages and disadvantages of using VC in classes for their personal growth, language and professional development, as well as their comments and suggestions. Students expressed their emotions during VC or immediately following VC quite clearly and openly. In some instances, they stated their opinions informally on Facebook. Feedback is used as an important part of the course, serving as a valuable resource and inspiration for adjusting future courses.

BACKGROUND

The language centres at Masaryk University and Aberystwyth University have been using VC technology for teaching purposes since 2004 and our current use is a result of this experience, research carried out within Invite project and establishing contacts with other Language Centres abroad, e.g. University of Helsinki, Paddeborn University, etc.

VC allows students to practise and develop a range of skills in multicultural communication. As I will illustrate below, they practise negotiation and argumentation and prepare mock trials. Students prepare group presentations, surveys are completed, and discussions take place in a multicultural environment focusing on general English and academic English skills.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is necessary to place the theoretical methodological framework in the context of existing research into second language acquisition, teacher education, ESP and EAP. One should consider the following key issues: the process of teaching and learning; literacy, motivation of students; and multimodal communication.

There is wide literature on motivating learners and the role of teachers. Motivation is considered one of the most important factors for success in language learning. Gardner and Lambert (1972) explained four kinds of motivation. Integrative motivation, which means that if learners posses it, they want to learn a foreign language in order to integrate with native speakers. They like communicating with other people and explore different cultures. In instrumental motivation, language becomes a tool that enables learners to achieve set goals, e.g. passing an end of course examination in legal English.

Intrinsic motivation means that learning comes from within learners. Extrinsic motivation can be understood as motivation to learn a foreign language because learners will be rewarded for doing so, e.g. by promotion, pay increase etc. The research says (ibid) that although motivation is difficult to define, its attributes can be listed, e.g. goal-oriented. Motivation impacts the thought processes, feelings and behaviour of learners and integrative motivation correlates with greater success in language learning. Hedge (2000:22) mentions research carried out with a group of Japanese students to give four major motivations for learning English. The given list more or less echoes the reasons given by our students in an ESP class at the tertiary level. It suggests two kinds of motivation for learning English. Necessity to use the language as an instrument for achieving other purposes, e.g. doing a job effectively, studying successfully or wishing to integrate into the activities or culture of another group of people. Gardner and Lambert (1972) called these two as integrative and instrumental motivation. There was further research done in this field, a decade later, Gardner and Smythe (1981) showed in Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) four main categories to consider. 'The first is motivation, which involves desire to learn a language. The second integrativeness, which involves attitudes towards a target language group and which touches on the affective factor of ethnocentricity. The third involves attitudes towards the language teacher and the course. The fourth concerns the measure of anxiety in classroom situations and in using the language. It is now clear that motivation is a highly complex phenomenon consisting of a number of variables. It is also clear that the high correlations that studies show between motivation and successful learning confirm what is indisputable among teachers: that motivation is of crucial importance in the classroom, whether learners arrive with it or whether they acquire it through classroom experiences.' (Hedge, 2000:23) Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) stress clear advantages in setting up an ESP course where students have specific needs. Strevens (1988) summarises them in four points – focus on the learner´s need, there is no waste of time; it is relevant to the learner; it is successful in imparting learning and it is more cost-effective than ´General English´. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) mention that there can be no simple answers to the question: ´What motivates my students?´ According to them, it is unfortunate that in the ESP world, a simple answer is expected – relevance to target needs. Nevertheless, there is more to motivation than simple relevance to perceived needs. ESP needs to be intrinsically motivating. Brown (1982) distinguishes between ´motivation´ and ´attitudes´ and he identifies three types of motivation: (1) global motivation, which consists of a general orientation to the goal of learning a L2, which correlates to Gardner and Lambert´s sense of ´motivation´;(2) situational motivation, which varies according to the situation in which learning takes place and it is his new concept; (3) task motivation is the motivation for performing particular learning tasks, which seems to be the same as Gardner NS Lambert´s ´attitudes´. ´The literature on motivation suggests that there is no general agreement about what precisely ´motivation´ or ´attitudes´ consist of, nor of the relationship between the two.´ (Ellis1985:117) However, Johnson (1990:274) mentions in the article on developing teachers´ language resources that the interpersonal aspect of classroom discourse is divided into three modes: control, organisation and motivation explaining the role and impact of positive motivation from the teacher. It becomes clear that motivation on both sides, of the teacher as well as learners, is crucial.

When the VC experiment began 14 years ago, inexperienced VC participants tended to be more formal and their language production was too controlled. This was partly due to overexcitement, anxiety and tension caused by new technology, an international environment, and low self-confidence. Later VC participants started experimenting with various aspects to create purposeful and effective communication. More ease and playfulness in communication were observed during students´ experimentation, similar to research in other areas of literary studies (e.g., Coles & Hall, 2001). One

can say that playfulness is related to cultural characteristics of some nationalities, which was repeatedly mentioned in student feedback forms.

METHODOLOGY

The Role of Teacher

The role of the teacher varies according to the type of syllabus, course and other constraints. Robinson (1991) suggests that the quality of the ESP teacher lies in flexibility. Jarvis (1983) encapsulates the overall abilities needed by an ESP teacher and Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) also made a list of the likely requirements of an ESP teacher. The key to success in letting students work more independently lies in extensive preparation outside class. This collaborative work pays off at a later stage when students control the process and practise skills outside of a traditional classroom.

The differences between groups in a virtual classroom have to be reflected in the amount of work performed outside of VC. Teachers choose the technology and tools to be used for asynchronous communication (i.e., communication within the virtual class outside of their class time). Initially, the teacher plays the role of organiser, supporter, provider of resources and facilitator. However, as the course progresses, the teacher steps back and lets students play a more active role in running and controlling the course.

The Role of Students

Waters and Waters (1995) listed self-awareness to be the first ability of a successful student. Students who register for a VC course may have varied expectations. Nevertheless, end-of-course feedback continues to illustrate achievements in both English language improvement and practice of soft skills. Additionally, feedback often reflects personal challenges. Students are briefly introduced to technical skills, such as how to control a VC unit and tools they will use for asynchronous communication. In their VC class, students work through a series of steps (called micro-tasks) in which they build their expertise and skill set. During this practice, they gain self-confidence and their final production is much improved from their initial attempts. Students significantly improve their soft skills, including time management, project work, presentations, discussions, and argumentation. Throughout this process, students are encouraged to be as independent as possible in terms of organization of tasks, preparation for next sessions, suggesting contents of VC classes and the teacher rather plays a role of a facilitator, supporter, observer and consultant.

Tools for Asynchronous Communication

In order to minimise discrepancies in syllabi, teachers decide beforehand what technology and tools will be used for asynchronous communication. Two types have been tested: Wiki and closed Facebook groups. Wiki seems to be more straightforward and simple for the organisation of materials, clear division and display of work, archiving of materials, activities and completed work, and uploading student preparations for mock trials. Czech students, however, do not like using Wiki very much as they experienced difficulties related to registration, access, and its use. Although they are technologically literate, they were unfamiliar with Wiki and required extra support.

Teachers generally give freedom to students in terms of organisation of individual sessions, preparation of presentations, and strategies for argumentation in case studies. If necessary, teachers

open informal conversations within the closed Facebook group and students continue in its development. When students need additional organisation prior to individual sessions, they can create a closed group within a closed group. In addition, the speaking part of the VC session is enriched by an element of writing. Students write an outline of their presentation to serve as an invitation and formal summary.

Types of Activities

VC offers unique opportunities to practice naturally-occurring language in a multicultural classroom. Besides practising EAP and ESP, students improve in a number of soft skills: negotiation, argumentation, group presentations, time management, team management, etc.
Below can be found some useful activities.

1. **Brief Introduction of VC Participants**
   In groups of two, participants use flip cameras or smart phones to introduce themselves. This is uploaded prior to the first VC session. It makes the first VC more relaxing, with more natural questions. The same activity can be carried out in the standard classroom environment when students are asked to meet someone new, they have not met yet and upon a short interview, they prepare a brief introduction of their peer.

   Using photos to encourage ESP terminology use and speaking
   Students are asked to take a photo of a situation before they come to class, which is used as a starting point for a description using legal terms.

2. **Preparing to Debate**
   Students are explained the aim and structure of the preparatory exercise, in which they practise how to argue and how to support a teacher-assigned position. By preparing both views (for and against), they could see the problem in a wider context. Rather than being a win-lose exercise, students practise giving one argument at a time, which is often a problem for them. They also learn timing for their argumentation since they have to express themselves in an allocated time, which is often a problem for the less experienced students. Students follow a strict set of guidelines and allocated times is determined by the teacher according to their experience with English. Students use IT to prepare for the task outside class, so they frequently use a discussion forum enabling them to see views of others in the group. Students are given a lot of independence in advance. They are provided with examples of useful language and the rest of the preparation is on them. They brainstorm the topics for discussion, agree on them, they make a list of claims and counterclaims, they decide who defends a particular view, etc. So besides English, they improve their team cooperation and other soft skills. The teacher's role here is to provide general input, facilitate the activity, be the time keeper and provide feedback afterwards.

3. **Brainstorming Topics for Short Presentations and Follow-Up Discussions**
   Students in groups are given relatively free choice in shortlisting their presentation topics. Topics with relevance to their compulsory syllabus are always warmly welcome. Then they prepare and present an outline of their presentation during VC and write an invitation to it on a closed Facebook group. After students receive feedback, they divide the work, allocate team roles, discuss the structure of the presentation, prepare audience tasks, determine visuals, etc. Students are also responsible for preparing follow-up discussion, generating questions and writing a formal abstract. Throughout the whole process of preparation, the teacher's role is to stand back and observe and if necessary, to advise on structuring the presentation, its timing

and work division. Sometimes students create a closed Facebook group within a closed Facebook group for their presentation group to discuss various issues and get organized and prepared for their next class. It is a sign of trust for a teacher to be included in this group. Usually, natural team leaders become more visible in work division and organization, other students offer to do the work in which their strong points and likes can be exploited.

4. **Case Studies, Practising Negotiation, and Argumentation**

This task uses ready-made cases available in the International Legal English Certificate (ILEC) textbook, see Krois-Lindner, A., & Translegal (2006). Its case studies are concise and suggestions are made regarding roles for negotiation and given tasks. For example, students are asked to: identify legal issues of the case, list strengths and weaknesses of the other party of the case, and study and decide which relevant legal document(s) to use and prepare for negotiation. The tasks also recommend further skills to develop as the students prepare case studies using legislature and writing tasks relevant to their syllabus (e.g., writing a letter of advice, writing a memo, etc.). Students usually used Google Docs or the MU information system for working on one document as a team.

Students are given absolute freedom how much, how well and how in-depth they prepare. The teacher focuses on giving feedback after the task.

5. **Mock Trial**

A mock trial is the most complex activity for a VC class used at the Faculty of Law. Students chose their roles and sign up at Wiki. Teachers make sure that roles are evenly and logically distributed (e.g., if there is a prosecution counsel on one side, the defence counsel should be on the other side of the virtual classroom).

It is necessary to have shared knowledge for this task (e.g., all students should understand the outline of the mock trial). Therefore, a brief bulleted-item summary is distributed. Students prepare for their roles individually through readings and searching for additional evidence. The role of the teacher is to support the students, help with the organisation of the mock trial, and assist with technical issues as needed (e.g., presenting evidence by data camera, zooming, etc.). This task creates a language challenge for the students because the mock trial participants are expected to behave and speak with a certain level of formality.

6. **Academic Skills in English in a Non-Homogeneous Class**

It is also possible to prepare a fruitful discussion after presentation to students majoring in other fields of study, i.e. non - lawyers from different countries. During preparation of the presentation and follow up discussion, students practise writing abstracts collectively for their presentations and throughout the whole preparation, they have to bear in mind they are preparing a presentation and discussion for lay people. Although the depth of their presentations cannot be compared with the same task in a homogeneous class, where the level of background knowledge is higher, there are strong arguments for keeping this asymmetrical model. This is supported by the students' end-of-course written feedbacks.

Feedback from students

The summary included below is based on in-depth, paper-based feedback running over the period of six terms, in which students were given only questions and were asked to express their opinion and feelings on classes with the VC element, in which more technology than in standard classes was used. They could provide feedback either in their mother tongue or in English, and they could hand in the feedback anonymously if they liked.

Czech students' feedback summary from VCs focusing on academic English in a non-homogeneous class

- **Strengths:**
    - Natural communication and understanding of different accents
    - Improved English
    - Learning about different cultures
    - Fun and interesting topics
    - Encouraged to communicate
- **Weaknesses:**
    - Time management
    - Limited group cooperation
    - Limited legalese
- **Opportunities:**
    - Practise useful skills for real life
    - Naturally occurring communication
    - Accents
- **Threats:**
    - Stress that they would not understand different accents
    - Shy about talking
    - Worried about the level of English

Czech students' feedback summary from VCs focusing on legal English

- **Strengths:**
    - Excitement about natural communication
    - Discussing legal topics
    - Learning soft skills
    - Increased independence
- **Weaknesses:**
    - Lack of experience in law and soft skills (negotiation)
    - Lack of preparation for exam
- **Opportunities:**
    - Mastering new skills and technology for future career
    - Naturally occurring communication
    - Accents
    - Cultural differences
    - Legal English practice
- **Threats:**
    - Lack of time to prepare for an exam

LANGUAGE AND INTERCULTURAL ISSUES

As there is time for neither formal input in intercultural aspects of communication nor linguistic issues, students learn by doing. Their awareness is raised by the teacher´s feedback, challenging questions, or the teacher´s explanations pointing out discrepancies or inappropriate behaviours.

CONCLUSION

Since 2004, experience with the incorporation of VC and student feedback relating to VC prove that technology offers the following benefits: support of student advancement in language development and appropriate language use in authentic international communication; motivation of students to be more involved through meaningful activities; enriched student perceptions of other cultures; and student encouragement to improve soft skills for later employment. VC may help future graduates in successfully joining the job market. Of course, VC is not for everybody. There are students who prefer more traditional ways of studying. Technology can enrich how one studies a foreign language and culture in the 21st century.

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