



Centre for Academic English
Department of English
Stockholm University
S-106 91 Stockholm
Sweden
tel. +46 8 163593
fax: +46 8 15 96 67

INVITE

Communication technologies and acquiring academic and professional communication skills – an interactive learning infrastructure and new methodology

Evaluation report on the training materials developed by the project team

Maria Kuteeva, PhD

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Introduction

The present report focuses on the evaluation of training and learning materials developed by the Invite Project team as a result of the work carried out between 2006 and 2008. The overarching aim of the project was to develop transferable communication skills in English through an interactive learning infrastructure, namely video conferencing, thereby providing opportunity for telecollaboration between various academic institutions and linking the academic and professional worlds (<http://invite.lingua.muni.cz/about.html>).

The training and learning materials comprise four documents: 1) a report in which John Morgan lays out the theoretical foundations of the Invite Project; 2) a handbook containing various kinds of tasks for developing socio-cultural, technical, organisational and language; 3) a methodology quick guide aimed at teachers planning to introduce video-conferencing into their teaching; and 4) a video conferencing quick guide designed for enhancing videoconferencing skills in academic and professional contexts. These documents draw both on the existing academic literature written on the subject, and on the experience of videoconferencing sessions conducted between different project partners, mainly between Aberystwyth and Masaryk Universities.

Project report

In his report, John Morgan sets out a theoretical framework for developing appropriate skills and strategies for effective communication in video conferencing. The introductory chapter outlines the characteristics of video conferencing as a medium of communication and points out various difficulties encountered in its use since the 1980s. It is shown that the initial stages of communication in video conferencing are marked by high levels of formality. Therefore, the report aims to identify the developmental stages of participants' adaptation to using this medium, and discusses a social and technological cycle leading to effective participation in remote community groups.

Although various kinds of technology have been used in education, the benefits of video conferencing are relatively undervalued, largely due to insufficient instruction among language-teaching professionals. The report stresses the importance of viewing video conferencing as a means of support for oral communication, i.e. a literary practice with a defined set of standards, patterns and styles for exchanging information. Drawing on previous research, the report identifies a need to look into how people adapt themselves to work creatively and dynamically in the video conferencing environment. Considering social factors that affect participants' motivation and creativity, there emerge three parallels between the notions of 1) social formality and operational dimension, 2) social playfulness and cultural dimension, and 3) socially negotiated design and critical dimension. These concepts can form a socially negotiated basis for participation in video conferencing. The report goes on to discuss different participant roles and characteristics of discourse communities and communities of practice. It is shown how the Invite Project fostered the emergence of new communities of practice by encouraging groups to come together with the objective of taking part in specific tasks of designing video conferences with limited guidance from a facilitator.

The above-mentioned theoretical framework underpins a proportional approach to syllabus and programme design described in Section 3 of the report. This approach moves through three phases: structural, communicative and specialised, thereby fostering participant autonomy and expertise and gradually decreasing facilitator control. It is common to use similar approaches in online education and training when the learners are unfamiliar with the medium of instruction. Likewise, the Invite Project participants had no experience of video conferencing and were both highly enthusiastic and anxious about using it. Therefore, a more structured and formal form of instruction was required at the outset, but this phase gave way to greater degrees of socialisation and collaboration between the participants. It is pointed out that there is no clear boundary between the communicative and the specialised phase, and that the participants often move backward and forward trying new operational ideas. The report goes on to show how the proportional approach can be applied to video conferencing, stressing the importance of discussion topics and instruction on how to use this medium of communication (time management, time differences, logistical and technical requirements, etc.). Some participant guidelines are provided for both structural and communicative phases, followed by a discussion of the specific features of the specialised phase, including strategies for discussion and presentations.

The analysis of the specialised phase of communications development leads the author to consider the multi-level feedback cycle (participant to participant, facilitator to participant, participant to facilitator) in relation to possibilities of independent participant collaboration. The notion of social telepresence is reconsidered in the light of the project experience. It is argued that social telepresence can be achieved with very limited technologies, and that it does not necessarily depend on a sense of belonging to a community. The author also argues that socially meaningful activities can reduce the effect of physical barriers, which points to a need for careful task design.

The major goal of the Invite Project was to set up training that would provide strategies for professional communicators and to foster the development of transferable communication skills. The observation of social communication amongst the project participants has led the author to reconsider the social cycle of adaptation to video conferencing as described in the first two sections, viewing it as a basis for identifying characteristics of communication for training and communications development. Drawing on the project experience, the author concludes that many patterns of socialisation are learned, and that communities emerge as a result of developing strong social ties. Each video conference exchange is a unique experience for the participants and for their shared social understandings. Therefore, the notion of “best practice” is considered to be limiting, as the author points to a need for a more useful and realistic notion of “developing practice” in training.

The report finishes with an appendix containing the details of the video conference recordings, as well as a bibliography listing the works cited in the main text and other publications related to the project’s theme. Overall, the bibliography is relevant but by no means exhaustive, given the recent developments in the field of computer-assisted language learning. The major handicap in the theoretical framework of the report is due to a lack of references to up-to-date empirical research on the use of video-conferencing in language learning. The most recent publication in the bibliography dates back to 2003.

Handbook of training materials

The findings of John Morgan's report have been used in the preparation of training materials for the handbook. This document contains various kinds of tasks to be carried out by learners with the support of video conferencing. The contents are divided into three major parts according to the level of learners' proficiency in English (pre-intermediate, intermediate and advanced), and are accompanied by sample VC lesson plans and teacher's notes. Each part comprises four kinds of tasks aimed at developing socio-cultural, technical, organisational and language skills. The themes of the tasks are similar for different proficiency levels (e.g. introducing oneself, filling in a questionnaire, intercultural communication, videoconferencing skills, gap-filling exercises, etc.) but the complexity of activities to be carried out by learners varies. The scope of the tasks and teaching materials is sufficiently broad to be used by any language teaching practitioner in his/her own institutional setting.

Quick guides

The two remaining documents, 'Methodology Quick Guide' and 'Video Conferencing Quick Guide', provide practical advice for novice users of video conferencing. The former aims to outline a range of issues and procedures to be considered by instructors. It contemplates practical matters (e.g. booking arrangements, technical support, troubleshooting procedures), as well as teaching-related concerns (e.g. dealing with anxiety, managing activities, coping with cultural differences, providing feedback and evaluation). The methodology guide is written in a clear, concise style; the structural layout, including various levels of headings and numeration, helps the user to find quick answers to many questions. 'Video Conferencing Quick Guide' is an indispensable tool for any novice learner. Clearly structured and illustrated, this short document provides essential tips on using video conferencing in educational settings. Its eight sections focus on different types of video conferences, specific vocabulary, procedures and useful phrases for preparing and conducting a VC session, as well as some problem-solving tips. Both 'Methodology Quick Guide' and 'Video Conferencing Quick Guide' will be available in several European languages, thus helping to reduce cultural barriers and to diminish any potential anxiety associated with using a new technological medium for teaching and learning purposes. As pointed out earlier, initial training is fundamental for making videoconferencing sessions a successful learning experience, and these quick guides can certainly be useful to learners and teachers alike.

Concluding remarks

The reviewed project materials demonstrate the results of solid, theoretically grounded practical work carried out by the Invite Project team in the past three years. The experience of telecollaboration between Masaryk and Aberystwyth universities has proved prolific in providing opportunity and infrastructure for developing the learner-participant transferable communication skills in English. The publications resulting from the project implementation show potential for disseminating the practice of using video conferencing in academic and professional contexts across Europe, thereby contributing to a more meaningful intercultural dialogue between different member states.