

Videoconferencing and Shared Virtual Learning of English for Specific Purposes

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Abstract

The authors wish to address some issues of enhancing the students' self-motivation and learner autonomy via videoconferencing and virtual learning techniques implemented in ESP courses of English for IT and Business English. They will also present ideas on how to improve the ESP teaching/learning outcomes at middle sized universities in this case the University of Pardubice in the Czech Republic and HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki, Finland.

The authors will discuss some e-instruments (Moodle, Facebook groups, shared Google docs and presentations, Google drive) for improving effective language learning and for achieving desired progress in the students' communicative and cross-cultural competences. The discussed instruments are related to raising the students' learner autonomy through the videoconferencing techniques into the everyday learning-teaching process. The authors will present a joint video-conferencing modules used in co-teaching process which started in the spring of 2011 within the course of English for IT and has been extended to the course of Business English in 2013 as a part of the EU-funded Unicom project. The students involved in these joint courses have approximately the same graduate profiles and language competences.

The authors will provide practical insight into the problem issues and SWOT analysis based on hands-on experience. They will also reflect on the intercultural challenges seen through the different approaches of IT and Business English students towards both set and selected topics for VC sessions. Finally they will focus on the shift from the teacher-centered to learner-centered approach.

1. Introduction

A virtual learning environment is a web-based communications platform that allows students, without limitation of time and place, to access different learning tools, such as program information, course content, teacher assistance, discussion boards, document sharing systems, and learning resources [1]. The rapid development of information technologies allows videoconferencing to be used more extensively as a tool in language education. The concept of videoconferencing modules for English language teaching at the University of Pardubice was also implemented into the EU-funded Unicom project. The main idea of the Unicom project is the innovation of the language education concept towards the quality assurance and optimization of the conditions for the development of student and academic staff internationalization. Within the three key activities: Excellence and Individuality Sustainment, E-learning Implementation and ICT Utilization the project addresses the needs of talented students and scientists in terms of their further foreign language and intercultural development. Both authors are individually responsible for one of the six project key activities and cooperate closely on the development of the videoconferencing concept within the ICT Utilization key activity. The need for improving professional life skills led the authors to seek new methods of approach to these needs. The implementation of videoconferencing modules supported by e-tools seems to be one of the possible answers to this issue.

2. International cooperation in ESP courses

The authors started the cooperation with the partner university of Haaga-Helia, University of Applied sciences in Helsinki in 2011 and later piloted the videoconferencing module concept in their standard ESP courses for IT students. The IT students involved in these joint courses worked in small sized groups and had approximately the same graduate profiles and language competences. The close cooperation of the two partner universities is absolutely essential for this project. The authors of this article in cooperation with Ms Riitta Blomster, ESP senior lecturer at Haaga-Helia, designed a videoconferencing module to help the students to discuss topics related to the major scope of their IT studies. The pilot project proved to be successful and was subsequently implemented into the mentioned Unicom project and extended to students of Economics on the Czech side.



Fig.1. Example of small-sized groups in joint videoconferencing modules

3. E-instruments

The authors decided to support the videoconferencing modules by several e-instruments not only because they proved to be found very effective but also because the students find them approachable. Current generation is said to be born with their hands on a keyboard. The students are used to dealing with all kinds of e-devices in their everyday life. The authors wanted the students to use the e-instruments to communicate in English.

3.1 Moodle

The relevant ESP courses are supported by Learning Management System Moodle at both universities. Figure 2 shows how Moodle is used as a management system to organize and support the videoconferencing sessions. Students are accustomed to the navigation in the system. The videoconferencing modules have been precisely prepared and the students learnt about different cultures and university systems from Moodle documents in advance. They could also find important information concerning dates and times.

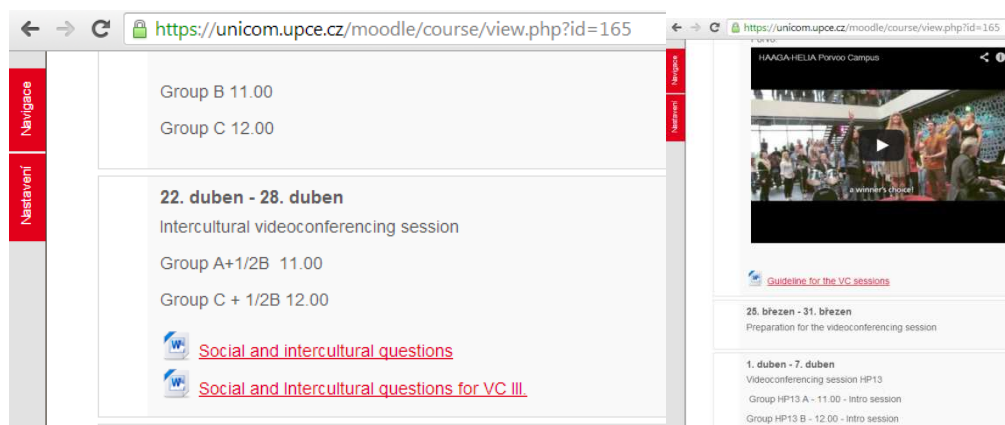


Fig.2. Sample screen shots from Moodle [3]

3.2 Facebook

Both Czech and Finish students were invited to join the specifically set-up groups on the PARHEL (Pardubice/Helsinki) Facebook page via their Facebook accounts. They used the groups to post and review their presentations and communicate within the groups and with the teachers. Figure 3 shows that the set topics often initiated discussions between students beyond the given task and demonstrated the obvious shift from the teacher-centered to learner-centered approach.

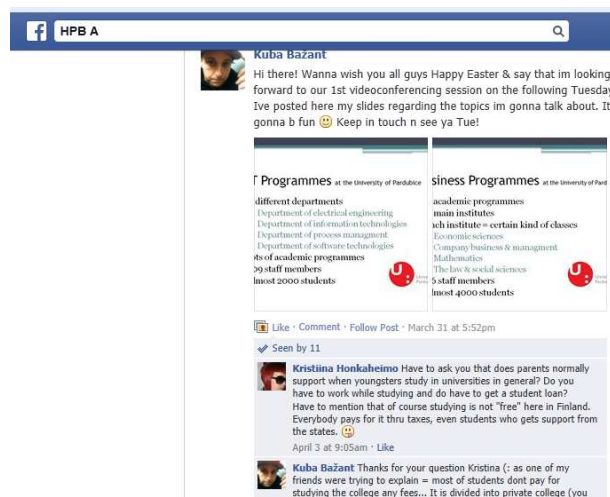


Fig.3. Sample Facebook screen shot of students' discussions

3.3 Google drive

The students were assigned several tasks within the three live videoconferencing sessions. They cooperated as a team in preparing the introduction of their university. They communicated and worked as an international team when organizing a joint Czech/Finish presentation concerning a topic of their choice and finally they prepared intercultural questions for their Czech/Finnish team members. The authors searched for a virtual space where the students could effortlessly work together. The Google drive appeared to be the best choice. Shared link and joint access allowed the students to collaborate and the teachers to monitor their progress and outcomes. The following figure shows the shared presentation document.

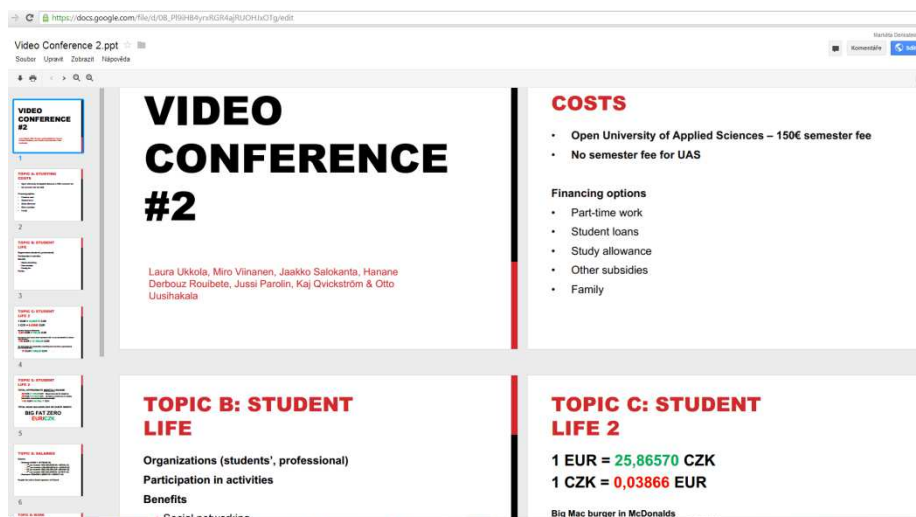


Fig.4. Sample shared Google document

4. SWOT analysis

The authors see the main strengths of this videoconferencing concept in the target language automation and the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered approach. The students appreciated mainly the group and team learning and practice as well as the exclusive role of a lecturer as a facilitator. The e-support Moodle course and original support study materials were among the strong points. The authors realised that the weakest part of the course was not enough time for deeper practicing in joint presentations. The concept itself is time demanding and requires a strong self-discipline of both teachers and students. The participants also regretted that there was not any follow-up course developing their presenting and videoconferencing skills further. These weaknesses

can be dealt with in the future by creating a tailor made course addressing these needs. The opportunities can be seen in providing additional intercultural awareness and involvement of further social networks and new technologies. The only threat the authors can foresee is no audience interested in the course which however seems highly unlikely.

5. Learner-centered approach

Within the framework of the basic distinction between the concepts of teacher centeredness and learner centeredness, some specific teacher roles and methods - especially the one of facilitator and collaborative teaching were prioritised within the whole project of implementing the videoconferencing modules into an ESP course. The authors proved that the shift of the responsibility for studying and learning is as important as the knowledge itself. The students were given a concept and they filled the concept map with their own ideas and content. They especially favoured more open tasks, for example preparing the set of intercultural questions. Teacher becomes the facilitator who monitors and evaluates the learning process of the individuals. As Leo Jones states: In a student-centered class, students don't depend on their teacher all the time, waiting for instructions, words of approval, correction, advice, or praise. They don't ignore each other, but look at each other and communicate with each other. They value each other's contributions; they cooperate, learn from each other, and help each other.[2]

Learner-Centered Approach

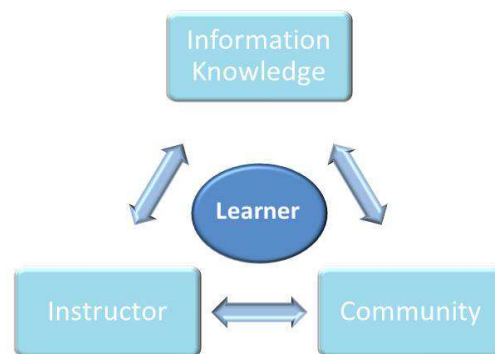


Fig.5. Example of Learner-centered approach according to Jones

6. Conclusion

The authors see the main value of the videoconferencing modules in the learner-centered approach and enhanced learner's autonomy together with the simulation of real-life encounters in the target language. They anticipate the sustainability of the videoconferencing modules beyond the Unicom project horizon and plan to further extend the cooperation in the field of Business English with a new partner University of Pécs in Hungary.

References

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- [2] Jones, L., The Student-Centered Classroom, CUP, 2007
- [3] Retrieved from <http://www.unicom.upce.cz/moodle>