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Videoconferencing in ESP Classes: Learner-Centred Approach

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Abstract

The integration of videoconferencing (VC) into ESP education provides an opportunity for the combination of collaborative learning, autonomous learning and cross-cultural communication via social media and ICT implementation. Videoconferencing encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning in order to achieve a successful outcome of the whole session and enables them to apply varied project-based concepts. Instructors usually remain in the background during the lesson but take an active role in the preparation. The focus is on student–student interaction both in the VC classroom and in social media activities.

The authors describe their first-hand experience as teachers of joint VC Business English sessions arranged between the University of Pardubice, Czech Republic and the University of Pécs, Hungary. By sharing the lessons learnt, they aim to help teachers interested in organizing similar, cross-cultural ESP sessions. Students' views are presented on the learning experience, discussion topics, and recommended modifications. The authors show the outcomes based on students' feedback, and provide some suggestions as to the suitability of the videoconferencing concept for ESP classes.

Integrace videokonferenčních modulů do hodin odborné angličtiny (ESP) nabízí možnost kombinace kolaborativního i autonomního učení spolu s prvky interkulturní komunikace prostřednictvím sociálních médií. Autorky popisují své zkušenosti z videokonferenčních hodin, prezentují výsledky na základě zpětné vazby studentů a nabízejí doporučení týkající se vhodnosti videokonferenčního konceptu pro výuku odborné angličtiny.

Keywords:

videoconferencing, learner-centred approach, collaborative learning, autonomous learning, cross-cultural communication

Bionote:

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Introduction

Videoconferencing (VC) is not a new concept in the field of education. Interactive videoconferencing has been integrated into traditional practices from kindergarten to post-graduate levels since the 2000s (cf. Invite project 2006-2008, O'Dowd 2006, Anastasiades 2010, Wu et al. 2011, Hradilová and Chovancová 2012, Denksteinová and Podlášková 2013, Jung 2013, Bensafa 2014, Eguchi 2014, Hopper 2014). With the help of a camera, microphones, loudspeakers, screens and IP connection, learners can have joint live lessons with another group of learners at a distant location. Owing to its interactive potential, videoconferencing seems to be a tool that could widely be applied in foreign language education. It offers scope for international collaboration in both EFL and ESP settings.

In the spring of 2014, joint ESP lessons were arranged for the second-year BA students studying at the University of Pardubice, Czech Republic and the University of Pécs, Hungary.¹ The lessons were integrated into Business English courses with the aim to provide an opportunity for the students to practise English, to meet other cultures and to experience participating in VC held in a foreign language. Two mixed nationality groups of students were formed and three VC sessions were organized for each group. All participating students were asked to fill in a questionnaire allowing them to critically reflect on the benefits and drawbacks of VCs. The goal was to explore whether VC sessions were seen as beneficial learning environments by the students. In addition, the respondents were encouraged to recommend topics that they would find suitable for such discussions, and make suggestions on how the sessions could be made more efficient.

In this paper, the authors will first discuss the application and benefits of videoconferencing in teaching English based on previous research and practices. After that, they will present their own findings.

¹ The cooperation between the University of Pardubice and the University of Pécs started as a modification of the videoconferencing model previously carried out between the University of Pardubice, Czech Republic and Haaga-Helia, University of Applied Science in Helsinki, Finland in 2013. The authors adapted the concept for their joint VC Business English sessions.

Videoconferencing in EFL and ESP

Regarding the practice of EFL, videoconferencing can break the traditional routine of classroom teaching. Students can meet either native or non-native speakers, which can increase their motivation and help envision themselves as members of a cosmopolitan international society (Dörnyei 2005). English is a world language so the motivation for language learning can originate from meetings with non-native speakers so that a 'cosmopolitan, globalized world citizen identity' can develop (Dörnyei 2005: 97). Research on EFL videoconferences with native speakers (Wu et al. 2011) and non-native speakers (Jung 2013) has proved that these sessions raised students' confidence and motivation levels.

The results of the EU-funded Invite project (Leonardo da Vinci Programme) also support the benefits of videoconferencing in the teaching of English as a foreign language. The project, which was initiated by Masaryk University, Brno, in the Czech Republic and the University of Wales in Aberystwyth, UK, aimed at developing an innovative, comprehensive programme for the application of videoconferencing in the cooperation of professional and educational environments and cultures (Invite 2006-2008). One of its main goals was to provide teaching methods, guides, and learning materials for VC sessions. The results were disseminated at several conferences (cf. Morgan et al. 2007, Budíková et al. 2008, Hradilová et al. 2008, Morgan 2008, Štěpánek and Hradilová 2008), and also shared on the website of the Invite project (<http://invite.cjv.muni.cz/index.html>). The outcome of the project fills a gap in VC methodology since it also comprises handbooks with sample VC lesson plans, tasks for videoconferencing skills training courses and quick guides on the structuring and management of the sessions. The booklet written by Hradilová, Chovancová and Vincent (2012) takes a similar, practical approach by sharing videoconferencing exercises developed for the students of law.

Videoconferencing offers a learner-centred approach (Denksteinová and Podlášková 2013): it supports learner autonomy, independent learning, and collaborative learning. The focus is on the language learner, who needs to seek, collect, organize, present and share information in a foreign language, using online and live digital connection. The teacher is mostly a facilitator in this process. This does not mean, however, less work and preparation. O'Dowd (2006) suggests that the success of videoconferencing sessions is largely determined by the time and

energy devoted to the preparation and planning of activities. He also emphasizes the importance of creating pre- and post-videoconferencing tasks, with the aim to make participants get to know each other before the actual sessions and let them reflect upon the experience after the meetings.

Videoconferencing provides a platform for both collaborative learning and project-based learning (cf. Dooly 2007 and Hopper 2014). Each group member takes individual responsibility in the accomplishment of the given assignment and contributes with the output of his work to the success of the project. There is interdependence between the members: they take responsibility for their part and are aware that their performance influences the final, joint outcome (cf. Dooly 2007). When collaborative learning is combined with the application of ICT tools, the situation will be close to workplace experience (Dooly 2007: 217). In addition to practising the foreign language, students will acquire skills that are more and more in demand in the job market: creative thinking, planning, time-management, synchronous and asynchronous workgroup collaboration, and joint problem-solving via the use of technology (cf. Dooly 2007). Collaboration with members of another culture towards a common goal also enhances the development of intercultural understanding and tolerance (Allport 1979, cited in O'Dowd 2007: 5).

Reports on cross-cultural EFL videoconferencing have confirmed that these discussions can trigger active communication in English. Based on the comparison of uni-cultural and cross-cultural VC meetings, Eguchi (2014) found that the lack of information about the other culture can motivate students to participate and ask questions.

Especially in ESP, videoconferencing has great potential. On the one hand, it can offer a solution to practising professional or vocational meetings in English. Students can meet both native and non-native speakers, groups of fellow students, professionals or experts that are located at a distance. On the other hand, it can also provide an opportunity for international, cross-cultural experience. Technology-enhanced ESP has further benefits; Butler-Pascoe (2009), for instance, point out that it supports critical thinking, and utilizes authentic materials in an interactive, collaborative way.

Research aim and questions

Thus, it can be assumed that interactive videoconferencing is an ideal alternative to traditional, classroom-based language learning. It is a learner-centred and collaborative approach, with the teacher acting mostly as a planner and facilitator. However, the authors were interested to know whether students with no previous experience in videoconferencing agreed with the beneficial aspects after participating in three sessions. The purpose was to explore if the students themselves saw VC sessions as a good way of practising English and felt that they could learn more than in a traditional Business English lesson. The students were asked to describe what they liked the most and the least about videoconferencing and recommend modifications for improvement and topics for future discussions.

The research questions were as follows:

1. Do students find videoconferencing a good way of learning English?
2. What do students like the most and the least about videoconferencing?
3. What topics would students suggest for discussion?
4. How do students think the sessions could be more efficient?

The authors believe that the findings may be useful for teachers who are interested in organizing similar sessions in the future.

Preparation

Three videoconferencing sessions were planned for the spring term of 2014, each comprising two sixty-minute meetings involving approximately 8 students on each side. Several months before the first videoconference, the authors met via Skype regularly to discuss the number of sessions, dates, timing, bookings, content and specific instructions. Facebook was chosen as the communication platform for student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction and a page called ParPecs was set up. This page contained two closed groups, and both Czech and Hungarian students were invited to join the relevant mixed nationality groups using their current Facebook accounts before the first VC session. The preparation stage also included the introduction of the videoconferencing concept in the preceding face-to-face classes dealing with the chairperson's role, discussion rules, politeness issues and intercultural aspects. In accordance with the suggestions of O'Dowd (2006), the teachers felt it essential to start planning in advance and to provide guidelines for the participants beforehand.

The three VC meetings focused on introductions and university matters, problem solving and intercultural communication. Before the first videoconferencing session the students were asked to prepare their brief personal introduction on Facebook, together with one question relating to their partners' university (see Figure 1). The questions were subsequently answered and further discussed during the initial session.



Figure 1. Profile example from the first videoconference

For the second videoconferencing session students had to find a problem they faced at their own university which they would like to be solved. They prepared a short presentation explaining the problem and asking the other side for a solution or some suggestions. The presentation was uploaded to Facebook before the second videoconferencing session. Both sides familiarized themselves with the relevant problem, prepared some suggestions and presented them during the sessions. These suggestions were either accepted or refused by the presenting side and many proposals provoked further discussion. The second VC was thus a platform for joint problem-solving with the aim to simulate real business meetings and to facilitate intercultural understanding and tolerance (cf. Allport 1979, cited in O'Dowd 2007: 5).

The final videoconferencing session dealt with intercultural issues. Each student in the group prepared one question dealing with various cultural aspects, e.g. humour, education, cultural heritage and others. The list of questions was uploaded to Facebook and answers to these questions were given during the session.

Methods

A questionnaire of 13 questions was given to students at the end of the final VC session. The main background variables were the place of studies, gender, and the knowledge of English (listening, writing, reading, and speaking skills) based on self-evaluation.

The first main section of the questionnaire focused on students' agreement with seven statements on the beneficial aspects of videoconferencing. The first three focused on the aspect of the language learning experience: (1) *VC sessions are a good way of practising English*, (2) *I was more active in VC lessons than in a traditional lesson*, (3) *I could learn more in VC lessons than in a traditional lesson*. The next two involved statements on the assistance received during the preparation phase: (4) *I received enough help and guidance from the teacher before the VC sessions*, (5) *The Facebook group helped me prepare for the sessions*. The final two statements focused on the intercultural experience and students' willingness to participate in other VC sessions the future: (6) *VC sessions are ideal for meeting and learning about cultures*, (7) *I would be ready to participate in more VC sessions*. Students had to rate the statements on a Likert-scale from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

In the second section of the questionnaire, open-ended questions were raised on what students liked the most and the least about videoconferencing, which session they enjoyed the most, what topics they preferred, how they believed the sessions could be made more efficient, and what suggestions they had for the topics to be discussed. They also had to rate their overall impression of videoconferencing on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = very bad, 5 = very good).

Student feedback

All the students came to the videoconferencing sessions without any previous experience in similar meetings conducted either in their mother tongue or in English. The responses were thus made only on the basis of their experience from the three meetings.

The students' general impression of videoconferencing was good, rated at 3.9 on average. With regard to the beneficial aspects, the students agreed that videoconferencing was a good way of practising English; they found the sessions also ideal for meeting and learning about new cultures. Most of them agreed with the statement that "I would be ready to participate in more VC sessions". Regarding the

efficiency of learning and active participation, however, they seemed to be undecided in judging whether they could learn more or were more active than in a traditional lesson. Table 1 illustrates the rate of their agreement with the statements.

Beneficial aspects	Rate of agreement
VC sessions are a good way of practising English	4.3
I was more active in VC lessons than in a traditional lesson	3.1
I could learn more in VC lessons than in a traditional lesson	2.9
I received enough help and guidance from the teacher before the VC sessions	4.4
The Facebook group helped me prepare for the sessions	3.9
VC sessions are ideal for meeting and learning about other cultures	3.8
I would be ready to participate in more VC sessions	3.6

Table 1. Students' rate of agreement with statements on videoconferencing (1= strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)

The results suggest that students did not necessarily feel that videoconferencing increased the level of their activity or provided a better language learning experience. Regarding the background variables, it was found that students who assessed their speaking skills as being poor agreed slightly less with the statements about the benefits of videoconferencing sessions than students who stated they had good or very good speaking skills in English (see Table 2).

Beneficial aspects	Rate of agreement	
	Poor speaking skills	Good speaking skills
VC sessions are a good way of practising English	4.1	4.5
I was more active in VC lessons than in a traditional lesson	2.6	3.5
I could learn more in VC lessons than in a traditional lesson	2.7	3.3
I received enough help and guidance from the teacher before the VC sessions	4.1	4.6
The Facebook group helped me prepare for the sessions.	3.9	4.0
VC sessions are ideal for meeting and learning about other cultures	3.4	4.1
I would be ready to participate in more VC sessions	3.1	4.1

Total average	3.4	4.1
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Table 2. Speaking skills and students' rate of agreement with statements on videoconferencing (1= strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)

Although those with not so strong English speaking skills also agreed that videoconferencing was a good way of practising the language, they did not feel that they had been more active than in a traditional lesson and most of them were undecided about whether they would be ready to participate in more sessions. Students with good or very good speaking skills felt that they had been more active and agreed that they would be interested in more VC sessions. In general, they were more in agreement with the benefits of videoconferencing, especially with the statement that it is a good way of practising English.

In their answers to the question 'What did you like most about VC sessions?', the intercultural and interactive aspects were mentioned by most of the students. They enjoyed being able to practise English in a relaxed atmosphere, by talking to fellow students from another country. The fact that they found themselves in a new learning environment, working autonomously and collaboratively to prepare for the lessons, was a new experience. As one of the students noted, "We had to organize ourselves without the participation of the teacher." The chance to practise English without the stress of being corrected was also mentioned as an advantage: 'we didn't have to speak right'. They also commented on the Facebook group, saying that 'it was the best choice to make efficient interaction'.

Regarding the least favoured features of VC, the passivity of some participants was mentioned by several students. One of the respondents even noted that speaking should have been compulsory for all participants to eliminate inactiveness. Other critical remarks commented on the relatively big group size: it seemed to be difficult for them to manage the conversation between two groups of 7–10 students. There were also comprehension problems because of speakers' accents or the use of microphones. Both Czech and Hungarian students mentioned in their answers that there were differences in preparation levels: Czech students put more effort into preparing for the sessions than Hungarians, which resulted in both groups feeling a bit uncomfortable at the meetings.

The session that the majority of participants (70%) enjoyed the most was the third one, when intercultural topics were discussed. According to their answers, the atmosphere was the most relaxed since students were already familiar with both the

situation and the groups shown to them on the screen. As one student commented, 'it was easier to talk because we already knew a lot about each other'.

Students were also asked to share their suggestions on how videoconferencing sessions could be made more efficient. The main points made can be summarized as follows:

- choose interesting topics for discussion,
- the chairperson should involve everyone in the conversation,
- the teacher should motivate the students to be more active and talkative,
- smaller groups should be organized.

The recommended topics for discussion fell into the following categories:

- topics related to hobbies and free time activities,
- business or economics related issues,
- current issues (news),
- no fixed topic – students can choose.

The suggestions on group size, topics, the role of the chairperson and the role of the teacher indicate that students hold it important that the meetings be interactive. Communication between groups of students could be enhanced by changes in groups size, topic choice and the preparation of the chairperson.

Lessons learnt

Based on the experience of the teachers and the feedback received from the students, it can be claimed that these meetings proved to be useful both as platforms for language practice and cross-cultural collaboration.

Although most of the students found videoconferencing a good way of learning English, they were less certain whether they could learn more or were more active than in a traditional lesson. Especially students with not so good speaking skills in English seemed to have doubts about their activity and learning experience. Most of them seemed to be more undecided about whether they would be ready to participate again than students who assessed their speaking skills as good or very good. This suggests that videoconferencing might not lead to more active participation or better learning experience in the case of all participants. The level of foreign language knowledge can influence to what extent participants see the benefits of these lessons.

Regarding the topics, it was interesting to see that students either supported topics for everyday discussion or suggested more profession-related topics. They also proposed that they should be allowed to choose topics for VC. This is an important aspect that teachers working on topics and tasks for videoconferencing should consider. If students are more actively involved in the planning phase with regard to topic choice as well, they will probably be even more interested and committed. When working on the lesson plans, teachers should also consult the useful quick videoconferencing guides and handbooks that were prepared and published within the frameworks of the Invite project (Invite 2006-2008). All of them are available on the website of the project (<http://invite.cjv.muni.cz/results.html>). In addition, teachers could also develop their own VC lesson plans and tasks, especially in the field of Business English, similarly to the collection written for the students of law (Hradilová and Chovancová 2012).

In their suggestions on the improvement of VC sessions, students confirmed the importance of the chairperson in managing the discussion. Selected chairpersons in the groups play a vital role for the successful outcome of the sessions. They act as the bridging or linking factor in the conversation. The students selected to play this role should possess beside the necessary language skills also natural leadership skills, the ability to delegate tasks and be sensitive, polite and respectful.

Students also commented that attention should be paid to everybody's active participation. They suggested smaller groups and more teacher control to enhance this. The possible passivity of the participants can indeed hinder the flow of information exchange (Dooly 2007: 230). Moreover, the management of the discourse can also be problematic (cf. O'Conaill et al. 1993) because groups of participants talk to each other via the screen.

The authors believe that videoconferencing is suited mainly for teachers willing to apply the learner-centred approach. The most important aspects that should be considered during the planning phase are students' speaking skills in English, topic choice and lesson planning, the preparation of the chairperson and the active involvement of all the participants.

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