



Student and Teacher Perceptions on Learning Languages through Web Conferencing: Focus on Adobe Connect Breakout Rooms

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Abstract

After having been teaching online using Adobe Connect web conferencing system since 2008, it was time to stop and reflect upon its advantages and disadvantages. The purpose of this research paper is to study the possibilities and challenges of online language teaching by focusing on the breakout room feature of the Adobe Connect system. The aim is to investigate how the function supports or challenges language learning from the students' and the teacher's viewpoint. In addition, the purpose is to compare to what extent their experiences coincide. In this study the data consists of my own observations as a language teacher using Adobe Connect breakout rooms. The data on students' experiences was collected by conducting a survey in the virtual learning environment Optima. The e-questionnaire was replied by 29 students of business and business information systems using the blended learning method at Oulu University of Applied Sciences. The students were inquired about how well the breakout function serves language learning purposes in general and on the specific lesson when the survey was carried out. Moreover, some technical background information was collected on the hardware and software used. The survey and the teacher's observations indicated that the breakout function succeeds in supporting the interactive nature of language learning. Most of the challenges discovered were related to technology.

1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to discuss how well the web conferencing system Adobe Connect (AC), and its breakout room function in particular, manages to serve the purpose of language learning. The subject emerged out of the author's personal interest in investigating how students experience this method of synchronous online learning.

Web-conferencing technology such as Adobe Connect (AC) offers a synchronous tool for instructor-student and student-student communication through audio, video, text chat, presentation display, breakout rooms, white board collaboration, polling, and desktop or application sharing [6]. Cappiccie and Desrosiers [3] studied how their adult students experienced the use of Adobe Connect on a social work course conducted by using the blended-learning method. Traditionally the course was implemented asynchronously. The students preferred AC sessions to asynchronous discussion boards since AC increased interaction. As disadvantages Cappiccie and Desrosiers [3] pointed out concentration difficulties at home, technical problems and acquisition of pertinent equipment, its installation and use. From asynchronous methods the students wanted to retain recorded lectures that are useful in learning difficult concepts. The teachers suggested thorough introduction to the use of the programme together with students, as well as ensuring that students are appropriately equipped. Morrison [4] examined the applicability of AC in discussion-rich seminar teaching. Due to its constructive features and tools that advance communicativeness and communality, AC is suited to interactive synchronous instruction. The disadvantages are related to its time-consuming nature and technology: it takes longer for the instructor to design classroom activities to be implemented via AC; transitions between activities take longer than in a physical classroom; solving technical problems hinders progress. In general, dysfunctional technology is experienced as a major problem [cf. 2]. Also the lack of physical contact challenges interaction since there are no visual aids such as gestures and non-verbal clues to rely on [4]. Wang et al. [5] explored the integration of synchronous technology (AC) into an educational technology programme in an American university and in an English as a Foreign Language programme in China. The experiment showed that the use of AC helped in bridging both cultural and geographical gaps among learners and teachers. It provides tools such as audio and video that enrich interaction and enable instant feedback from the instructors and peers.

In 2008 our school was faced with the problem of diminishing numbers of adult students and a growing number of drop-outs. Being tied to studying at school premises in the evenings did not attract adult students who sought flexibility. Consequently, a blended learning method was introduced in our school in the autumn 2008. The teachers were provided with short introductions of 1-2 hours to the



learning environment Blackboard and the web conferencing system Adobe Connect Pro in the spring 2008.

This paper reports on findings from a study that aimed to investigate how the Adobe Connect breakout room function supports or hinders language learning: what are the advantages and disadvantages. The answer is sought by analysing both the teacher and student perceptions. In addition, the purpose is to compare to what extent their experiences coincide.

2. Method

The data includes the teacher's observations of the use of Adobe Connect breakout rooms during the time period of 2008-2014. Students' experiences were investigated by conducting a survey in the virtual learning environment Optima in connection with two language courses that both consist of 10 hours of AC sessions and 8 hours of classroom studying. The e-questionnaire was replied anonymously by 29 students of business and business information systems at Oulu University of Applied Sciences. The questionnaire included ten questions of which the first five inquired about technical background information on the students' browser, operating system, Internet connection speed, Flash Player version and audio equipment. The remaining five open-ended questions focused on inquiring about the applicability of AC breakout room function on language learning as well as about problems encountered. The replies of the open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively rather than quantitatively because of the small number of respondents.

3. Adobe Connect breakout rooms

In an AC conference room, the teacher in the *host* role can create breakout rooms and send students or *attendees* into rooms just as in an ordinary physical classroom, where students can be divided into groups. Breakout rooms can be used in meetings and training sessions that have 200 or fewer people. In a single training session there can be up to 20 rooms. Once in a breakout room, students can communicate and collaborate with each other via audio, text chat and other tools [5]. The instructor can visit the rooms. When work in the breakout rooms is complete, the host ends the session. Similarly, all attendees return to the main room automatically. The breakout function is started by clicking on a breakout room symbol in the attendees pod (Fig. 1.). By default there are three breakout rooms available, but the number of rooms can be added. The attendees are assigned to rooms either manually by selecting the attendee name in the list and then dragging it to the desired room, or automatically by clicking on the Evenly Distribute From Main button. During the same session, the attendees always return automatically to the same room. [1]

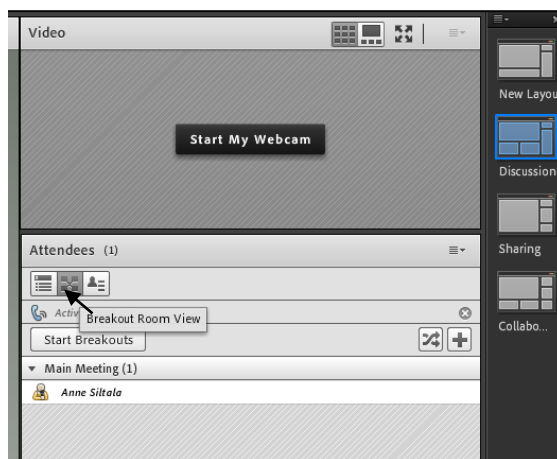


Fig.1. Screenshot from starting the breakout room function in the Attendees Pod.

4. Advantages of the breakout room function

Group work in AC breakout rooms constitutes the main part of online language classes in the business department of Oulu University of Applied Sciences. The activity types include reading out texts in turns, dialogues, word definition and vocabulary exercises, listening practice, negotiations and role plays. None of the traditional classroom activities have to be abandoned in breakouts [cf. 3, 5]. On the contrary, working online provides features that are not always available in a classroom setting: students have access to the Internet where they can search for information, listen to audio files, watch YouTube videos on the subject as well as use e-dictionaries. They can take notes together, share files



and make presentations to be shown in the AC main meeting room. Division into groups is much faster at AC than in a physical classroom when allowing the programme to do it automatically. Consequently, the group composition varies and enables communication with different people, while in a classroom setting students tend to group with the same people. In AC groups students feel they are more involved and committed to participating since they cannot see each other and are entirely reliant on what they hear. Moreover, students mention that learning is enhanced when working with learners of different language levels. Also the importance of peer support was reflected in the answers. Some students find it easier to communicate online than face-to-face, which may be explained by the smaller risk of losing face as the students do not see each other. Two students comment on the breakout function as follows:

“It caters well for language learning because it enables us to talk a lot. Also listening practices (those that the teacher plays) advance learning. Before having this experience, I would have never believed that the function can be applied to language learning in such a versatile way.”

“Yes, the breakouts make language learning easier. You are obliged to participate -> If you cannot do the task, you can ask others for help.”

In breakout rooms students do not have the typical background noise of a traditional classroom since they can only hear each other's and the instructor's voice. Students communicate via headsets that they are recommended to use. A notepad, chat and sharepod are available in each breakout room. Prior to assigning students into groups, the teacher introduces the activity. The instructions are shared via a sharepod on a PowerPoint slide in each room when the breakouts are started. Thus, students do not have to memorise the activities. The teacher can visit the groups one at a time providing assistance when needed. In breakout rooms it is easier to listen to individual speakers and assess their skills. In a classroom, students normally either stop talking or speak in a silent voice when the teacher stops at their group. Also, students address the teacher more frequently and ask questions than in traditional teaching. The convenience of studying at home is noted by some students as one of the advantages of online learning.

5. Challenges

Common challenges for both the teacher and students involve audio problems, disconnections from the AC session and slow transitions between the main room and breakouts. Attempting to solve these problems during the session is time-consuming and distracts from the actual task. Audio problems do not hinder all communication since the speakers can use chat if their voice is not audible to others, provided that the speakers can hear what others are saying [cf. 2]. It appeared that most of the students having audio problems were running Google Chrome as a browser. However, this possible interrelation requires further study and concentration on the technique. Problems usually emerge when the student does not have a functioning headset or uses the computer's internal microphone which can cause echo. The absence of non-verbal messages complicates students' communication as they cannot see the speaking partners' facial expressions or gestures. Likewise, the teacher, not being able to interpret these cues, remains void of immediate feedback on how the students have adopted instruction. Therefore, a good sound quality is emphasized in AC environment. When the number of attendees in the meeting increases above 20, the programme may freeze and does not allow the teacher to shift between breakouts. The only remedy is to log off and log in again. From the teacher's viewpoint the pace and progress of learning at AC is slower than in a classroom. The same activities at AC take more time to implement. Apart from learning, attending to technological challenges requires a lot of attention from all parties. Consequently, the learning session at AC can be an exhausting experience.

6. Conclusion

The teacher and student perceptions coincide in most respects. The open-ended answers reinforced earlier findings on the applicability of Adobe Connect in teaching. For language learning AC breakout rooms offer an online environment that enables synchronous interaction and implementation of versatile language activities without the background noise of a traditional classroom. The majority of students in this study think that the breakout room function promotes their language learning and enhances group work skills as the group composition varies and they have to interact with speakers of varying language levels. Even the weaker language learners find it beneficial that the closed audio environment obliges them to talk. Moreover, students learn effectively from each other and offer peer support both in linguistic and technical matters. However, some learners note that they benefit more

from face-to-face learning. Attending to technical problems engages too much lesson time from both the teacher and students. As the supply and demand of e-learning opportunities increase, it should be in every educational institute's interest offering these services to adopt a systematic approach to managing technical challenges, be it in the form of real-time technical support or providing introduction to the use of ICT tools prior to a course. Further research could focus on comparing language acquisition in a synchronous online environment to classroom learning.

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