Motivating students to enhance speaking skills via videoconferencing

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Speaking is one of the skills that EFL learners need to develop when learning the target language. Very often they feel reluctant to express their views in the classroom for several reasons. They may be hampered by poor literacy skills (Eales, Neale & Carroll, 1999), shyness or simply the fact that they do not feel sufficiently confident to speak in front of their peers for fear of making errors and being ridiculed. My primary concern, therefore, is to assist my students in developing their speaking skills so that they can perform successfully in the compulsory speaking test part of the Cambridge English examinations. With these assumptions in mind, I designed a study with a view to providing my students at C1 and C2 levels with the opportunity to engage in out-of-class online interactions via the videoconferencing application, *Zoom*. This additional practice might prove beneficial in terms of enhancing their communication skills.

The benefits of videoconferencing

Videoconferencing, a synchronous communication mode, can be employed as an alternative to face-to-face interaction, thereby facilitating engagement among learners. Kern (2015) claimed that students' production of sentences in a synchronous group discussion was two to four times greater than in face-to-face interactions. Videoconferencing can be defined as "synchronous audio and video communication through computer and telephone networks between two or more geographically dispersed sites" (Lawson *et al*., 2010, p. 295). It provides instantaneous interaction since students communicate with their peers in real time, as well as constituting a solution for EFL learners who have fewer opportunities to communicate in the target language (Ino, A. & Yabuta, Y. 2015). Furthermore, communication through videoconferencing includes eye contact, gestures and turn-taking, which can enhance students' positive attitudes and motivation to learn the target language (Jauregi, Graff, Bergh & Khriz, 2012).

The project

A learning platform was created by using the videoconferencing application, *Zoom*, to encourage the students to interact with each other online. The platform was accessible to the students via their smartphone, other mobile devices or their desk computer. They were also requested to download the application Google Drive on their device so that the activities could be shared. Bi-weekly tasks were designed with the aim of guiding the students towards developing proficiency in speaking. The tasks were three-tier:

    (1) Reading materials provided the context for the debates.

(2) Vocabulary exercises were prepared to check for comprehension.

(3) Questions were set to prompt interaction on videoconferencing.

Eighteen students at C1 and C2 levels volunteered to participate in the study, since they appreciated the additional practice deemed helpful for their Cambridge English examination, whilst at the same time experiencing a novel approach to learning.

Activities

One of the goals was to afford the students the opportunity to be exposed to authentic texts, not only to those in their coursebooks. As a result, seven articles covering a range of topical themes, which, it was hoped, would arouse the students' interest, were selected from the BBC and The Guardian newspaper as reading resources; for example, 'What is healthy eating?', 'Five ways students can boost their confidence at uni', or 'The world's most polite country', to name a few.

The seven vocabulary exercises comprised True/False or Multiple Choice questions, and ten new lexical items were acquired in each exercise. Google forms, on which the vocabulary exercises were formulated, were shared with the participants. Below is an example of a vocabulary exercise.

> After reading the article do the following vocabulary exercise. Choose the right answer (a) or (b).
>
> Description (optional)
>
> The war in Syria PROMPTED a wave of people to flee the country. *
>
> ○ discouraged
>
> ○ caused
>
> We MISSED OUT ON a chance to get a cheaper mortgage. *
>
> ○ failed to use an opportunity
>
> ○ disregarded

In order to prompt the participants to conduct their online debates, some questions were provided for an exchange of multiple views, thus developing

their speaking skills.   Here is an example of questions for eliciting information from each other:

'What changes have occurred in our eating habits in the last twenty years? How do you foresee our diet in the future?'

'Which of the five pieces of advice mentioned in the article do you consider to be the most/least important in boosting university students' confidence?' 'Talk about your own experience at university.'

'To what extent do you think the Spaniards are polite?' 'In your view, should students learn about good manners at home or at school?'

Students' interaction on Zoom

The participants were invited to book their meeting room on a bi-weekly basis. In other words, their meetings were scheduled at their convenience, which is an advantage of using such technology. Once they had agreed on their preferred time and day, they would take part in their respective debates in groups of three, and each session lasted for about 10-15 minutes. To ensure that their progress in speaking could be monitored, each video was recorded by the students themselves and uploaded to the learning platform for the tutor to watch and analyse later. It is important for all the videos to be downloaded and saved since they are not permanently stored on *Zoom*.

The outcomes

The participants were fully engaged in their online interactions, reporting that they were motivated and comfortable when expressing their views due to their familiarity with the subject under discussion and lack of pressure. The video conference setting might also have fostered a more relaxing atmosphere conducive to enhanced interaction. They performed their online tasks without the anxiety of being observed or intimidated by their peers. They were able to consider their ideas and prepare their questions prior to their online debates. They made an effort to incorporate the newly acquired lexis in their discourse, as they knew that using a wide range of vocabulary would enhance their output. They felt more independent when managing their online interactions without my help, and made their own decisions in terms of when and how to start their debates. Constant practice on videoconferencing led to confidence building and fluency development.

A fundamental aspect of videoconferencing is that students can see paralinguistic features, such as gestures or facial expressions, which facilitates communication. Hence, the students could learn the techniques of how to initiate, respond and take turns during their discussions, which they later applied in their face-to-face classes.

Some improvement was noticed in the students' speaking performance in the classroom, as they felt more confident and produced extended discourse with greater ease. The scaffolding provided by videoconferencing was influential in this regard.

Drawbacks

Despite the fact that the students generally expressed a positive attitude towards their novel learning experience, some problems were reported. Technical glitches, such as communication breakdown or blurred images, occasionally arose during interactions and disrupted task completion. Some of the students would rather have communicated in a face-to-face classroom context, since they can receive instantaneous peer support should they need it. Others claimed that although the atmosphere was unthreatening due to lack of peer pressure, the absence of personal contact created a somewhat cold environment. Once again, they would have appreciated a more natural setting like their classroom.

Conclusions

The conclusions that can be drawn from this novel learning experience are that videoconferencing can be perceived as a convenient tool to provide students with a learning context outside the traditional classroom setting. It can stimulate students to adopt a self-learning approach and collaborate through peer interaction, thereby developing communicative competence. It assists in increasing students' confidence in speaking, and provides practice prior to face-to-face class discussions.

In spite of above-mentioned limitations, I would certainly recommend teachers to implement videoconferencing in their teaching as a motivational tool to enhance students' speaking skills.

References

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