

Effects of task-based videoconferencing on speaking performance and overall proficiency

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to find the effects of using Videoconferencing (VC) as a tool for foreign language instructions in a semester long research study. The research questions focus on the effects of VC (1) on speaking skills, and (2) on general proficiency scores. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in a university in Japan were divided into an Experimental Group (EG) with weekly VC outside the classroom, and a Control Group (CG) provided with ‘shadowing practice’ and written assignments instead of VC. Both groups spent eight weeks under the treatments with pre and post measurements. The results showed improvement in holistic ratings and temporal measurement in transcribed speech data, but not statistically significant in interaction between time and treatments. Speaking performance of the EG showed statistically more significant progress in fluency and lexical variation, and in general proficiency. The results suggest that using VC with tasks in a blended manner with classroom instruction develops balanced L2 competence and performance.

Keywords: videoconferencing, task-based language learning, speaking, proficiency.

1. Introduction

It is not easy to find regular opportunities for interaction in English with fluent English speakers in an EFL context such as Japan. Even some learners who attend conversation classes in universities cannot be given sufficient time to talk in English with English speaking instructors due to large class sizes. This situation leads to the fact that many learners in Japan cannot communicate sufficiently in English, particularly in speaking (MEXT, 2016). This fact also leads to an increasing number

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of people counting on English language programs through VC (Yano Economic Research Institute, 2015).

However, one problem with commercial programs using VC for language learning is that the content dealt with in sessions seems not to expand learners' L2 competence but just to the extent that the learners manage to develop fluency in daily conversation. Therefore it appears necessary to introduce frameworks from Second-Language Acquisition (SLA) such as task-based language learning, which facilitates L2 development (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014).

As a solution to such issues, we have implemented interaction-based instruction with the goal of role-play tasks through VC with English speakers. Hence, the purpose of the study is to find the effects of using VC as a tool of foreign language instructions in a semester long research project. The aim of this study is to investigate the effects of the instruction that includes VC as its communicative goal (1) on speaking skills, and (2) on general proficiency consisting of vocabulary, reading and listening.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and instructional conditions

The EG, consisting of 22 university level learners of English in Japan experienced eight role-play task sessions through VC over the course of one semester. The weekly VC sessions were held with English teachers living in the Philippines. The teachers had experience in teaching English in a language school in the Philippines, so they were familiar with how to handle a discussion class with two learners. Each session was 45 minutes long. We gave the teachers a brief scheme for the 45 minute sessions: ten min. for warm-up, 25 min. for a role-play task and ten min. for cross-cultural questions which the learners prepared in order to learn about the situation in the Philippines in accordance with the topic they discussed in the role-play task.

The issues for VC sessions were from a listening course book with which the learners do listening comprehension and dictation on their own before a preparatory class, a 90 minute regular class. In the class, being conducted by a Japanese teacher of English, the following five steps were taken: (1) free discussion between the learners on the issue; (2) sharing of words and expressions as 'gaps' they noticed – the teacher provided L2 expressions equivalent to L1 based on the notes of 'what they wanted to say but could not'; (3) presentation

by an assigned group of learners on the issue in order to stretch their content knowledge; (4) re-discussion on the same issue to incorporate their learning in Step 2 and 3 with different learners; and (5) role-play practice in triads among the learners, in which they could switch roles in order to prepare for any role in the task. After the preparatory class, paired learners experienced the same role-play task through VC with the teachers in the Philippines. As a post task, the learners were given a writing assignment.

The CG, consisting of 27 learners in the same university, were provided with the same listening pre-task as EG before their weekly 90 minute classes. They used the same materials, and experienced the same steps in the classroom up to the part of a role-play among the learners. Instead of VC, however, they were assigned to do 'shadowing practice', i.e. repeating or reproducing aloud the sound of the listening material for ten minutes daily and to keep a record of it. They were assigned to write a short essay on the same topic as well.

2.2. Data collection tools and procedures

The test followed the style of the TOEFL Speaking Section Part 1. Learners were asked, for example, 'Some students prefer to work on class assignments by themselves. Others believe it is better to work in a group. Which do you prefer? Explain why'. The teacher read aloud the question and provided 15 seconds for planning, then had the learners talk in the microphone in a computer-assisted language learning system for 45 seconds. The learners' oral production was recorded and rated up to four points by three raters, including the authors using the TOEFL Independent Speaking Rubric ($\alpha=.94$). The spoken language was manually transcribed and analyzed quantitatively.

The Eiken IBA is a multiple choice question style standardized proficiency test consisting of listening and reading parts. Each part consisted of 50 questions; the reading part included 15 vocabulary featured questions. We used the score percentage in each section to compare the progress of the CG and EG.

3. Results and discussion

In order to make the two groups homogenous in the initial evaluation score in the TOEFL style test, the number of the participants became 30, that is 15 in each group by cutting the top learners in the EG and the bottom layer of the CG.

For the TOEFL style speaking test, the result of two-way ANOVA repeated measurements showed no significant interaction ($F(1,28)=2.66, p=.114, \eta^2=.02$), but a significant difference between pre- and post-tests (Time : $F(1,28)=28.78, p<.001, \eta^2=.24$). Regarding the quantitative analysis of temporary measurement based on the transcribed data, significant interactions indicating EG>CG were observed in two variables: fluency by word per minute ($F(1,28)=9.49, p=.004, \eta^2=.05$), and lexical variation by type-token ratio in the Giraud Index ($F(1,28)=8.99, p=.006, \eta^2=.04$).

For the results of the *Eiken* IBA proficiency test, the EG outperformed the CG with a significant interaction ($F(1,28)=6.11, p=.019, \eta^2=.04$). Hence it can be said that VC brought about more L2 development in overall proficiency. These positive results for VC are in accordance with effects of interaction in SLA.

4. Conclusions

In this research, we found that providing task-based interaction using VC to EFL learners improved their speaking ability in fluency and lexical variation. The instruction also improved listening and reading proficiency. These findings add more evidence of positive effects of using VC in a sequence of L2 instruction.

In conclusion, since the CG also showed improvement in speaking, creating opportunities for L2 interaction with role-play tasks particular in EFL contexts can be a necessary condition, and VC session as a goal of interaction can be regarded as a satisfactory condition to enhance further L2 development in fluency and complexity.

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