



How to Use Adobe Connect for Oral Language Practice in International Virtual Classes

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Abstract

Given the importance of improving fluency in speaking in second language students, a tandem project was carried out by the Language Centre of the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz (Germany) and the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of the Università degli Studi di Parma (Italy). The goals also included the development of cross-cultural competence and reading skills, as the topics to be discussed during the online sessions were first tackled by reading texts which were easily accessible on the Moodle platform of the University of Mainz. Such topics were related to the recent history of Germany and Italy, the relationship between these countries and the bridging of the cultural divide through dialogue and mutual understanding. Each online session was centred on a particular aspect of the subject matter and included two phases: (1) a plenum discussion with all participants in the same virtual room, (2) small group discussions taking place simultaneously in separate breakout rooms. As a general rule, Italian-speaking learners of German had to speak German and vice-versa. The virtual meeting of students and teachers from Mainz and Parma was made possible by Adobe Connect, providing learners with the opportunity of an authentic language experience. The presentation will focus on the ways used to make this learning tandem more efficient compared to traditional tandem programs, where the role of the teacher is generally limited to the supply of the contact data, and possibly, the final assessment/evaluation of the objectives achieved. In our case, instead of just assigning tasks to be executed by students on their own, we kept an eye on the entire learning process, providing our guidance whenever necessary, though in a nonintrusive manner, so as to foster students' autonomy in a rather informal learning environment. Our teaching role thus shifted to that of moderators and facilitators, who planned, coordinated and managed the learning experience step by step, i.e. checking all the time that everything was moving along as expected. The presentation will investigate this new role, which differs greatly from instructing students in person or lecturing them in a sort of one-way communication. Teaching (or better, moderating) together an interactive community of international students also means learning to interact with other teaching staff and figuring out the best strategies to use the tool chosen. While analysing the strengths and weaknesses of our experiences, we will give you some tips and tricks on how to profit most from Adobe Connect features for effective language learning through web conferencing in higher education.

1. Introduction

Speaking is one of the four abilities targeted in language courses at any stage. Speech fluency has become even more important in recent years, with the onset of globalisation and increased travel opportunities. Nevertheless, oral communication is still not trained enough in traditionally designed language courses at schools and universities, particularly in Italy, where the most widespread model of education is based on reading and writing, with too little time left for listening and speaking [1]. This is also due to the external factors such as the great number of students in a class, the lack of time available for lessons, etc.

To counterbalance the predominance of written over oral practice and of grammar over live communication, a partnership was started by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of the Università degli Studi di Parma (Italy) and the Language Centre of the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz (Germany), with the aim of enriching the formal courses of the academic year 2014-15 with tandem activities carried out with native speakers in a virtual class. The meeting point was an online room in Adobe Connect that both groups could enter through a password granted by the University of Mainz, who owned the licence of the software.

Considering the above, the project focused on synchronous dialogues for speech training, but asynchronous reading and writing were not totally neglected, as they played a role in the preparatory and follow up work after the Adobe Connect sessions. Furthermore, although our primary goal was the training of linguistic skills in an authentic context, cross-cultural objectives were pursued as well, so as to make the students profit make the most out of the peer-to-peer interactions in this somewhat new



learning environment. Here is an outline of how it came about, thus developing a type of tandem tailored to our needs, which also implied our taking up a different role as teachers.

2. The concept of tandem and the role of teachers

A tandem project basically consists of collaborative training sessions carried out by proficient speakers of two languages, with the common aim of learning from each other. It is a didactic concept that has been already known for decades and applied in many different ways, however its basic tenets are those of reciprocity and peer tutoring [2].

Although one of its targets is usually the achievement of a certain learning autonomy [3], a tandem is rarely initialized by learners themselves, but most frequently by teachers who supply participants with contact data and assistance in case of problems; a final assessment of the students and/or evaluation of the learning objectives attained generally takes place too, but just in the end. That means that students are left quite alone and free for most of the time, hoping that they will be responsible enough to steer their conversations beyond small talk. We wanted, instead, to provide our students with more step by step guidance, though in a nonintrusive manner.

2.1 A new tandem

In our computer-mediated institutional tandem, two groups of B2 students, respectively located in Mainz and Parma, met once a week at a set time to talk about a given topic. That was not free conversation independently carried out by single students, but rather, guided interaction within a virtual class.

We also infringed the common rule of not mixing the languages, as Italians spoke German and vice-versa, instead of devoting each session to just one language at a time. We thus aimed at training the weakest skill, that is spoken production, and meant to avoid the risk of two unbalanced partners using the best known language all the time. To make up for the lack of reading comprehension of authentic talks by native speakers, we provided audio and audio-visual materials for the preparatory work on the Moodle platform, as we will explain below.

2.2 New teachers

As teachers, our endeavour was to keep an eye on the entire learning process, which started before and continued after the meeting sessions. First, we agreed on what topics should be discussed and subsequently assigned tasks to be executed by students on their own: reading, watching videos, listening to podcasts and finally writing reports on the opinions expressed during the videoconferences.

All didactic resources and worksheets were made easily accessible through a password on the Moodle platform, so that students could learn new words and contents which would soon enable them to speak about the recent history of Germany and Italy, the relationship between these countries, the role of stereotypes for mutual (mis)understanding and so on (good discussion stimuli used were, among others, texts by Antonella Romeo [4], Jan Weiler [5] and Paul Watzlawick [6]). We thus tried to also develop intercultural competence, so as to match the traditional attendance lessons centred around language structures only or, at the most, daily life in the corresponding foreign country.

After these lesson plans, we coordinated and managed the online sessions together, ensuring for example that everybody took part in discussions, calling out those who were less involved and checking all the time that everything was moving along as expected.

Unlike the more formal courses into which the tandem project was integrated, we never really lectured or instructed our students on the above mentioned subjects, but rather led them to teach one another and express their own opinions in a well-organized manner. To sum up, our teaching role shifted to that of joint moderators and facilitators of our students' learning process [7]. Teaching counsellors would perhaps be the most appropriate word for this new role.

3. Lesson structure

After preparatory work had been done and the specific subject matter introduced by ourselves or a pair of students working together, the core part of the Adobe Connect session began, including two phases: (a) a plenum discussion with all participants in the same virtual room, (b) small group discussions taking place simultaneously in separate breakout rooms.

This structure helped combine sociability and individualization, formality and spontaneity [8] in the learning process, as the oral reports and interventions in the plenum discussion resembled speaking to a public, whereas the interactions in small groups were like talking to friends: it goes without saying that students were asked to change their language register accordingly.



From the technical point of view, students were instructed on how to use the “Raise Hand” button to intervene in the plenum discussion and were then prepared for breakout rooms by telling them how their screens would change. As teachers, we could see from our computers all virtual rooms opened simultaneously in this last phase and control what was going on in each of them, or simply walk around in our physical classroom and have a look at the groups. In every case, we could answer questions or provide guidance, whenever needed, as we moved freely from group to group [9].

During the online sessions, students always had the possibility of using a chat window, for example asking for help if something went wrong with their webcam or microphone, so that the technician could immediately intervene and solve the problem individually, with no fuss, without interrupting the lesson which was going on quite normally for the others. Notification windows were at the teachers’ disposal to inform the attendees about the time remaining or to send them some reminders, e.g. “Don’t forget to give your feedback after closing the online session”.

4. Results

This project gave the attendees the chance to interact with peers who helped them when needed and shared the same difficulties every time they spoke the foreign language. To be more precise, they were not actually peers as intended by conversational analysis, because they did not share the same amount of knowledge, as classmates usually do, but were rather language experts. Despite of this, considering the corresponding situation of tandem partners, nobody felt judged by the counterpart for his/her mistakes, therefore using the target language when conversing with such a proficient speaker turned out to be far less intimidating than with teachers.

On the other hand, the tandem partners were not just experts in oral practice, but also much more language-conscious than native speakers generally are, consequently they could really help each other with any sort of corrections and were willing to do so, as they knew that their observations would be welcome and reciprocated. In short, students had the opportunity to play an active role in their learning process and this increased their motivation and self-esteem. Moreover, they learned how to use ICT tools which are becoming more and more important in working life as well, so their attendance will hopefully contribute to pave the way for future success.

It was a good idea to assign the topics and tasks in such a prescriptive way, as the students were obliged to face further lexical and thematic challenges that they would have probably avoided if they had had the choice to do so. In a sense, they were compelled to learn more, even by keeping their space of freedom, particularly in the last phase of web conferencing sessions. Some of them continued their tandem experience after the end of the institutionalized project and even met their tandem friends abroad, so student satisfaction was high.

The only aspect which was not quite successful as expected was the collaborative work done in form of a wiki to prepare the initial reports that opened up the Adobe Connect sessions of the winter semester, in October-December 2014. The partners just prepared two separate works and put them together, instead of writing a text together. Furthermore, their presentation resulted in reading aloud, in turn, what they had previously written, instead of giving a speech as requested.

Writing was practiced more efficiently as a follow-up of the web sessions, when students had to fill in a worksheet to summarize the points of view discussed and the arguments used to support them. The abilities of reporting opinions, synthesizing and evaluating information from a number of sources, explaining the advantages and disadvantaging of different options are all part of the descriptors associated with the B2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [10].

5. Conclusions

Based on our experiences, we can now say that web conferencing has turned out to be a good method to improve language learning in higher education. If it is integrated into a language course and/or associated with other tools, the results will be even better and more comprehensive.

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