# Enhancing EFL Teacher Training through International Collaboration with the Use of Videoconferencing

**Barbara Loranc-Paszylk**

University of Bielsko-Biała (Poland)

*bloranc@gmail.com*

## Abstract

*The paper aims to give an overview of possible benefits resulting from the incorporation of videoconferencing in EFL teacher training. Furthermore, it presents some preliminary results of a project that included a few experimental sessions of videoconferencing organized as a result of international collaboration between two universities from Poland and Spain: University of Bielsko-Biala and University of León. The participants were both Polish and Spanish students majoring in English and specializing in TEFL. The project's aims were to create a collaborative learning environment where students can discuss and design didactic materials using team work activities and at the same time, to develop students' communicative language skills through audio and visual interactions in real time. The results of this mini project, illustrated through students' opinions collected in the interviews and the perspectives of the teachers involved, aim at helping maximize the potential benefits in foreign language teacher training that might be offered by new technologies and allow to arrive at recommendations to make the most of such cross-cultural encounters allowed by the use of ITC tools.*

## 1. Introduction

The term videoconferencing is used to describe a system where two or more participants in different locations can interact using specialized equipment through a high-speed Internet connection [1]. With the quality of the online transmission increasing and with reduced costs of computer equipment this means that videoconferencing is becoming more and more popular nowadays, especially in the field of education. The potential of videoconferencing has already been discussed by a number of scholars who investigated this issue from different perspectives and have identified a list of advantages of this communication mode. For example, some researchers emphasize the role of such a form of computer mediated communication in enhancing participants' intercultural competence [2]. The role of videoconferencing in fostering the development of intercultural competence has been, for example, recognized in cross-cultural business communication with Hungarian and American students [3].

What seems to be an unquestioned benefit of videoconferencing reflected in a number of studies on the role of ICT in foreign language learning is the development of foreign language communicative skills. For example, distance learners of Chinese were believed to better and faster acquire this language as a result of videoconferencing-supported negotiation of meaning [4]. In another study, the development of L2 oral production among young learners was investigated and it was suggested that pupils of both lower and higher abilities tend to see videoconferencing as helpful in learning to speak French; better students were more motivated by their videoconferencing participation and the lower ability students became more self-confident in speaking as a result [5]. Another research study illustrated how oral skills can develop due to the foreign language learners' participation in videoconferencing sessions [6].

This article aims to discuss the role of videoconferencing in EFL teacher training and it gives an overview of projects in which the participants, university students from two different countries, Poland and Spain who were non-native speakers of English. The latter fact was considered an advantage – due to today's position of English as a lingua franca and the number of speakers of English as their second or foreign language outperforming the number of its native speakers. As it can be concluded, nowadays a non-native speaker is more likely to use English as a vehicle for communication with another non-native speaker rather than a native speaker.

Such a combination of interlocutors would surely allow the participants the opportunity to be exposed to and get familiar with a foreign accent of spoken English, which should be considered an advantage in the process of EFL teacher training. Greater sensitivity to diversified accents in English has become a must in today's world of TEFL. In fact, even among native speakers of English, there is a great diversity of accents Standard English in the UK is actually spoken nowadays by about 12–15 per cent of the population [7].

## 2. International projects based on videoconferencing

Apart from focusing on the two primary elements of foreign language teacher training: development of language competence and enhancing the teacher professional expertise, our videoconferencing projects have incorporated two important dimensions of EFL teacher training that has been raised within a few last decades, such as: development of ITC skills and experiential learning.

Firstly, since the beginning of the new century Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has also been considered an indispensable part of any teacher's preparation for the profession [8]. Taking part in the project has made teacher trainees more aware of the tools offered by technology that can be effectively applied to the foreign language classroom.

Secondly, as experiential teaching being the has been declared as an indispensable element of learner-centred language teaching and when transferred into teacher education, it needs to be included in institutional teacher training [9]. In our projects we also relied on pair work and group work, which was aimed to help introduce natural student-student interaction, develop communication strategies and use feedback from peers.

The projects' aims were to create a collaborative learning environment and at the same time, to develop students' communicative language skills through audio and visual interactions in real time. As the details of the series of our projects that aimed at development communicative competence, and speaking skills in particular have been discussed elsewhere [10], we will focus on providing an overview of the projects where EFL teacher trainees focused on didactic materials development.

 Teacher-education programmes have often been criticized for equipping the graduates with limited experience in materials design, evaluation, adaptation, especially post primary programmes seem to undervalue the status of materials design [11, 12]. Bearing that in mind we organized a project that aimed to provide the trainees with opportunities to apply what they have learned in the class in more independent practical work of analysing and designing ELT materials, while making sure there are engaged in collaborative work and hands-on activities in class.

The project took place at a small state university in the southern Poland in April and May 2014. The participants were MA students majoring in TEFL, all in their early twenties. It needs to be mentioned that the participants do not have many opportunities to interact in English with foreigners, let alone native speakers of English outside of class, as they do not live in a cosmopolitan or particularly tourist area of Poland. Applying the videoconferencing tool would thus help to extend students' communicative experience beyond the spatial limitations of the classroom. The Spanish participants, our partner university students represented a similar profile with respect to the language level, age and the area of studies.

Below are some details of the mini-project:

The trainees were given three weeks to get together in groups of three or four and as a team they were asked to design a series of activities for English learners. They were given specific instruction as for the level of English language competence, the time limits and the topic of the activities. We insisted that each group of students find a time and a place to meet and discuss rather than simply divide the work among them and finish their work individually. In class, the groups made presentations of what they had done followed by class discussion and some even carried out micro teaching that would allow a fuller evaluation. The plans of the activities were to be exchanged between the respective university team prior to the video conference so that the audience could analyze the task plans and didactic materials. During the final stage of the project, the videoconference, the teams from both countries were to present feedback, evaluation and suggested modifications of the tasks. The students completed the videoconferencing assignments in the language lab, where one room was equipped with desktop videoconferencing capabilities. The videoconferencing sessions were conducted in a language lab equipped with the Polycom® HDX 7000™ videoconferencing system. The equipment allowed for image transmission at a resolution of 1280 x 720 and a speed of 30 frames/s, (720p). The quality of the transmission was superb: HD voice, HD video and HD content. The device established the Internet connection directly, by dialling to other endpoints (IP address).

It should be highlighted that during the videoconference, the students had to perform tasks both as members of an evaluation team and as the members of the team that had authored a paricular series of tasks.

In the final stage of the project we interviewed the Polish participants and asked them to share their comments and opinions about the experience.

## 3. Conclusions

The participants' responses on the open-ended questions ("which aspects of the project did you find valuable and which ones need improvement?") can be are summarized below.

First of all, a vast majority of participants (85 %) said that they valued most the opportunity to interact in a real time with foreigners in English. They also seemed to appreciate the fact that they could interact with the foreign students whose profile of studies and area of expertise is similar to their own (92%). A slightly smaller number of students (69%) admitted that enhancing their professional expertise in didactic material development was the most valuable aspect of the project. As for indicating the areas that needed improvement, the students most frequently (75%) suggested closer collaboration between the international teams and thus avoiding any misunderstandings in formulating task requirements and they also mentioned (85%) that the contact time between the teams via videoconferencing should be greater (in this project we spent only one 3 hour session in this mode of communication).

This project showed that videoconferencing can offer a great potential for training EFL teacher trainees as it can create a creating a stimulating learning environment and allow the opportunity for face-to-face interactions despite large distances.

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