



How to Use Adobe Connect to Enhance Speaking Awareness in L2 Acquisition

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Abstract

The paper will show how a tandem project carried out by means of the software Adobe Connect supported L2 acquisition in the respective groups of Italian and German university learners, who met online to attend virtual classes conceived for both of them together. In our evaluation of this experience, particular emphasis will be given to those aspects of oral language that are most neglected in traditional classes, such as turn-taking skills and argumentative abilities in various speaking contexts. To achieve these goals, metalinguistic reflection was fostered by the subdivision of each web session into well-defined work phases, which corresponded to as many types of audio-visual interactions mediated by computers (basically, one-to-one versus plenum discussions). The presentation of the teaching strategies will clarify how the communication medium influenced the process of learning, compelling the students to pay attention to specific features of oral discourse which usually occur in a different form. This made videoconferencing a more pervasive teaching and learning experience compared to other sorts of tandem which have been in use for some decades.

1. Introduction

In the academic year 2014-15 the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature of the University of Parma (Italy) and the Language Centre of the University of Mainz (Germany) started a tandem project with the aim of improving their students' L2 oracy through authentic communication with native speakers. Common classes were held in virtual rooms made available by Adobe Connect. These shared lessons took place once a week for six weeks in both semesters.

In the following we will show how the lesson structure was designed and explain in which way it fostered language awareness, intended as a pre-requisite for the development of advanced communication skills. In particular, we will investigate if and to what extent Adobe Connect videoconferencing contributed to the participants' metalinguistic reflection, helping them acquire argumentative abilities, as required by the CEFR [1]. We will further explain how the use of Adobe Connect especially highlighted the constitutive factors of communication according to Jakobson's model (sender, receiver, context, message, channel and code) as well as their interrelations [2].

2. Lesson structure

Every online meeting included three phases: (a) monologue; (b) plenum discussion; (c) one-to-one or small group interaction. The lesson structure was so conceived as to train different types of speaking and this variety of communicative situations raised the students' awareness that the way we speak strongly depends on extra-linguistic factors such as audience, purpose and context. As Goh & Burns [3] put it, "they need to know what linguistic resources can be used for organizing and structuring stretches of speech to form coherent spoken texts that are appropriate for the setting and the participants."

Adobe Connect helped them acquire this ability to switch from one language register to another by technically separating the different work phases through layout changes. During the initial monologue/s, consisting of a presentation done together by a German and an Italian student or in turn by the teachers, almost the whole screen was occupied by the handout or by an image or video, but you could see the speaker on the left top of the screen, the next speakers (if any) just underneath and the list of all attendees' names (see Fig. 1). The person holding the floor had a preset time available and everything was thoroughly planned, from the choice of arguments to their sequence, but the discourse should be spoken in a relaxed, seemingly spontaneous manner like public speaking.

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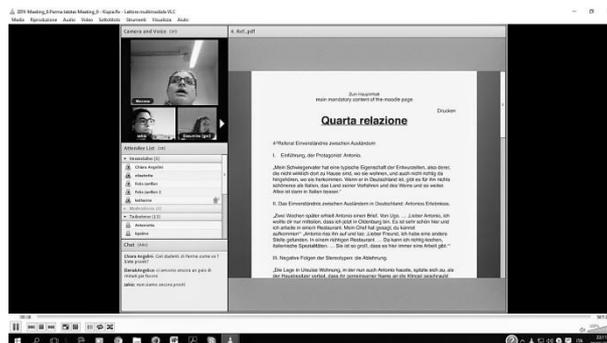


Fig. 1 Layout in the first phase

During the plenum discussions the argumentation did not follow a pre-established pattern, as the internal organization of every speech was preceded by the evaluation of the external information, i.e. the opinions expressed by the others, so every speech was in a way extemporaneous, a sort of reaction to the previous arguments. In short, the competence to take part in the argumentation thread was based on both cognitive and social skills. Formality and spontaneity were combined at the utmost level, everyone was an addressee and an addresser at different times and the active role of the latter was technologically highlighted by his/her face displayed in the middle of the screen, with the listeners' faces displayed in a much smaller space underneath and all attendees' names on the left (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Layout in the second phase

In the third phase students continued the discussion in pairs or small groups, which were assigned a separate breakout room each. Every pair or group only saw its own members' faces (see Fig. 3): this created an easy-going atmosphere and more familiar modes of social interaction. It was like talking to friends about academic matters: some small talk was allowed to break the ice, but then the topics and the corresponding vocabulary remained the same as during the plenum discussion.

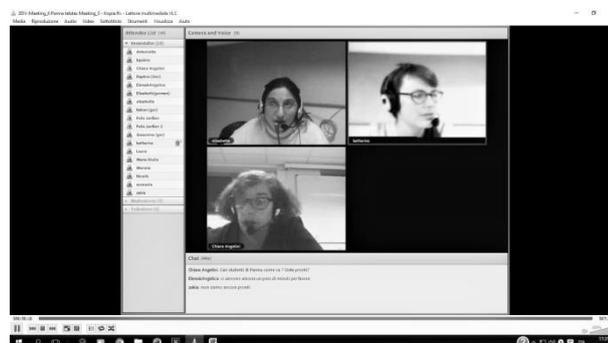


Fig. 3 Layout in the third phase



3. Communication channel

The description of the three phases represents how the project came about when everything was technically correct, but it occasionally happened that something went wrong with the connection. Adobe Connect provides attendees with a chat window (or more, if needed) that can be used in such cases, asking for help when you cannot communicate otherwise, for example because your microphone is not working. Writing short messages in this space has another advantage: during plenum discussions you do not disturb the meeting if the problem you are trying to solve only regards you or your equipment, nevertheless your SOS reaches the technician.

Besides its practical use, this feature of the software enhanced students' awareness of the importance and influence of the communication channel itself, which seems to be usually contemplated by linguists only. Indeed, when you interact physically, not virtually face-to-face, you do not think of the air which enables your words to reach your partner's ears. You just realize that there is a communication channel when you have some trouble with it and, at the same time, you realize that language can have a phatic function too, like in the messages shown below (Fig. 4):

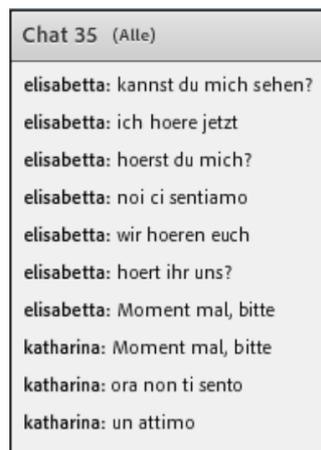


Fig. 4 Chat window

The tone of these written messages was much more familiar and less accurate than the oral interaction that they were trying to establish or re-establish, e.g. they contained colloquial expressions, spelling mistakes or grammatically wrong elliptical sentences. These mistakes were frequently due to haste and not considered as inappropriate, whereas those which came up during the discussions were often the consequence of language weaknesses and every effort was made to avoid them if possible.

The colloquial tone of the chat messages was highlighted by the possibility of using emoticons to express feelings and states of minds, which are normally not important or even concealed in formal situations. Emoticons were perhaps also used to compensate for an intrinsic shortcoming of videoconferencing, which allows you to see the faces of the people you are talking to, but can impede you, for various reasons (e.g. the low definition of webcams), to see them clearly and infer emotions from them, as it usually occurs when dialogue partners are physically in the same place.

Another way you become aware of the communication channel is by checking your equipment through the guided procedure known as Audio Setup Wizard, which you can find in the meeting menu. Before every meeting, students were called upon to test their microphone and earphone, regulate the volume and ask for help if something was not working properly. They thus realized once more that there was not just air between them and their interlocutors, and they further perceived the difference between listening and speaking, as it could happen that their earphones functioned but the microphone did not or vice-versa, as if they were temporarily deaf or mute or both, a situation that a non-disabled cannot experience in real life.

4. Listeners/speakers

Attendees were not seen or heard if they forgot to activate their webcam or microphone, as connecting them (that means plugging in the device) was not enough. In such cases the resulting limitation was not due to any malfunction, but simply to oversight. However, if this happened, people experienced being temporarily mute likewise, but never ceased to hear the others' voices, so they could listen, but not speak. This somewhat 'artificial' division between the two abilities distinguished the passive and active use of language. Moreover, you could always identify the speaker thanks to the fact that a small

microphone icon next to his/her name blinked every time someone was saying something: this way technique signaled once more who had the floor and who did not.

Furthermore, the difference between listening and speaking was underlined by the general rule that everybody had to speak his/her L2 in order to always train the weakest skill, that is, oral language production. Our decision had the 'side effect' that the roles of the partners in the communication process were very well defined by the code spoken at that particular moment, as a change of role from addresser to addressee or vice-versa corresponded to a change of code too, at least in the one-to-one interactions. As for the rest, this didn't apply completely to every phase, for example, in plenum sometimes two speakers of the same nationality took the floor one immediately after the other.

Another rule was that listeners could not speak while someone else was talking. Actually, this is first of all common sense and politeness. Nevertheless in real life the public's whispering into one another's ear is not an exception and can be really disturbing. In virtual life it is possible to prevent it technically, or at least to prevent it from disturbing the session. Not all of the attendees have the same status: in our case, except for the breakout rooms, students were just participants, i.e. they could take part actively, but they could not decide anything autonomously, while hosts and presenters conducted the meeting and established who had the right to speak by giving him/her the permission to do so. This permission equaled, technically speaking, to clicking on a button. Students who wished to speak just had to indicate it by clicking on the "Raise Hand" button and waiting for their turn to speak [4].

5. Turn-taking

The "Raise Hand" button in Adobe Connect is meant to regulate turn-taking in situations where it could be difficult to discern when it is time to take the floor. In the second phase of the online meetings, teachers used this feature to bring order to the sequence of comments made by students and the latter learnt discipline, if they ever needed any, in the presentation of their ideas and opinions.

As aforementioned, in a virtual room people do not always see each other very well due to poor technical quality, or simply because the attendees who are not speaking are displayed in a too small space to see clearly if they are raising their hands, whereas you would probably have less trouble if you were all physically in the same place. This is a reason why the "Raise Hand" button was very helpful during plenum discussions; apart from this, it drew learners' attention and fostered metalinguistic reflection on the importance of turn-taking in oral language.

Such importance is very frequently underestimated, even if this kind of pragmatic competence is often what makes the difference between a good and a proficient or native speaker of the target language. As Rebecca Hughes [5] points out, "turn-taking in spontaneous speech is at the same time the simplest and the most complex of mechanisms" and it is at least partially language-specific as well as culture-bound [6,7]; in spite of this, it is rarely taught and the simplistic fictitious model A-B-A-B, where the speaker B takes over orderly just a few seconds after A has completed his/her last sentence, still prevails in textbook dialogues [5].

On one hand, the second part of our sessions reproduced the turn-taking patterns which are most common in traditional classes, i.e. a type of language which differs from real life [8] and where teachers have not only "a vastly disproportionate number of turns overall compared with the other participants" [9], but also an overwhelming power of decision, as they always selected the next speaker and thus steered the conversation towards the direction desired. As noted above, technology strengthened their power and conversational rights and thus made these more evident than ever.

On the other hand, the new setup of the third phase imitated spontaneous speech very effectively, i.e. it truly reproduced in a virtual room the face-to-face interactions of real life, even more realistically than traditional in-presence classes. Like in authentic communication outside the classroom, students were free to choose the point for the change of roles between addresser and addressee without teachers' interference, so they had to look out for non-verbal, paraverbal and verbal signals [10] such as gaze, tone of voice and the so-called "sociocentric sequences" [11].

They understood very quickly how difficult it was: not only did they not master the foreign language enough to know the L2 rules of turn-taking, but they instinctively applied the L1 habits they were accustomed to. As speakers, they did not use all the turn-yielding signals of the target language and, as listeners, they were not able to catch such cues, and particularly the back channel [12] was lacking in their responses to partners' utterances.

As for overlaps, it is hard to say how much they depended on cultural factors and how much on the learning setting. Common experience shows that Italians tend to talk over another person more frequently than Germans, or at least they frequently do not perceive it as a violation of the non-written turn-taking rules of interaction, like most Latin peoples [13]. We agree with Inara Couto [14] that "L1 patterns merely transported to L2 conversations could easily be interpreted as rude or obnoxious

behavior”, giving rise to international misunderstanding, however, foreigners are usually considered as fully justified if some minor traits of their behavior deviate from common standards.

Moreover, in the third phase of our sessions overlaps were probably tolerated more than they would have been in another communicative situation, as they were seen as a form of necessary collaboration: examples are the native speaker’s help to find a word or to finish a sentence and the correction made by saying the same thing in a slightly different way.

In any case, students probably felt uneasy when they were faced with the responsibility of turn-taking in one-to-one conversation with a person from another country, so they experimented how complicated it is and how they need to improve their turn-taking skills in authentic situations, which are by far less predictably structured than a traditional classroom environment.

6. Conclusions

Authenticity and the increased motivation deriving from it have always been the key success factors of tandem programs, together with spontaneity. Students speak more freely when they are not hampered by the fear of making mistakes and being judged for these, as the dialogue partners are at the same ‘hierarchical’ level and share the same problems.

We expanded the original concept of tandem language learning, firstly by enlarging it to an entire class and secondly by trying out different modes of interaction. This served the purpose of language learning, like all tandems, but in addition to this it fostered metalinguistic reflection, which in turn made language learning more effective and was also useful for a better understanding of the own language.

Acknowledgement

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