

Videoconferencing for language learners

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“Real communication is our aim”

WHY VIDEOCONFERENCING?

As a language teacher it is a wonderful experience to hover on the side-lines and to observe your students talking with animation and interest to young French, German or Spanish students. Real communication is our aim, between real people and in real time, rather than an artificial role-play in the classroom, finding out about some imaginary French girl you have just pretended to meet on holiday and asking constantly how many brothers and sisters she has. Videoconferencing offers us a manageable context for such real communication.

Observing a videoconference, we may experience the vague sadness that even with the hours of preparation given to every single lesson during an Ofsted inspection lessons could never be as interesting as this, but that is more than compensated for by pleasure at the students' performance.

But how does it happen? Without the structure which the teacher provides this could be no more than an expensive novelty. Videoconferencing is a learning activity like any other; it requires a *framework* and *support* to enhance communication, which teachers are uniquely placed to provide.

OUR EXPERIENCE

Videoconferencing with our partner schools in Lille and Hamburg began on a regular basis in January 1996 at Monkseaton Community High School as the brainchild of our headteacher, Dr Paul Kelley. Our school is a 13–18 Comprehensive State School near the North-East coast with an intake which is very close to the national average in terms of ability. When we began the project my own computer skills were limited to two-fingered typing and reasonable familiarity with language learning software such as *Henri Béret* and *Willi Wunderbar*. One of the first important decisions made by our headteacher was that in order to avoid problems of compatibility between different systems we would make sure that our partner schools would be using

the same equipment as us. This meant that as Head of MFL it fell to me to take the equipment to them and to set it up¹. It is a testimony to the ease of use of the equipment that I was able to do this on both occasions and to bask in the misguided admiration of French and German colleagues who believed me to possess technical skills!

WHO? WHERE? WHAT? HOW? WHEN?

From January to June of 1996 we concentrated on our link with Lille and on our nine Year 13 and nine Year 12 A Level French students. Although we did arrange sessions with Hamburg and for younger students it seemed better to concentrate on a small target group for evaluation purposes and to build on that experience. Of our nine Year 13 students who had five months of videoconferencing, six students showed a marked improvement in their spoken French in terms of accent, intonation, accuracy and fluency. It also improved their confidence in speaking, which is, of course, highly important in terms of performing in an examination situation. The remaining three students had not suffered from the experience, but as their teacher I could not see any marked improvement. Analysis of the group's examination grades suggested an average improvement of one grade per candidate, but the results of nine students in one year are not sufficient basis for statistical analysis. Personally I was convinced of the value of videoconferencing and that all the hard work had been worthwhile by Laura's beautiful accent, Philip's animated conversations and Catherine's in-depth discussion of immigration which so impressed an independent visitor.

In our second year from September 1996 to June 1997, the A Level French groups continued and the project was widened to include A Level German and some Year 11 French and German classes. Once again the results were very positive in terms of students' performance during videoconference sessions and the improvement in communication

skills, confidence and general attitude to learning the language. It also became clear that the Year 11 students who participated in videoconference sessions were much more proficient than their peers at asking questions, an important feature of the written papers of our GCSE board. In addition to these weekly sessions we arranged occasional links for younger pupils as well as participating via videoconference in special events such as an Environment Week organised by our partner school, the Lycée Européen Montebello in Lille and a European Week arranged by our Hamburg partner school, the Gesamtschule Eppendorf. The third year saw videoconferencing enlarged with the introduction of regular links with the our Spanish partners in La Coruña².

The decision as to where to house the videoconference set-up is important. We have found that a small room is best in terms of acoustics and to avoid distractions. To videoconference in a library or study centre is distracting for others trying to work there and leads to unwelcome interruptions. The most effective communication is obtained with one, two or three participants and privacy enables students to focus on their partners on screen. The importance of the support of Senior Management in our school is underlined by the fact that in order to provide our videoconferencing rooms two Deputy Heads lost their offices!

Similarly, things would have been very difficult without the help of the IT co-ordinator (in our case, Dave Clouston). Although the kit is easy to set up and to use, some degree of technical expertise must be available in school. It also helps if manufacturer support is available, since the system relies on computers, software, videoconferencing kit and ISDN-line all working at the same time!

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

The first sessions are easy. As with all the new technology with which they are faced nowadays, students seemed to grasp it very quickly, and it has to be said that in this case it was remarkably straightforward to use: sit them down at the machine, call up your partner school and within minutes they have forgotten their inhibitions and they are prepared to talk and risk making mistakes in a way which they would never do in the classroom.

It is at this very first stage that it is vital to establish guidelines as to how the sessions are to be conducted, especially with all of the other calls on curriculum time.

If the session is to last 20 minutes, then ten minutes must be in the target language and ten minutes in English, in order to cater for everyone's needs. The alternative is a strange mixture of both languages which may well be amusing, but does not allow students to develop effective communication strategies or to gain the listening practice which not only improves comprehension skills but also enhances pronunciation and intonation.

Typically, a session would begin with greetings

and the usual polite enquiries, moving on to agreement on the topic for discussion (usually determined by the teaching programme and guided by a tasksheet such as that illustrated) and the discussion itself. After ten minutes the students must take the initiative to begin the English part of the conversation and at the end students confirm arrangements for the next week's session.

A programme of topics for discussion is essential. For one thing, it would be all too easy to run out of things to talk about, but, principally, as with any other language learning activity, the videoconference must be part of a planned, structured scheme in order that students gain maximum benefit. There is little point in Year 11 students trying to find out about their partners' holidays and to describe their own if they do not have the basis of structures and vocabulary to deal with the topic, and if the conversation is not effectively followed up. Each Year Group needs an outline programme agreed with your counterpart in the partner school, with, of course, some leeway for the students to talk about other items of mutual interest.

Support materials also play an important role. We found that a booklet we had written to help students prepare for the conversation element of the Speaking Test was an excellent source of questions to ask and vocabulary and structures to use related to a given topic. For many activities a worksheet serves to provide a core for the conversation. These can be fairly closed, e.g. requiring students to find out information about their partner relating to a certain topic, or their opinions on a given theme; or they can be more open-ended, simply requiring a brief summary in the target language of the main points discussed.

Videoconferencing is not usually a class activity. It works well with a group of two to three students, where everyone can be involved and keep the two-way communication going with all partners visible on the screen. The last thing the teacher wants to see is a group of people too far away to be involved in the task.

This is not to say that videoconferencing has no effect on class learning. Apart from the skills and increased confidence and enthusiasm that the students bring to the lesson from their sessions, the knowledge that a topic being learnt in the classroom this week will be used in the videoconference session in coming weeks can only add to the sense of realism and purpose. Occasional whole-class sessions are of course possible, with selected students sitting at the machine and the rest observing, making notes or contributing pre-prepared items. This allows early access for younger classes who would otherwise have little contact at that point in their career.

The range of activities appropriate to videoconferencing in a foreign language is as varied as the students who can use it. Our target group of Year 11 students used it last year to practise the various conversation topics for their GCSE Speaking Test, whilst our Year 13 students concentrated in the final months before their A Level Oral on the topic they

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had chosen to discuss in depth, not only gaining valuable practice in the use of the appropriate vocabulary and structures, but also having the opportunity to research their topics in greater depth from a French or German point of view by finding out their partners' experiences and opinions. This is made easier by talking to the same partners each week, getting to know each other and building up friendships and confidence.

**"building up
friendships and
confidence"**

Depending on the equipment you are using, the technology can also add to the fun. Ours (Picture-Tel kit) offers amongst other features a snapshot facility, a whiteboard, and file transfer. Our students can take a snapshot of their partner as they appear on the screen and later incorporate it into a Word document, adding the information that they have found out about them. They can write text into the whiteboard and at the click of a mouse button their partner can take control of the whiteboard and make additions or alterations to what they have written. Some homework may have been checked in this way! The whiteboard also offers drawing facilities and even makes it possible to play international hangman, should this be required! File transfer enables whole Word documents, such as background material for an essay, to be sent via the ISDN line for one's partner to download onto disk. Students can make a short video of their school, hobby or surrounding area and send it during the videoconference to demonstrate a topic under discussion. They can even build up a record of their videoconference sessions. A video-recorder attached to one of our machines will record exactly what appears on the computer screen and provide material for subsequent use by an individual student or for a whole class.

WHAT IF IT GOES WRONG?

It is essential to establish good habits from the very beginning. Such problems as have occurred have been most often due to people rather than equipment, e.g. absence or lateness. Our Sixth Form students have it drummed into them from the outset that if they are going to be absent due to illness they must telephone the school so we can find a stand-in or fax the partner school. Late switching on of the computer by students arriving after time for their time-tabled slot invariably leads to a computer error as the incoming call interrupts the booting up. So students have learnt that, if one call does not get through, they must wait a full five minutes before calling again.

These are simple points which avoid a great deal of wasted time, but I am still not sure what to do about the *conciierge* in our partner school who occasionally refuses to hand over the room-key to the students!

CONCLUSION

It seems that some aspects of learning a language are ideally suited to videoconferencing, and that

we will continue to refine our thinking about what works most effectively. Analytical tests (YELLIS) carried out in early 1997 showed that students involved in our developments had made statistically significant positive changes in attitude to the learning of a Modern Foreign Language during the year, a motivational improvement which, in itself makes the work seem worthwhile!

NOTES

Students Across Europe Language Network Videoconferencing was the beginning of a series of developments at Monkseaton. Our project was accepted by DfEE as one of the 21 projects to be evaluated as part of the Superhighways in Education Initiative. The feed-back provided by the evaluators from the University of Leeds proved both encouraging and helpful and the final report was very positive. Videoconferencing was incorporated into the development of our Students Across Europe Language Network, details of which can be found on our website:

www.ncl.ac.uk/Schools/zdclou/index.htm

This was the basis of a successful bid to the European Union to co-ordinate a telematics project of the same name which began in September 1996, and is ongoing. In January 1997 Monkseaton Community High School gained the status of Language College.

Getting started thoughts on the technical side

1. We began with RM486 computers and RM's Picture-Tel 50 kit. To get started there are initial charges to purchase a videoconferencing kit (and a computer if you don't have one available) and to install an ISDN 2 line. The running costs are the rental of the line and the international call charges, both of which are twice ordinary charges.

Videoconferencing is a fast-developing field with a vast array of equipment offering a wide range of quality and price. The state-of-the-art equipment used by large companies is beyond the means of most schools and colleges, but good quality kit offering clear sound and vision is not. To use videoconferencing for Modern Foreign Language learning the quality of the sound is the most crucial consideration and we have found that using a 486 computer with a Picture-Tel videoconference kit has given us the quality we needed, although there are of course other systems available, of which we have no experience. The kit consists of a camera, hand-set and a card which is fitted inside an ordinary computer. We used a computer already in school and it can also be used for other purposes when not in use for videoconferences. The kit currently costs £2,700 from Research Machines, the distributor for Picture-Tel in the UK. Installation charges for an ISDN 2 line are just under £200 from BT, although in September and October of 1998 a reduction of £80 was offered. The ISDN 2 line is basically a digital phone line but with twice the capacity, which explains why call charges and rental are twice that of an ordinary line.

Although the charges are high, it must be remembered that the equipment is not in constant use due to holidays which differ in the various partner schools. We estimate that our call and rental charges for the first year were in the region of £4,000 and £5,000 in the second. This compares favourably, for instance, with the cost of employing a Foreign Language assistant and has different advantages, of course. In financial terms it is worth considering that, if three extra students are motivated by the experience to stay on in the school's Sixth Form their capitation allowance more than covers the running expenses.

2. We are using GPT kit provided by one of our sponsors, Siemens. Our other sponsors and partners for the Students Across Europe Language Network include the BBC, Granada Learning, Reed Elsevier (Heinemann), ICL, The Open University, BT and the University of Newcastle.

Séance De Visioconférence

Nom d'élève anglais: _____

Nom de partenaire français: _____

Date: _____

Sujet de discussion: _____

Préparation: _____

Résumé des points discutés: (i) _____

(ii) _____

(iii) _____

(iv) _____

Ce que j'ai appris de mon partenaire: _____

Problèmes? / Commentaire: _____
