

**TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE (A
PRACTICE PAPER)**

Lecturer Tuncer Can
Istanbul University, Turkey
tcan@istanbul.edu.tr



Tuncer Can, graduated from Istanbul University, Hasan Ali Yücel Faculty of Education, English Language Teaching Dept. in 2001. He also completed his MA on “Constructivism and Foreign Language Teacher Education” in the same department in 2004. He has been teaching English Grammar, Introduction to Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition and Advanced Reading Skills in the same department since 2001. In 2004-2005, having FLTA scholarship from Fulbright Commission he taught Turkish as a foreign language via Videoconferencing at Syracuse University in a joint program of Syracuse and Cornell University, NY, USA. Constructivist Approach, Teacher Training, Linguistics, Acquisition, Discourse Analysis and Sociolinguistics are among his interests.

ABSTRACT

Teaching a foreign language via Videoconferencing includes many distinct aspects of instruction and requires reconsidering the methodology, instructor roles, interaction types, and teaching environment. The multiple selection of channels, through which the teaching materials can be transmitted, necessitates revision of traditional one way communication between the instructor and the learners. Videoconferencing allows for two-way interactive instruction. Furthermore, the fact that the Videoconferencing mode of teaching exhibits two different and distant physical realities to be controlled on one screen urges the revision of the traditional mode, where one instructor and many students interact. The components that play a crucial role in the interaction that Videoconferencing provides are those among instructor-facilitator-learners-materials-technology, whereas what is really at stake is the interaction among instructor-learners-materials. Instructor roles alter as the facilitator roles merge with them. The instructors attain new roles while keeping the channels open and functioning. Moving from one source to many shifts the dependency and conveys learners into more autonomous scaffolding. The equipment in the Videoconferencing facility we used are various, among which are Polycom 128 ViewStation, Document Camera, Tv Monitor, Scan Converter, Audio/Video Switcher, VHS VCR, Projector, Smart Board, and others.

INTRODUCTION

Videoconferencing has lately been used by global corporations for business meetings and by educational institutions for lectures. However recent innovations in telecommunications technologies such as ISDN and compressed videoconferencing systems have lowered equipment and transmission cost, making two-way video feasible for small colleges, businesses, classrooms and libraries. Videoconferencing has been used by schools to enrich the classroom experience by connecting them to learning parks, museums, experts and even other schools worldwide through television monitors and video cameras. Videoconferencing is a means through which less commonly taught languages could also be presented in colleges and universities. In this paper I will argue on some general issues concerning the implementation of VC by presenting one such case conducted by Syracuse University in collaboration with Cornell University and Colgate College.

Our Experience

Syracuse University and Cornell University went onto a joint project of offering classes on Turkish in the fall of 2004. Both SU and CU offer beginner and intermediate level Turkish Courses. Intermediate class has been offered via Videoconferencing. The instructor at SU has taught a student at CU 3 days a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. A facilitator has been assigned by CU. The facilitator has been a Sociology major graduate. The materials for the classes have been sent through e-mails and the facilitator. The facilitator helped the student write and was asked to act as a pair for dialogues. She has been also actively participating into the conversations and the activities. On the cultural matters and grammar explanations she has always been contacted to give examples and evidence.

A wide range of activities have been planned and used, the aim has been to test the use of various media. Powerpoint presentations, Turkish movies, songs, websites, Turkish newspaper articles have been used to enhance variety of Turkish language input. The class has been conducted according to the feedback from our student. Her comments have been considered in the selection of materials, reading topics and activities. Current events like elections, political changes, natural disasters and exhibitions have been integrated into the class discussions. Evaluation has been done by written exams, presentations and projects.

In the spring semester the beginner Turkish class has also been offered via VC, in this class Syracuse University, Cornell University and Colgate College were connected via multi-point VC connection. 3 students from SU, 2 from CU and 2 from CC have been attending the classes.

Videoconferencing

According to Miller (2002) Videoconferencing can be defined as communication in which all parties can send-and-receive audio-and-video to-and-from each other. All other types of electronic communication (including typing, electronic drawing, the viewing and manipulating of websites, the playing of prerecorded video, etc.) can occur within, or concurrently with, a videoconference. Videoconferencing is a form of interactive television. Burn states that within the field of education, whilst

videoconference systems appear to provide the potential to reach a wider student audience, offer greater flexibility, make use of scarce expertise and enhance communication channels between remote groups of learners and their tutors, its use within an educational context is still not well understood. Jodi Reed and Merry Woodruff (1995) argue that while compressed video holds great promise for expanding the classroom experience, it also amplifies poor teaching styles and strategies. The planning process and learning curve may seem excessive at first, but the shift from “knowledge disseminator” to “learning facilitator” is likely to enhance learning for both local and remote students.

Technology

Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) is communication protocol used to provide audio, video, and data over a 64Kbps or higher channels. Also IP is the most widely used packet-switched communication protocol used to transport information between computer systems. VC could be used in different contexts. For example for person-to-person, person to group, person to several groups, group to group, person to linked groups. The VC is conducted through a monitor, multi-perspective videocamera which is also able to zoom in and out, microphones.

VC is a promising application for teaching foreign languages, VC establishes a visual and audio connections among people from distant places. Teachers of foreign languages, in our case Turkish, can be connected into the classrooms in the US even from their native country through thorough planning, if especially time differences could be resolved. Through VC teacher can see and hear remote learners in real time, he can use conversation and body language to enhance communication. The real time interaction makes both parties active participants like in the conventional classrooms. Hence, the motivation is possible. Along with the instructor on one end a facilitator could be employed on the other end. Thus, a conventional classroom is enriched. The facilitator could act as a helper, guide, example or interactor, communicative pair in activities. Facilitator's roles may vary according to the activities employed by the instructor. The instructor could share his/her teaching responsibility with the facilitator and this in return could lead to a change in the instructor's roles.

Facilitator

The instructor becomes a planner of the process and activities, the facilitator could help by applying the plan and the activities. The instructor is freed from being the only example and representative of the language and the facilitator becomes an important partner. This partnership exemplifies the real life and becomes very fruitful for the learners. The facilitator could act as both informant and active pair during the VC sessions. The instructor and the facilitator could very well represent the communicative styles in that specific language if engaged in talk. The difference could enable students to see and analyze different examples which in return could broaden their experience as hearers. The facilitator also motivates the remote learners by bringing another perspective into the classroom. The instructor should be flexible enough to engage the facilitator as much as possible. Thus, the lecturing time could also be reduced and the motivation of the learners could be sustained.

The Class Environment

VC enables connection with external resources, other native speakers could be integrated when needed. Remote learners can host and bring in other resources into the classroom as well. VC supports the use of diverse media. A computer for internet resources, document camera for still images, smart board for instruction could be employed during the sessions. The instructor could also share some ad-hoc prepared materials with his learners anywhere through e-mail. The homeworks and exams could be conveyed through e-mails as well. The computer makes the transmission of any kind of audio visual and colourful materials, such as slides, photos, songs, movies, powerpoint presentations and etc. easier, the document camera enables the use of still images like photos, graphics and maps and ad-hoc materials like handouts. This would turn the video screen into a learning experience through different learning styles.

Destructors

On one hand VC is supportive and could give more stimulus through the two way channel, on the other hand however VC could be quite destructive. For instance, the equipment and the lines for transmitting sessions are costly, VC takes more time to plan and prepare, if visuals, like handwritten or copied materials, are not properly prepared, students may have a difficult time reading them, if the “pipe” that carries the transmission among sites is not large enough, the students may observe “ghost images” when rapid movement occurs in “real time”, if the system is not properly configured, class members may observe an audio “echo” effect. The result is audio interference that detracts from the learning environment, there can also be some sound and image delays as well as audio “clipping” (Reed and Woodruff, 1995). A skillful technician could be presented on the conference site and take care of these destructions or the instructor and the facilitator could be educated about the tools and possible problems arising from the technology. In the case of any kind of disconnection on the sites the instructor and the facilitator should always have a plan B. This could give them some time to fix the problem.

Another destructor, audio clipping, could arise when two people from different sides try to speak in the same time. In this context, turn takings are very important to avoid such a destruction. The instructor, the facilitator and the learners should agree upon the ways of breaking into and interrupting the conversations. VC is not like watching a kind of “interactive television” which has its own communication styles. The instructor and the facilitator should speak slower, clear, distinct and louder; they should act slowly as well. The students on the other hand should keep the background sounds and motions in minimum as this could also destruct the communication.

Interaction

The instructor should lecture less and pre-plan the active experiences to avoid destructive motions and noises. The active experiences could involve hands on activities, group or pair work, reading, writing, question and answers, discussions. Lecture could be used for 15 minutes (Reed and Woodruff, 1995). This lecture

should include colourful media, visuals and audios, and should be flexible for questions and discussions. The facilitator should be challenging by bringing different perspectives when possible. The learners should work on activities and tasks and then discuss them with the instructor and among themselves. The learners should also be given homeworks which they could present in the classroom by manipulating the media available to them, through the computer, document camera and etc. Working on small presentations they could construct their own knowledge and by discussions they can observe their own perspectives.

The instructor should be using the camera angles effectively so that when asking questions and when the learners are answering they could be zoomed in and out, for this the instructor could use the pre-sets on the remote controller. The instructor should know the names of the learners. This could help in setting up dialogues as well. Also looking at the camera or the screen could help with the issues of eye contact.

As seen VC requires a lot of pre-planning and awareness on the instructor's side, however once the parameters are set it becomes more and more natural. In the meantime both the instructor and the learners learn how to deal with the destructors and the awkward feeling of talking to the monitor begins to fade away. Moreover, if the instructor pays a visit to the remote side, the three dimensional vision of both parties feels awkward.

Planning a Lesson and Activities

After introducing the advantages and the constraints of VC, I want to focus more on the planning of a successful lesson. First of all, each lesson should have a clear goal. Setting the goals and the expectations is crucial, these should also be clarified for the learners. Then the activities, the means and the time for each should be specified. They should be clarified for the facilitator. Materials need to be prepared accordingly and be sent to the facilitator and the learners, if necessary.

The ideal condition is to be able to make a rehearsal or check with the equipment. The fonts and colours should also be considered, if they are destructive or unreadable. The instructor might choose to use simple, bold and bigger fonts with pastel colours. Lastly the instructor should decide on what to wear, usually not very pale or bright colours which might destruct the vision. The learners should be asked for evaluation of the lessons, this could help the instructor plan the lesson better in the future. The facilitator should also discuss about the activities and the lectures. Videotaping the classes and reviewing them later could also help in seeing the weaknesses and help in planning better lessons for the learners. Chances for improving the quality of the lessons should be sought constantly and continuously.

The instructor should try to individualize the lessons according to his learners needs by constructing on their existing knowledge. The instructor should design relevant activities and materials for the learners' needs, interests and contexts. Lessons should be interactive and the interaction among learners should be encouraged as well. The autonomy of the learners is to be facilitated by the activities. The instructor should also adopt a flexible and constructive approach which allows the lesson and the activities to modify even during the lesson, if necessary. (Andrews & Klease, 1999)



All in all, VC is a promising application for foreign language teaching and learning. CV gives opportunity especially for the small colleges where the appeal for foreign languages is fairly small to come together and share instructors, technology and resources. VC transforms the immediate reality as it brings distant interlocutors on the same grounds. VC also allows for various media to be shared and used for the language classes, as well as it facilitates the different learning styles. VC could ease some financial and social aspects of teaching and learning in the long run.

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