

Using Video Conferencing to Enhance the Teaching and Learning of Target Languages

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1.1 Introduction

Information Communication Technology (ICT) is becoming part of our everyday lives, and this fact is indisputable. ICT is part of the worlds of business, of administration and of education. Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) and Foreign Language Learning (FLL) partners have recognised this phenomenon. The European Commission's Directorate General of Education and Culture commissioned a report in 2002 regarding the impact of ICT on the teaching of foreign languages and on the role of teachers of foreign languages. The report focussed on examining the availability of ICT for language teaching and learning, describing the various uses of ICT in this area, studying some best practice cases, looking towards future developments and uses of ICT, but also looking at teacher training and the changing roles of language teachers and language learners. This report is an extremely valuable insight into the projected and desired development of FLL and FLT in the European education system, but its all-encompassing nature is beyond the scope of this paper. This paper will focus moreover on videoconferencing and language teaching. Common elements between both projects will evolve as I also examine the role of the language teacher, the role of the language learner, appropriate technology and sample cases where videoconferencing has been used for FLT and FLL. A focus of this paper will be on the Irish education situation as regards FLT and FLL and the European nature of modern day Ireland will be highlighted.

It is one of the recommendations made by the Irish National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) regarding "experimenting on a small scale with projects that make full use of media and information technologies to teach Irish and foreign languages" which will form the basis of my study in this paper. Experimentation with videoconferencing to assist in the teaching and learning of languages will be examined and discussed. The aim is to assess the validity of using videoconferencing as a methodology for enhancing FLT and FLL.

1.2 Videoconferencing in Foreign Language Education in Ireland

Videoconferencing, as described by the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) in Ireland, describes a system whereby "two or more participants, based in different physical locations, can see and hear each other in real time (i.e. live) using special equipment." (NCTE, 2003) The NCTE advice sheets on videoconferencing describe the use of videoconferencing in the foreign language classroom.

Ms. Jones' French class spent most of their Friday lesson in a videoconference with students from a school in France. They have also been sending their French essays to their e-mail pen pals over in the French school, receiving their English ones in return. They plan to hold another videoconference with each other at the end of term to discuss the benefits of online collaboration. (NCTE 2003)

According to the (Irish) National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2003) *Languages in the Post Primary Curriculum* discussion paper however, "anecdotal evidence suggests that a survey of post-primary language classrooms... would reveal that ... only very occasional recourse is made to media and information technologies". As regards teacher education, it seems, according to the NCCA, that teachers require knowledge and skills that are not central concerns in pre-service teacher education. This problem needs to be addressed if teachers are to teach effectively using media and information technologies. The NCCA is concerned that "so much linguistic communication within societies is now conducted via media and information technologies that language learning is bound to lose much of its interest and authenticity if it never or only rarely makes use of these technologies" (NCCA

2003). The Internet is described as a source of a “wealth of target language material in various media”, and a provider of opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous communication.

As far back as 1994, a programme of videoconferences linking schools in France, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland took place. The conferences examined the practicality of school-to-school videoconferencing, cost effective technical issues, effectiveness and appropriateness of the medium to various curriculum areas and training required for participants. Lessons were learned from the project as regards equipment compatibility, training in presentation skills, sound and picture quality and the importance of planned timetabling. [NEELB-Secondary School Videoconferencing accessed on the Internet at 01.08.07]

Another example of a school based videoconferencing project in Ireland is the Dissolving Boundaries Through Technology in Education project. This project was designed to support schools in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland “to engage in collaborative curricular projects using computer and video conferencing”. This project is directed from within the Education Departments of the National University of Ireland, Maynooth and the University of Ulster, Coleraine campus. Videophones or PC based videoconferencing systems were supplied to all participating schools and the website provides advice as to appropriate set-up, seating plans and so on. This project does not specifically mention foreign languages as a subject included in videoconferencing although reference is made to “inter-school projects covering many areas of the curriculum”. [Dissolving Boundaries, accessed on the Internet 10.08.07]

Videoconferencing (Video Teleconferencing) is according to research being used by educational institutions internationally. In Ireland, the evidence so far is that ICT in general, and from that we can assume videoconferencing is not widely used in language classrooms. It seems that language projects do exist and are quite possible. In Ireland however, research points to a lack of emphasis on ICT as a methodology in pre-service teacher training and in-service training as a reason for the lack of use of ICT in the language classroom. The amount of preparation time required for organising videoconferences, finding suitable partners and arranging suitable times can also seem excessive to language teachers. They generally bow to pressure to complete text books, go through exam questions and generally prepare for the state exams in the traditional way.

1.3 Videoconferencing in Education Internationally

In the U.S.A., where distances between learners can be vast, videoconferencing is emerging as a valued educational tool. This technology has carved a niche for itself, with evidence of videoconferencing in the classroom in a wide range of disciplines. Videoconferencing is ideal for virtual field trips, collaborative work and community events according to Linda Uhrenholt, an enthusiastic education advocate. Uhrenholt is quoted on pacbell.com’s website as saying “Oh, the places you and your students will go while using interactive videoconferencing!” It is claimed that videoconference connections increase student motivation and learning. The pacbell.com website lists 16 pages of resources to help teachers start “videoconference adventures”. Among the videoconferencing project participants are museums, zoos, research institutes, learning centres, science centres, sanctuaries, libraries, laboratories, space centres, historical societies, ocean institutes, State parks, aquariums, the U.S. senate and the House of Representatives.

Videoconferencing in the classroom is referred to as “Classroom Conferencing” by the Global School Net Foundation whereby “videoconferencing software is used to connect communities, cultures and classrooms so that students around the world can learn and collaborate together”. Software used includes such programs as CU-See-Me and NetMeeting. The Global School Net Foundation website includes a classroom conferencing directory, where schools can find partners using world-wide searches. Schools can also be included in a list to indicate availability for videoconferencing. The list of countries where schools have registered for videoconferencing activities is expansive, with 49 countries listed at time of accessing the site.

A website to “provide foreign language educators with useful links and resources for exploiting videoconferencing technology to develop their students’ foreign language skills and intercultural competence” was developed by Robert O Dowd, a lecturer in EFL at the University of Léon in Spain. The low cost of using the Internet (IP) to carry out videoconferences, despite poorer quality tends to be a more popular option with educational institutions he concludes. (O Dowd 2004)

Case studies as described by Jason Firestone on his Videoconferencing Website show the benefits and uses of desktop videoconferencing (DVC). Firestone documents five specific cases as he investigates how and why DVC can be used in language learning.

The first school he refers to is an English secondary school which has been using DVC since 1996. The students involved were “A” level students and of the nine students who participated in the five month videoconferencing project, “six students showed a marked improvement in their spoken French in terms of their accent, intonation, accuracy and fluency”. (Butler & Hawkes 1999) The language learning took place in pairs or threes with half the time spent speaking French and half speaking English.

The second example is a videoconferencing project involving three primary schools in North Yorkshire. Only one of the three schools had a French teacher and so the project allowed the schools to “share” the teacher using a DVC link-up. Not only did the pupils acquire foreign language skills but also it was found that the pupils’ communication skills improved as did both their ICT skills and the teachers’ ICT skills. The project was found to enrich the primary school curriculum in both French and English.

The third project refers to the ReLaTe (Remote Language Teaching) project, which has been in existence since 1995 and involves University College London and the University of Exeter. ReLaTe develops and tests videoconferencing software for use in language teaching. Both point-to-point and multipoint videoconferencing are catered to.

Hippernet is the fourth case looked at by Firestone. This is “High PERFORMANCE NETWORKED multimedia for distributed language learning” and it is a pan-European project across six countries. Business French learners using role-plays and DVC viewed the medium as providing effective support for the communication involved in language learning. DVC was thought to be motivating, focussed and productive as well as a means to eliminate physical barriers. (Mc Andrew et al. 1996:214)

Firestone also refers to online language schools which provide private tuition, such as Surf2School (Firestone 1999). Since videoconferencing favours pedagogical approaches that utilise dialogue and interaction (Goodfellow et al 1996, Mc Andrew et al 1996), second language teaching at a distance is a natural subject for closer examination. Research indicates that while this is the case, the videoconferencing must take place in the context of a managed course of activities that have been pedagogically designed. (Lucas & Riddy 2002).

1.4 Videoconferencing and Constructivism

Videoconferencing software such as NetMeeting, CU-see me and ISpy provide for collaborative experiences, with applications shared among participants in the meeting, under the control of the presenter. The participants can view a Powerpoint presentation for instance and they can contribute to the development or modification of an application. Each student can gain control of the mouse in turn. This collaboration requires some discipline among the users / students and is catered to by a good teacher/ facilitator. (Farren 2002). The students can also engage in dialogue with native speakers of their target language. The situation is created whereby the students wish to communicate, to express themselves and to find out information. The motivation comes from the students, and the topics that are prepared in advance are student centred.

A supporter of this constructivist approach to teaching and learning is Kwok Wing Lai. Wing Lai (1993) refers to the teacher’s role as being crucial in a successful computer based learning environment. As we enter a new era of technology, the role of the teacher will have

to change, she claims, as the teacher seeks to facilitate acquisition of knowledge rather than present it. Learning changes also as students are encouraged to embrace critical thinking and creativity. Personal ownership of the new knowledge and appreciation of it become a focus. Wing Lai advocates a problem-solving, collaborative environment where students participate actively in their own learning and direct teaching is at a minimum. The teacher is there primarily to guide and facilitate. This exciting, satisfying and stimulating environment gives the learners a sense of control of their own learning process. Integrating innovations such as videoconferencing into an existing school curriculum needs a teacher who is innovative and a manager of classroom resources. The teacher is no longer the authority on knowledge. The teacher is as flexible as the lesson plan and at times a participant in the learning process.

1.5 Videoconferencing and the Target Language Syllabus

An integrated approach as recommended by the NCCA, with classroom activities containing more than one component is achievable using videoconferencing if preparation is thorough. Foreign language teachers thinking of experimenting with videoconferencing (VC) need to be sure that student communication with target language students, via VC, involves activities which integrate the three basic components of the foreign language syllabus: basic communicative proficiency, language awareness and cultural awareness.

The preparation exercises for a videoconference can include an introduction to grammar and phrases which the student is likely to encounter as chosen themes are discussed. This is part of language awareness.

The synchronous nature of videoconferencing as opposed to the asynchronous nature of e-mail interaction involves different student strategies. In videoconferencing conversations, students come across unknown vocabulary and sentence structures as well as colloquialisms. For such conversations to run smoothly and become more fluent, students need to develop techniques to make sense of the information being given to them and produce a suitable reply, thus improving communicative proficiency.

Cultural awareness is brought about by introducing national costumes or games equipment, (such as a hurling stick in Ireland), musical instruments, singing and dancing, or simply pointing the camera out the window to show vineyards, ploughed fields or city skyscrapers.

1.6 Integration of ICT and Videoconferencing into the Classroom

In an address made by the Deputy Minister of Education in South Africa, Mr. Mosibudi Mangena, TQSA (2001) appeals to the public to never lose sight of the fact that technology is only a tool in the hands of teachers. It is not a universal remedy to all educational challenge. Technology on its own cannot drive, technology cannot teach, it cannot provide. Mangena also claims that teachers in the twenty first century are becoming increasingly important to the fabric of society. This might bring solace to teachers who imagine that the introduction of ICT methodologies into the classroom renders the role of the teacher obsolete. (TQSA 2001)

Teachers are expected to be 'experts' in their classrooms, but one should not lose sight of the fact that no matter how computer literate students are, a frame-work in which to set their work and positive encouragement to appraise and develop their skills is also needed. (Department of Education submission to the Information Society Steering Committee 1996).

Glenn Russell et al (2000) concur that computers permeate the fabric of everyday life. Teachers need therefore to have both basic and advanced computer skills to prepare their students for the new information age. Integrating computers into teaching and into curricula should be the aim of teachers and educationalists. Research indicates that European teachers seem to be very open to technological change. There is a huge pool of potential Internet users amongst EU teachers and information indicates that apart from ICT subject specialists, language teachers are the most open to the use of the new media. According to

the report commissioned by the Directorate General of Education and Culture, language teachers must rise to the challenge of harnessing the potential of ICT devices for their own and their learners' particular needs. (Commission Staff Working Paper 2002).

1.7 Conclusion

Current educational trends internationally call for language teachers and learners to be competent in ICT use. The benefits of ICT practices such as VC, which allows access to native speakers, global communication and cultural exchange are becoming evident from projects undertaken so far. In Ireland, both the NCTE and the Department of Education advocate the integration of ICT into education. The NCCA recommends that small-scale projects be initiated in order to use ICT in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Clearly time and money will have to be invested in promoting ICT use in both FLL and FLT. Problems exist as long as language teachers are untrained to use these new media. If teachers are to equip students with the skills to be autonomous, independent, life-long learners of language, using technology and the Internet to enhance this process, it follows that teachers and learners must be given ample support and commitment by the relevant parties, in terms of training, equipment and time resources.

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List of Abbreviations

DVC	Desktop Videoconferencing
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
EU	European Union
FLL	Foreign Language Learning
FLT	Foreign Language Teaching
ISDN	Integrated Services Digital Network
ISSC	International Social Science Council
ICT	Information Communication Technology
IP	Internet Protocol
LAN	Local Area Network
LC	Leaving Certificate
MSN	Microsoft Network
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (Ireland)
NCTE	National Centre for Technology in Education (Ireland)
NINE	Northern Ireland Network for Education
PC	Personal Computer
ReLaTeRemote	Language Teaching
TQSA	Think Quest South Africa
US	United States
USA	United States of America
VC	Videoconference