

**Partnerships for Learning Pilot Project: A new approach to language learning in a
visual -based web conferencing context**

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ABSTRACT

Recent advances in technology have necessitated a new approach in the area of foreign language training. New technologies can be used to create educational frameworks for learning that go beyond the standard school classroom paradigm. In this paper, we describe the Partnership for Learning Pilot Project which focused on using videoconferencing technology and desktop computers to conduct language learning sessions via the Internet. The project description, project content, its experience over a sustained long-term period and the potential future for this way of learning and teaching are described.

Keywords: videoconferencing technologies, headset, web camera, on-line sessions, learner-centred methodology.

INTRODUCTION

Outside formal educational settings, individuals are no longer content to have access to computers simply for information processing. Increasingly, these individuals are drawn by the powerful potential outcomes that result when computers help them connect to organizations and other individuals in the local and global community. Technologies such as e-mailing, blogs, wikis and chat rooms, although limited to the written word, are a few examples of the now commonplace ways of using computers to make human to human connections possible. This use of computers for mediating communication is

increasingly influencing the formal learning environment as well. With the movement towards Web 2.0 technology and using computers as tools for connecting people rather than information, a practice that supports and is supported by socio cultural theory, the boundaries of the spaces where learning takes place are becoming increasingly blurred. A new virtual space, or third space, is opening up that is redefining where, when, how and why and what kind of learning takes place.

All sectors of the education and training system are enthusiastically exploring and implementing the latest technologies in its many different forms. Videoconferencing over the net or video-based web conferencing is an increasingly popular form of on-line communication. This means of conducting face-to-face communication in real time allows a more immediate, more interactive form of contact than e-mail. Electronic communication, supported by desktop video-based web conferencing is more personal and much more effective since one can hear the nuances of tone and see nonverbal language such as gestures and expressions. Communications experts remind us that this nonverbal language is critical to the messages we wish to convey. They argue that 40 to 60 per cent of our communications with others are made through these nonverbal signs.

Videoconferencing technology like all computer technologies used for learning is reconstructing what it means to teach and learn. With more

demands on teachers in this new space to adopt an interactive approach, learners are negotiating more powerful subjectivities. Evidence from these sites suggests that teachers develop more effective communicative approaches and learners become self-directed. Along with this evidence comes great hope for the potential and power of implementing video-based web conferencing technology in a variety of learning contexts.

PARTNERSHIP FOR LEARNING PROJECT

The Partnership for Learning Project (PLPPP) is a multinational project aimed at promoting communication with the support of modern technologies. The project began in the context of a doctoral research project (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2005) as a distance education program for teaching and learning English as a second language via the Internet. It was promoted to all involved as a compliment to existing second language programs. Later stages of the project consisted of creating a virtual classroom for the following groups:

- Military students at the Faculty of Economics and Management
- Teaching personnel at the University of Defence.



Picture 1 Videoconferencing classroom

ICIWave Design, a Canadian company, located in Quebec City, researches and continues to develop specialized video-based web conferencing telecommunication services for this project. The audio and video “multi stream” technology allows individuals in multiple sites to connect over the Internet. Through this interface, real-time connections between Canada and the Czech Republic were made possible. The technology allows a controlled, yet easy, access to the website. Users are equipped with headsets

and web cameras. London, England provides a break point and at the same time a location for boosting the transmission of sound and picture thus ensuring a better quality video and audio reception than ever before between North America and Europe. The particular interface used in the project permitted up to ten people to be present at the website using individual screens. Interactions between the teacher and participants were facilitated with special technical features such as shared desktop and breakout rooms, which *ICIWave Design* created for this particular application.

The participants in the language program consisted of eight to ten students in the Czech Republic and an English language expert located in Canada.. Each participant is able to view the other participants on the screen. There is one screen for a teacher and another one that is designated as the visitor’s screen. This screen is used for various English-speaking guests participating in our discussions. It is possible to show a picture on the screen (see Picture 2), to play a video, to draw pictures and to show charts and diagrams to students. Students may still see each other and a tutor even if the above mentioned activities are displayed on the screen.

PLPP provides an on-line opportunity to practice speaking and listening through interacting in English. The approach to teaching is learner-centred, based as much as possible on the students’ real communication needs and interests.

The aim of video-based web conferencing sessions is to expose the learners in the program to a large variety of topics for discussions to help them become confident speakers in different situations that require the use of the target language. Thus the language focus is on fluency rather than on accuracy, although teachers regularly draw attention to structural or vocabulary issues as the need arises. Not only are the students encouraged with the help of other learners to find the words and expressions they need, but also are aware of keeping their listeners interested in what they have to say. Through this interactive process they develop ways to support other learners in the classroom and to create a space for their own voice. Importantly, they show significant progress in their language learning.

When planning the content of video-based web conferencing the sessions, the students and tutors collaborate in choosing various topics of relevance and interest to students' military, cultural and individual lives. The material resources used to spark conversation are chosen at the discretion of the instructor and in consultation with participants, colleagues at both Canadian and Czech sites and with periodic guest speakers.

The fact that the PLPPP is designed to be a learner-centred program where students have an agentive role in the knowledge producing activities is not without precedence. As Thorne and Black (2007) have observed, computer-mediated communication has the potential to transform what is often teacher-centred communication in traditional classroom settings into more multidirectional interaction in computer-mediated contexts. Indeed, the content of the PLPPP program is based as much as possible on the Military University students' needs and interests not on the instructor's pre-planned agenda. It is believed that this approach will help prepare these military personnel for interoperability in the international contexts in which they serve.

LANGUAGE TRAINING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DEFENCE

Language training at the University of Defence (UoD) is carried out in both full time as well as combined forms of studies. E-learning is especially integral to extramural and combined forms of language study; although computer assisted training is also available to learners in full-time language study programs. In some ways, language training at UoD is based on a blended learning model along with other models such as skill driven learning (aimed at skill development), attitude learning (aimed at approach/attitude development) and competency driven learning (aimed at competency development). At present, ICT in the language training program is extended to include the Partnership for Learning Program.

When a process of incorporating PLPP into the UoD curriculum began, students' evaluations of the project were carried out. It has been found that learning outcomes and students' acceptance were very good. One of the significant aspects of

the students' evaluations is shown in Figure 1. The students were asked the following question:

In my language learning I want to:

- ▶ use up-to-date technologies, the Internet, an in-house Study Portal and on-line sessions in language lessons and in my self-study.
- ▶ use ICT in my self-study.
- ▶ be taught in classical way.

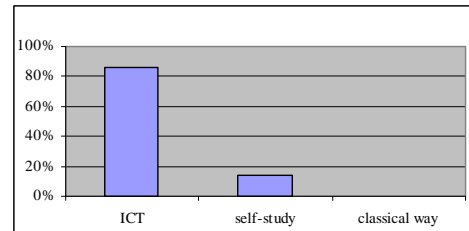


Fig. 1 The use of video-based web conferencing technologies in the language learning study

More than 80 % of students prefer language lessons with the use of up-to date technologies and 18 % of students want to use ICT in their self-study.

In a later stage of the research, three groups of University of Defence students were compared:

- **Group 1** – using a classical approach to language learning without ICT;
- **Group 2** –using a language learning approach that includes ICT through access to an in-house Study Portal, materials from the Internet and web quests;
- **Group 3** –using a language learning approach that includes ICT through access to the in-house Study Portal, materials from the Internet, web quests AND complimented by online synchronous communication with Canada.

Each group took part in their respective language training programs during two semesters of sixty lessons. At the beginning of the academic year, all students were tested to find out their entrance level of English using the American Language Course Placement Test (ALCPT). On the average, entrance scores for all

three groups were found to be similar with no significant differences between groups. At the end of a year, the students were tested again using the STANAG 6001 test, a standard NATO language test, in order to compare all language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The test results were **evaluated by the statistics-based STUDENT TEST in EXCELL.**

FINDINGS

The outcomes of the research (Fig 2) acknowledge many indisputable benefits of videoconferencing technologies in the educational process. These statistics are also strongly supported by significant qualitative data gathered in the Czech context as well as in other research contexts of the larger study (Charbonneau-Gowdy, 2005). Combined, these data are supported by well-recognized theories that indicate that learning is by its very nature a socio cultural activity (Vygotsky, 1978) and dialogue- dependent (Bakhtin, 1981).

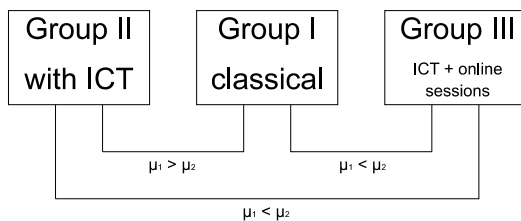


Fig. 2: Results of comparison groups in the study

Students from Group 3 (using a language learning approach that includes ICT through access to the in-house Study Portal, materials from the Internet, web quests AND complimented by online synchronous communication with Canada) are better in all skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in comparison with other groups.

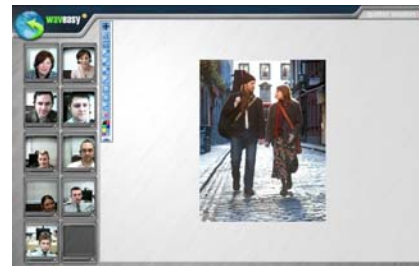
Student reactions to this program are very positive. All PLPPP participants were interviewed and there reactions were only positive. The following are some examples of students' comments about their online experience:

“I take part in PLPPP in order to practise listening and speaking skills. There I have to respond instantly. Though I know the topic of our conversation in advance and can read something concerning the topic beforehand, I am not prepared to answer every single question. That is

very difficult, but I enjoy it. It is very useful, I mean, to react promptly, and then to write something about the lesson. Actually, it is like a real life conversation: action and reaction. “
(Kamila, May 2005)

“This way of learning is much easier in comparison with the classical one; it is not so complicated and I have a feeling that I can understand things better.”
(Zuzana, June 2005)

“Technology is speeding forward, there are more and more web sites in English that provide you with material to study not only English, everything is very well developed, easy and done in an amusing way. Besides, when working on my career, everyone will ask me about my knowledge of languages and ICT. Yes, and a driving license, of course.”
(Jan, May 2005).



Picture 2 Shared desktop screen

IMPLICATIONS

The research results that are briefly reviewed here strongly support the fact that the shift to Web 2.0 technologies in educational institutions is having serious impact on learning and teaching approaches and results (Warschauer, & Grimes, 2007). Both quantitative and qualitative assessments of the participants' experiences using web conferencing technology indicate that there is solid evidence of changes in the ways that technology is viewed for learning on the part of teachers and learners. The data also clearly shows that learners are making more effective linguistic progress as a result of using videoconferencing technology. This evidence should lead to a greater engagement on the part of those involved in teaching and learning to critically examine their practices and technologies. There is an urgent need on the part of those involved in learning to ensure that the technologies we choose are supporting effective

and efficient learning AND most importantly that they reflect the power of technology to promote interactive communication-based learning to its fullest extent.

CONCLUSIONS

The benefits observed in this context included that ICT provided a flexible, friendly study environment, and allowed for independent time management. The changes in the identities of learners in becoming more empowered and self-directed are crucial factors that also surfaced in the findings. Students who used ICT for learning are able to evaluate themselves, their learning progress and to focus on their success. In the courses that included web conferencing discussion sessions, the findings clearly showed that students improved their knowledge. They also build on their new knowledge outside the formal learning context. This is an important factor for the participants – developing the confidence to use their knowledge and add to it when the opportunity presents itself. In other words, for this group of participants, the evidence supported that a more enriched use of ICT for audio-video-based communication led to empowering conversations and self-directed learning – a vital ingredient in life-long learning.

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