Internet Videoconferencing to Improve EFL Learning

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Abstract: This presentation describes the methodology used by Dr. Michael Marek and Dr. Vivian Wu for English language instruction in Taiwan using Internet videoconferencing, and their research findings after three semesters. Initial student reaction was positive. Quantitative and qualitative evaluation indicated an increase in motivation as a result of the interactions. Abundant literature is clear that when motivation increases, ability and confidence follow. Students cited several elements of the instructional design in explaining their increased proficiency: the sessions' emphasis on subjects interesting and pertinent to young adults, including American culture and traditions; spontaneous and authentic interaction with a native speaker; and the implementation of techniques to lessen anxiety. The positive results suggest a new avenue for foreign language instruction around the world that makes use of student-centered, active learning.

I am pleased to be here today to tell you about the work Dr. Vivian Wu and I have been doing, collaborating between America and Taiwan. We use Internet videoconferencing to improve the learning of English of students here in Taiwan. We are in the second year of our project and our research, and we are proud of the results showing an increase of student motivation to study English as a result of our work (Wu & Marek, 2007).

Dr. Wu and I met in the United States when we were in the same doctoral program at the University of South Dakota. Our program in Adult and Higher Education stressed active, learner-centered education and constructive learning. It deemphasized the traditional format of lecture, memorization, drill, and passive learning. It happened that I was a couple of semesters ahead of Dr. Wu and had completed my degree when she was working on her dissertation about the optimal learning environment for English in Taiwan (Wu, 2006). I was a peer reviewer of her qualitative data and in this way I learned about the challenges faced by teachers of English in Taiwan. I learned particularly about the difficulty of finding native speakers of English to talk with students of English.

One day, I casually suggested to Dr. Wu that maybe I could talk to her class via the Internet. At that time, I was not so much interested in teaching English as I was in innovative use of the Internet for mass communication – to benefit my promotion and tenure process. This is because I teach Mass Communication at Wayne State College, a small public liberal arts college in the American state of Nebraska. For those of you who do not know Dr. Wu, she teaches English at Chienkou Technology University (CTU) in Changhua City. My casual suggestion soon became an instructional design that makes use of our skills in both of our fields, and of our philosophy of student-centered education.

In America, when we teach English to people who are not native speakers, we say that we are teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). This is because the students are surrounded by a culture that speaks English and the students can easily practice their skills (Huan, 1989). Those of you here today know that in Taiwan, English

is a foreign language (EFL). The academic literature is clear that the opportunity for communication in authentic situations and settings, especially with native speakers, is a major factor in successful second-language acquisition by adults (Snow, 1987; Spolsky, 1989; You, 2003).

However, we all understand how difficult it is for instructors of English in Taiwan to find native speakers of English to interact with students.

Dr. Wu and I both strongly believe in the student-centered approach to instruction, as opposed to the teacher-centered approach. Teacher-centered instruction mainly uses lecture and memorization. The result is that students only want to complete the class, or use the subject matter for some other very practical purpose, like getting a job. They are not very engaged in learning the material, for learning's sake. This is called instrumental motivation (Gardner, 2001). On the other hand, integrative motivation deals with stimulating the learner's true interest in the subject, interest that will carry after the class is completed. In EFL, this means a desire to be engaged with the language and culture of native speakers. Teachers accomplish this by giving students more control over their learning, thus motivating them to be more engaged, and by using materials that are as authentic as possible. We call this making the class student-centered.

The project that Dr. Wu and I developed is an attempt to address this need for authentic materials with an innovative use of Internet videoconferencing. Our work included development of content providing cultural information about America that would interest CTU students. We also developed a structure that integrates my

presentations into the overall class. The students prepare in advance for the online sessions and they are assisted as they directly interact with me.

This addresses one of the biggest criticisms of past efforts to use videoconferencing to assist EFL instruction – that the videoconferences are NOT part of a comprehensive pedagogic structure (O'Dowd, 2005).I am going to explain the process we use, so you will see that this criticism does not apply to our work.

Instructional Design

Last year, I spoke to Dr. Wu's classes five times over the two semesters. That means five "rounds" of speaking to five classes each, or a total of 25 presentations to individual classes. There were a total of about 225 students in the classes. Students in these classes were non-majors with relatively low English speaking proficiency and comprehension. This past semester I talked to two classes of majors three times each.

The development of the presentations involved several steps, beginning with assessment of the technical environment. We chose to use the consumer system SKYPE (skype.com) because it was free, easily available in the CTU computer lab, and easy for me to use at home. Due to time zone differences, we were 13 to 14 hours apart in our local times. For me, the videoconferences fell in mid-evening, in the middle of the night, or in the early morning hours in the United States. Last semester, one of the classes began at 4:30 am for me. So I talked to the students from home.

The Taiwanese classes met in an on-campus computer lab. The teacher's work station in the lab made the connection to my computer and the screen of the teacher's computer was reproduced on a large projected display, as well as on the individual student computers in the lab. Wall-mounted speakers and a common microphone

allowed for all students to hear me and for Dr. Wu to control the flow of the conversation and assure equal opportunity for students to participate.

Once our technology was selected, we collaborated to plan carefully the overall strategy of the videoconferences and the individual lessons. I developed a presentation lasting about 20 minutes for each round of videoconferences. Dr. Wu gave me feedback on my drafts. The subject of each presentation was tailored to interest young adults and to highlight American culture, traditions. I worked hard to use simple vocabulary. The students received an advance written copy of my presentation, along with an mp3 audio recording of the text. In the recording, I slowly spoke the words and enunciated my words clearly. I learned this technique from "Voice of America" radio transmissions in what they call "special English." Dr. Wu reviewed the advance text with students, emphasizing the new vocabulary and meaning of phrases. Students listened to the recording on their own to help their understanding of my spoken English.

In the live videoconferences, I delivered expanded versions of the presentations, adding photographs to enrich my text. Dr. Wu translated or clarified meaning, as needed. For a period of about 70 minutes following the presentation, Taiwanese students, either as individuals or in small groups based on their comfort levels, asked me questions or replied with comments regarding the presentation. My topics included rural America, important holidays in the United States, national parks and vacations and American clothing.

The third step of our project last year was to collect and analyze findings at the end of each semester about changes in the motivation, ability, and confidence of the students. To do this, we used a quantitative survey of the participating students.

Qualitative interviews of selected students provided added richness of understanding of the experiences of the students. We created both the quantitative survey and the qualitative interview protocol following a review of the pertinent literature (Gardner, 1985a; Silva, 1997; Zeng's, 2001) and with human subjects research approval on both of our campuses. The survey questions were grouped to indicate student perceptions of motivation, confidence, and ability. The qualitative interview questions explored the experiences of the students in this project.

Findings and Discussion

Motivation, Confidence & Ability. After five rounds of videoconferencing last year, the survey of student perceptions showed that their motivation increased at a level that is statistically significant. On a five-point scale, where 3.00 indicated no change, motivation was 4.09, which is a statistically significant increase at the 95% level of confidence. Although the quantitative survey did not report statistically significant increases in confidence and ability in speaking English, much literature exists tying the three factors together, indicating that when motivation increases, confidence and ability follow (Clèment & Kruidenier, 1985; Horowitz, Horowitz, and Cope, 1986; Labrie & Clèment,1986). Therefore, we believe that the increased student motivation to study English, which can change in a fairly short timeframe, results in longer-term improvements in ability and confidence which take more time to develop.

In addition, the gender of the students produced statistically significant differences in motivation and confidence. Female students perceived more of a change in their motivation compared to their male counterparts as a consequence of the

videoconferences. There are probably cultural reasons for this that YOU may understand better than I do.

Cultural Content. Students particularly appreciated that the presentations dealt with aspects of current American culture. Their interest in American culture led them to respond positively to the videoconference sessions and the subsequent question and answer sessions.

Active Learning. Students clearly recognized that this English course was different from other English classes they had taken, not just because of the videoconferences but also because they were more engaged, active learners. In addition to the interactions with me via videoconference, they cited more interactions with each other in English and with their teacher, as the active learning style improved their confidence.

Authentic Materials. One of the primary benefits cited by the students was that they had the opportunity to learn accurate American pronunciation and usage. Knowing that they were hearing correct American usage increased the confidence of the students in the content of the lessons. This, in turn, increased their confidence in their own understanding, with resulting increases in their motivation and ability.

Student Anxiety. The students' perceptions of their distance learning experience were often framed in terms of how nervous or relaxed they were while speaking with me. Because of the way Dr. Wu and I designed the lessons, students found the experience to be less intimidating because she was present and provided assistance with vocabulary and grammar. Research shows that strong interactions and contacts with native speakers of English in a setting producing low anxiety can be considered to

be an ideal environment. The students found both criteria to be true in their Internet videoconferences. Another important factor in student comfort was that they were already familiar with the technology. They use SKPYE, MSN Messenger and similar systems regularly in their daily lives. Extending their use to the classroom was an easy step for them.

Learning Environment. Students were highly aware of their learning environment, commenting negatively on connectivity and bandwidth issues that occasionally caused the video to "freeze," and excessive class size (as high as 50 students) that limited their individual time talking with me online.

Conclusion

Dr. Wu and I believe that our work represents the development of an important technique for distance learning – one that avoids past criticisms of demonstrations of videoconferencing for language instruction. While there is considerable literature about boosting student motivation and confidence and about computer-assisted teaching, this is pioneering research into how precisely student motivation to study English improves as the result of videoconferencing with a native speaker of English.

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