

Video-conferencing and GCSE oral practice

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This article explores a recent experiment which brought together GCSE modern languages examination candidates and student teachers in training by means of video-conferencing. It argues that the use of the new technology may be beneficial to all parties concerned, given the diminishing opportunities for oral language practice by traditional means.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of GCSE examinations in England and Wales a decade ago brought with it a long-overdue recognition of the importance of oral competence in the teaching and learning of modern languages. The universal provision by examination boards of equal weighting for the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, combined with the subsequent requirements of the National Curriculum in modern languages, provided new opportunities for all, but at the same time created new problems for many schools.

Attempts in the late 1980s at diversification of language provision away from the traditional, historical dominance of French were not accompanied by widespread in-service training for those teachers with a previously unused 'second' foreign language. As a result, many teachers, not always necessarily trained as language teachers, were forced into reviving long-dormant language skills – and supposedly to teaching in the target language – without adequate support. Budget cuts in education over the past decade have resulted in larger classes in many areas, with serious consequences for conscientious language teachers trying their best to develop pupils' oral fluency in the foreign language.

This task has been rendered even more difficult by two further factors. The first involves the widespread practice of senior managers in schools in timetabling language classes in 'double' periods, often at irregular intervals. This taxes both pupils' concentration, especially at the early stages of language learning, and teachers' ingenuity in providing stimulating, varied lessons. It also renders the already difficult task of 'gardening in a gale'

(Hawkins 1987) – and of providing a firm basis for the acquisition of oral proficiency – potentially an even more tempestuous affair. Secondly, the almost equally widespread abolition of posts for foreign language assistants in many local education authorities in recent years, for reasons of financial stringency, has further eroded opportunities for adequate oral practice outside the often already over-stretched 'normal' classroom environment. In many secondary schools today, a combination of some or all of these adversities poses special problems to the hard-pressed teacher trying to do full justice to pupils preparing to be examined orally in a modern language at GCSE level.

TRAINING CHANGES

The challenges to initial teacher educators, preparing future teachers of modern languages, have also increased in recent years. As the amount of university-based time on secondary PGCE courses has decreased since the implementation of the requirements of Circular 9/92, the opportunities for providing future language teachers with a firm grounding in, and experience of, GCSE oral examining techniques at an appropriate moment in the course have also diminished.

In an attempt to try and begin in a small way to overcome a number of these challenges to language teachers, to language teacher educators and to student language teachers, the University of Hull Initial Teacher Education Partnership has explored over the past two years an innovative, potential way forward, through the use of desktop video-conferencing¹.

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PARTNERSHIP

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Early application of the new technology in a general way in Initial Teacher Education has been reported elsewhere (Wright and Cordeaux 1996). It was in response to concerns about the further development of our Initial Teacher Education Partnership that video-conferencing was examined as a medium of enhancing communication between partners over large rural areas. The University's ITE Partnership has formed the central focus for much of the early work with video-conferencing, but as schools have become involved in these developments, the scope for the use of the technology has expanded as opportunities for its creative use in the classroom have become apparent.

Castle Hall School in Mirfield, West Yorkshire, which has Language College status, contacted the School of Education about video-conferencing in 1995 and fruitful links have developed over the last two years as both the school and the University have together explored avenues for the use of the technology. One such development is reported in this paper.

The University of Hull provides initial training for between 30–40 MFL teachers each year. One aspect of the training involves preparing trainees to develop pupils' oral skills for GCSE examinations. Providing practice opportunities for this is a time-consuming operation and often one which is not easily organised while students are on school experience. From the schools' point of view, providing pupils with sufficient oral practice also makes considerable time demands on the teacher and presents logistical difficulties in the classroom.

VIEWS ON VIDEO-CONFERENCING

Castle Hall School approached the University of Hull to explore video-conferencing as a means of providing more practice for both pupils and trainee teachers. During the academic year 1995/96 a group of PGCE students volunteered to spend extra time providing 'virtual tuition' in both French and German from their base at the University for a group of 31 Year 11 pupils at the school, situated 65 miles from the University campus. The pupils participated in the trial in pairs. This trial, which lasted for several weeks, offered a number of potential

advantages. PGCE students gained opportunities to develop their oral teaching skills with specific reference to GCSE requirements; pupils at the school received extra language preparation; and, because the school's video-conferencing unit was located in a 'booth' at the rear of a language classroom, the normal teacher of the class could send pupils on a rota for the oral practice while continuing a lesson with the rest of the group. In order to assess pupils' reactions to using this form of technology, a short questionnaire was given to them after their sessions. The remainder of this paper reports the findings from that survey.

THE PUPILS' VIEWS

The sample included 14 male and 17 female pupils. We sought to elicit their reactions to

- the use of the technology
- speaking with a new person
- working in pairs
- this method compared to working with an assistant
- the method compared to 'normal' oral sessions in class.

We further asked them to indicate whether or not this extra oral practice helped in terms of their

- vocabulary
- listening skills
- confidence
- ability to reply.

Finally we asked them to rate the use of video-conferencing, to indicate whether or not they would have liked to have had more practice using this system, and whether or not it had changed their view of oral work.

Table 1 presents the percentages of the 31 pupils responding to five considerations on a five-point scale. On the scale used, '1' indicated that it was helpful and a '5' that it was unhelpful.

As with many small-scale enquiries, the findings are at best an illustration and point the way forward to the need for further work and more detailed exploration. Clearly, many pupils found the technique to be of benefit. In terms of using the technology, if nearly half (45%) only rated it 'in the middle', the remaining half of the sample were

Table 1

	Helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Unhelpful
How did you find the technology?	26	22	45	6	0		
How did you find speaking with a new person?	35	42	16	6	0		
How did you find working in pairs?	51	35	10	3	0		
How helpful was this method, compared to oral language practice with an assistant?	16	26	45	13	0		
How helpful was this method, compared to normal oral language practice in class?	45	29	22	3	0		

overwhelmingly in favour of it, with 48% of them rating it at '1' or '2', and only 6% rating it at '4'. As preparation for oral work, the fact that 77% of the sample rated working with a new person at '1' or '2' is surely encouraging. Comparing oral practice using the technology with oral practice both with the *assistante* and within the normal classroom situation, it is clear that these pupils rated it favourably, and particularly strongly when compared to class sessions where the teacher's time can inevitably only be divided by the number of pupils in the group. The technology enabled these pupils to obtain oral practice on a virtual one-to-one basis.

In Table 2, we present the results of the pupils' rating of the extra oral practice on their language skills by using the technology. A rating of '1' indicated that they felt it had helped a good deal, and a rating of '5' that it had not been at all helpful.

The strongest support for using the technology comes in the pupils' rating of 'listening confidence' and 'ability to reply'. For each of these aspects of oral work, more than half of the sample rated this form of extra oral practice as '1' or '2'. The percentages of the sample rating it below '3' are encouragingly small.

The questionnaire ended by asking the pupils three further questions: whether or not they found the use of video-conferencing 'fun, predictable, boring or worrying'; whether or not they would have liked to have done more of this sort of work; and whether or not it had been a useful element in their GCSE oral examination preparation. Encouragingly, 68% of the sample rated the experiences as 'fun', but 22% felt it 'worrying'. Although 70% reported that they would have liked to have done more of this sort of work, the ratings as to whether or not this was a useful element in GCSE preparation were split almost equally, with 48% in favour and 52% against.

CONCLUSION

As the demands of oral preparation increase both for pupils and for trainee teachers, and as the opportunities and circumstances for enhancing the preparation of both by traditional methods are ever straitened, the use of video-conferencing offers a realistic further avenue for the development of this crucial dimension of language teaching and learning. For a school, participating in an Initial Teacher Education Partnership with a Higher Education Institution can bring not only benefit through the training of students, but also further benefits through the development of newer technologies and ways of tackling aspects of pupils' learning. Once schools have video-conferencing technology available, this and other initiatives, such as direct links with continental European partner schools, become possible for the further development of pupils' language learning and intercultural experience.

Item/rating	Helpful					Unhelpful	Total %
	1	2	3	4	5		
vocabulary	6	16	52	13	13		100
listening	32	42	16	6	3		99
confidence	16	39	32	13	0		100
ability to reply	9	42	29	16	3		99

Table 2 Pupils' rating of the use of the technology for helping with oral skills

NOTE

1. Video-conferencing is often imagined to entail communication via studio to studio, using large and expensive equipment. While this can be the case, smaller desktop machines, which are effectively an upgraded version of a standard PC (486), have become available since 1994/95. Even in such a relatively short time, the costs of the technology have fallen dramatically to approximately one seventh of the original cost.

For those unfamiliar with this technology, 'upgrading' involves the addition of a 'card' (which adds power) and a video codec to a standard PC. This, when coupled to a video camera and a microphone and speakers, transforms the PC into more than a video phone, as the machine also has significant data-sharing applications. Two machines are then linked by an Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) connection (comprising a pair of digital phone lines) and communication can proceed! ISDN is available over more than 90% of the UK telephone network and can also be accessed in continental Europe.

There are now available on the market several proprietary versions both of the hardware and software. At the present time, international protocols for video-conferencing H.320 and data transfer T.120 are being established so that full capability will eventually be available between different platforms. At the University of Hull, pioneering work in developing and researching the educational applications of desktop video-conferencing has been taking place since 1994. Initially VC8000 hardware from BT and PCC software from Olivetti were used – though other platforms are now being used as well.

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