The Possible Impact of Videoconferencing on Learning and Teaching of English Language

Vulić, Vesna; Del Vechio, Manuel

THE POSSIBLE IMPACT OF VIDEOCONFERENCING ON LEARNING AND TEACHING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

MOGUĆI UČINAK KORIŠTENJA VIDEOKONFERENCIJA U PODUČAVANJU ENGLESKOG JEZIKA

VULIC, Vesna & DEL VECHIO, Manuel

Abstract: This paper presents the findings of a small-scale study questioning the English language competences of students of the Undergraduate Professional Study of Accounting and Commerce. The study examined the students' experience in English language learning, asked about their opinion on the participation in an interactive exchange with native speakers, about their previous experience with videoconferencing as well as their views on the possible outcome of incorporating videoconferencing in their language courses. A questionnaire was used as data collecting instrument. The outcome points to students' enthusiasm in using videoconferencing in English language learning as an opportunity to improve and enhance their cross-cultural communication perspective.

Key words: videoconferencing, language skills, cross-cultural communication

Sažetak: Ovaj rad predstavlja rezultate analize upitnika vezanog uz korištenje videokonferencija s izvornim govornicima engleskog jezika u nastavi studenata preddiplomskog stručnog studija Računovodstva i preddiplomskog stručnog studija Trgovine Veleučilišta u Požegi. Rad istražuje iskustva studenata u učenju i njihovo mišljenje o uvođenju videokonferencija u nastavu. U svrhu prikupljanja podataka korišten je upitnik. Analiza upitnika je ukazala na pozitivne stavove vezane uz uvođenje videokonferencija s izvornim govornicima.

Ključne riječi: videokonferencija, jezične vještine, međukulturalna komunikacija

Authors´ data: Vesna **Vulić**, BA, Veleučilište u Požegi, Vukovarska 17, Požega, vvulic@vup.hr; Manuel **Del Vechio**, struč.spec.oec., Veleučilište u Požegi, Vukovarska 17, Požega, delvechio@vup.hr

1. Introduction

Every day millions of people all over the world use English in their business communication for buying and selling, exchanging and exploring resources and capabilities. It is the language of commerce, of industry, of finance and providing services. People communicate in order to do the things they could not do as individuals and in that communication they cooperate, negotiate, settle the conflicts, persuade, look for and find solutions for problems, use innovation and discuss traditions and values.

The use of English for business communication presents a challenge for language teachers when they design a course or choose different materials and methods to suit their students' needs. As foreign language teaching evolves faster than ever language teachers have to deal with numerous challenges. The technological development, especially the advent of the Internet, has influenced the area of foreign language teaching. The new multimedia is important for the so-called Digital Natives [1].

Therefore, language teachers frequently opt for blended teaching which refers to a language course which combines a face-to-face (F2F) classroom component with the relevant use of technology. The term technology covers a wide range of technologies which include the Internet, CD-ROMs, interactive whiteboards, the use of computers and videoconferencing facilities.

Spoken interaction has always been considered an important element in foreign language acquisition. Speaking skills develop best in an authentic situation that involves negotiation of meaning [2].

Learners' self-confidence, production, oral comprehension in a foreign language as well as their intercultural communicative competences may increase in their interactive exchanges with native speakers of a target language. One approach to interactive exchange is videoconferencing. Videoconferencing allows geographic distances to be bridged, exposes students to the cultural values of the target language and helps them discuss and process material covered in class. A number of scholars claim that videoconferencing interactions aim at fostering foreign language speaking skills with issues of self-confidence, anxiety and communication apprehension. For example, Kinginger analyses classroom interactions taking place between language learners in the USA and France via international videoconferencing [3].

The current high education policy in Croatia aims at improving the quality and relevance of teaching and learning which is described in the Croatian National Strategy for Education, Science and Technology. Foreign language teaching should improve students' communicative and interpersonal skills, intercultural awareness and linguistic competence.

Thus, videoconferencing tools should be included in foreign language teaching as a supplement to the communicative classroom. The assumption underlying this study is that the students put in a position to communicate with distant native speakers would react positively to the idea since it could enable them to improve their oral and socio-cultural skills. By examining students' opinion we could move further towards introducing videoconferencing into language course as well as to assess the benefit and challenges of the use of videoconferencing in English language acquisition.

2. Videoconferencing

Videoconferencing is not a new technology and it has been incorporated in project-based learning (PBL) for a long time. The first steps were taken in Finland at the end of the 1990s. There are numerous reasons why we should consider videoconferencing in more details. First, for students, it means learning and practicing spoken skills. Second, project-based learning has been accepted as a valuable method of educational collaboration for decades. Third, many free or inexpensive platforms can be found on the web for live online sessions. O'Rourke and Stickler describe videoconferencing as synchronous communication: "dialogic communication that proceeds under conditions of simultaneous presence (co-presence) in a shared communicative space, which may be physical or virtual" [4].

Students practice the four language skills, use the language beyond the classroom, develop intercultural awareness, improve their linguistic skills, discuss, compare and reflect different cultural customs and practices. The incorporation of videoconferencing in language learning offers an authentic real-world experience in an often text-book driven learning environment and allows for contextualized processing of material discussed in class [5].

O'Dowd & Lewis, Jager, Kurek & O'Rourke describe their research on the applicability and efficacy of videoconferencing tools. In order to find the best ways of using videoconferencing in language learning Terhune's study might help. He conducted a study with students of English as a second language. He used Skype-based conversation in a relatively uncontrolled setting. Contrary to the expectation that students would be highly motivated the data in Terhune's study showed that not all students adapted well to videoconferencing. Therefore, the author suggests that videoconferencing tasks should be more controlled and methodized to achieve better results [6].

3. Background of the study

The English language curriculum has been changing over the years in order to cope with specific needs of learners. When business English learning is considered the increased demand for developing intercultural competences has become obvious. For a considerable period of time scholars have been studying possible aspects of evaluating intercultural competence progress among language learners and different materials and pedagogy which might ease the process of learning. The introduction of videoconferencing as the media of foreign language learning and teaching has been the interest of some European studies (O'Dowd, O'Dowd & Waire) [7] [8]. These studies show positive aspects of using this medium, such as enabling the learners to communicate with native speakers face-to-face synchronously, enabling them to communicate different sources of information simultaneously in the virtual space. However, the studies also reveal some limitations of using this medium.

The purpose of our study was to examine the students' opinion on how videoconferencing might improve their business English language learning

competences. The questions were focused on students' expectations on videoconferencing, their feelings and previous experience of communication with native speakers, as well as their experience in English language learning and self-assessment of their language competences.

4. Design of the study

4.1. Participants
Nowadays students who continue their education at a tertiary level in Croatia are supposed to be around B2 level of the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR). The English language instruction program at the Social Department of the Polytechnic in Pozega amounts to 90 hours distributed in the first three semesters of the studies. The group consists of students of the Undergraduate Professional Study of Accounting and students of the Undergraduate Professional Study of Commerce. English language for those students is taught in the form of contact teaching (once a week for 90 minutes) with the use of course book.

The study took place during the first semester of the 2016-2017 academic year. The participants were 54 first-year students of Social Department consisting of students of the Undergraduate Professional Study of Accounting and students of the undergraduate Professional Study of Commerce. Their level was lower intermediate, B1 or intermediate B2 according to CEFR. The profile of the participants was young adult students, 39 female and 15 male. 50 students were 18 years old and 4 were 20. They were students born around 1998 which suggests that they all use technology on a daily basis.

4.2. Data collecting
Data were collected through a questionnaire. A questionnaire was personally delivered to each of fifty-four students. All of them participated, completed and returned the questionnaire. The obtained results were analysed, presented and discussed with students at the end of the first semester.

4.3. Design of the questionnaire
The study took place from November 2016 to January 2017 at the Polytechnic in Pozega. The student questionnaire was administered in the last week of November 2016 during the first semester. The students completed the questionnaire which consisted of 18 questions in one of the English classes. The first four questions were for obtaining the background information about the students as well as the length of time during which they studied English and which level of the State Matura Exam they took.

The second part of the questionnaire was about the students' experience in English language learning and their perception of the language level they are on.

The third part of the questionnaire was aimed at providing information about the students' expectations from the participation in an interactive exchange involving conversation with native speakers.

The fourth section of the questionnaire were yes/no questions regarding conversation with a native speaker, visit a country in which the English language is spoken and students participation in a videoconference.

In the fifth section of the questionnaire students answered one open-ended question regarding their expectations of the videoconferencing. The questionnaire was based on a Likert scale aimed at determining respondents' level of agreement on each statement. Students could indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the affirmation. All the participant were informed in advance of the idea for using videoconferencing in English language courses with the detailed overview of the planned program. In a conversation during the class, students were encouraged to express their own learning expectations from videoconferencing prior to completing the questionnaire.

5. Results obtained from the study

5.1. Questionnaire findings

The 54 students involved in the questionnaire survey were from 18 to 20 years old. The majority of students (72%) were female.

Students have been learning English from four to twelve years. The mean score is 9.00. Seventy-six percent of students have been learning English for more than nine years.

The second and third part of the questionnaire was based on a Likert scale aimed at determining the students' level of agreement to each statement in the questionnaire. The Likert style form allowed students to select answers based on how much they agreed with the point of view given in the question. They could indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the items.

The fifth question asked students if their experience with the English language was mostly spoken. Fifteen percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed. While 28% of the participants could not agree or disagree with the statement, 57% of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The sixth question asked if their experience with the English language was mostly written. Fifty-eight percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed. Twenty-six percent of the participants could not agree or disagree with the statement, while 16% of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed.

On the following question the majority of participants strongly agreed or agreed that they understand most of the business vocabulary used in their English classes.

The eight-question asked students about their capability of asking questions in English. Sixty-one percent of the participants were confident about their capability of asking questions in English, while 21% were not sure about it, and 18% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Only 31.4% of participants felt that they understand English culture, as opposed to 43.1% who were unsure and 25.5% who disagreed with the statement.

The tenth question asked participants about their capability of spending 45 minutes communicating with a native speaker of English. Responses showed that only 48.1% of the participants believed that they were capable of communicating with a native speaker of English for 45 minutes, while 32.3% were unsure, and 19.6% disagreed with the statement.

87.3% percent of the participants agreed that they like using CDs, PCs, and video in their English class. A minority of 2.9% strongly disagreed and 9.8 % were unclear about the question.

The third part of the questionnaire was about students' expectations from an interactive communication with native speakers.

The twelfth question asked students about their enthusiasm to converse with a native speaker of English. Seventy-one percent of the participants agreed with the statement, while five percent disagreed and twenty-four preferred not to agree or disagree.

Seventy-eight percent of the participants agreed that the exchange should help them practice their business English vocabulary oral skills, while only 6.5 percent disagreed and 15.5% did not agree or disagree. Students gave almost identical answers on the question dealing with the possibility to learn about another culture and its importance in business communication.

In the fourth section of the questionnaire, the students were asked to answer three yes/no questions. Only 23% of respondents had videoconferencing experience, 33% conversed with a native speaker for more than 15 minutes, and only eleven percent of respondents visited a country in which English is spoken.

The fifth section of the questionnaire asked the participants to answer an open-ended question regarding their expectations of interactive exchange. Most of the respondents expressed the opinion that videoconferencing could enhance mutual understanding and help the participants in developing and improving their speaking skills.

6. Conclusion

The assumption underlying this study was that the students of the first year Undergraduate Professional Study of Accounting and Commerce would have positive attitudes towards introducing videoconferencing into their English language curriculum. Students were asked to express their opinion on the benefits and challenges of the use of videoconferencing in Business English Language learning.

The Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) emphasizes the importance of intercultural awareness, intercultural skills and global competences in language teaching. The findings of the study suggest that the majority of students feel confident using their business vocabulary and they think they are capable of asking questions in English. On the other hand, study analysis shows that they are not confident enough in their knowledge of English culture and the prospects of communicating with native speakers. They express positive attitudes towards using technology and videoconferencing in class.

Furthermore, study analysis clearly shows students' enthusiasm to communicate with native speakers, the possibility to learn about another culture and practice business

vocabulary. However, less than a quarter of students had videoconferencing experience, only about a third conversed with a native speaker for more than a fifteen minutes, and a small minority visited a country in which English is spoken. Nevertheless, most of them expressed positively towards the possible introduction of videoconferencing in their English language classes.

In conclusion, incorporation of videoconferencing in the classroom teaching, despite some challenges, has the potential to increase students' self-confidence and motivation and support the development of intercultural awareness and intercultural competences.

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8. Appendix

Study Questionnaire

Please provide the following information about yourself
For the following questions, please answer by checking ( ) the appropriate box.

1 What is your gender?	MALE	FEMALE

2 Indicate your age category.	18	19	20	21	22 or over

3 How many years have you been studying English?	4	5	7	8	9	10	11	12

4 Did you take higher level (A) of State Matura exam in English Language?	YES	NO

For the following questions, please answer by checking ( ) the appropriate box.
SA= strongly agree, A=agree, N=neutral, D= disagree SD= strongly disagree

5 My experience with the English language is mostly spoken.

SA	A	N	D	SD

6 My experience with the English language is mostly written.

SA	A	N	D	SD

7 I understand most of business vocabulary used in my English classes.

SA	A	N	D	SD

8 I am capable of asking questions in English.

SA	A	N	D	SD

9 I believe I understand English culture.

SA	A	N	D	SD

10 I believe I am capable of spending 45 minutes communicating with native speaker of English.

| SA | A | N | D | SD |

11 I like using CDs, PCs and video in my English class.

| SA | A | N | D | SD |

12 I am enthusiastic to converse with a native speaker of English.

| SA | A | N | D | SD |

13 The exchange will help me practice my business English vocabulary oral skills.

| SA | A | N | D | SD |

14 I will learn about another culture and its importance in business communication.

| SA | A | N | D | SD |

For the following questions, please answer Yes or No by checking ( ) the appropriate box.

15 I have videoconferencing experience.	YES	NO

16 Have you ever conversed with a native speaker for more than 15 minutes?	YES	NO

17 Have you ever visited a country in which English is spoken ?	YES	NO

Please answer the following question.

18 What do you expect to learn from videoconferencing session?

_____

_____

_____

_____