

Creating virtual classrooms (using Google Hangouts) for improving language competency

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Introduction

The ubiquity of the Internet and digital technology has changed the way we access information, interact and learn. In the UK, ICT has been given the status of a 'skill for life' along with Literacy, Language and Numeracy. This has placed an onus on the teachers who must ensure that ICT is 'embedded' in the subjects they teach. Colleges have invested vast amounts of money into Virtual Learning Environments which have become depositories for learning materials developed by teachers. More recently, online conferencing tools have captured the imagination of EFL teachers. Tools such as Skype or Google Hangouts allow them to interact virtually with learners in real time.

At the same time, there has been relatively little research into e-learning in ESOL contexts. Some studies suggest that a virtual learning environment can be conducive to language learning as online learning appears to reduce student self-awareness and social anxiety which, in turn, results in increased language production (e.g. Bradley & Lomicka, 2000; Wallace, 1999; Carnevale, 2003; Roed, 2003 quoted in Ilas & Kelly 2011¹). It has to be pointed out that these studies looked predominantly at asynchronous types of e-learning. Other studies (e.g. Curtis, A. and Roskams, T (2000) in Hewett B.L. and Lynn, R. (2007)²) suggest that 'students [attending online writing classes] expressed varying levels of satisfaction, disappointment, and "demotivation" from the peer feedback they received and the sometimes overwhelming amount of information they received in the synchronous modality' (2007: 2).

¹ Ilas, M. & Kelly, O. (2011) *Let's talk - providing virtual ESL learning support from a distance*. retrieved August 2014 from <http://www.ascilite.org/conferences/hobart11/downloads/papers/Ilyas-concise.pdf>

² Hewett B.L. and Lynn, R. (2007) *Training ESOL Instructors and Tutors for Online Conferencing. The Writing Instructor*, Retrieved August 2014 from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ824633.pdf>

Research objectives

In this study I work with three groups of third country national women to investigate the efficacy of synchronous online teaching and propose a model which includes a blend of synchronous and asynchronous e-learning that can be effectively applied in online language teaching. The study also looks at adult learners' attitudes towards online learning and demonstrates that with careful planning this mode of delivery can be very motivating.

As such, the study sought to answer three questions:

- 1. To what extent can online video conferencing tools (e.g. Google Hangouts) be successfully applied in adult ESOL learning contexts (as measured by participants' performance on the vocabulary pre/post-test and the ease with which such tools can be used by teachers and students)?*
- 2. What is the most effective model of delivery, ONLINE+ or ONLINE (see descriptions below), in terms of vocabulary acquisition?*
- 3. How will adult ESOL learners respond to this medium of delivery?*

In order to answer the research questions, 3 experimental conditions were established:

- 1 - ONLINE+ - online conversations + 'learn ahead' (learners read/listen to the text prior to the session; they are also given vocabulary sets and conversation questions in advance; learners are expected to learn and memorise the lexis prior to the lesson)*
- 2 - ONLINE - online conversations only (learners get conversation questions and read/listen to the text prior to the session but vocabulary is not provided)*
- 3 - CONTROL (learners attend their course twice a week with no additional sessions added) (NB. Both ONLINE+ and ONLINE interventions were offered in addition to students' regular classes)*

Research methodology

A total of 12 sessions were delivered (6 sessions per group). All sessions were based on The BBC Words in the News website³. 6 topics from the list on this website were selected for the course. Typically, the sessions took place once a week and were approximately one hour in duration. The sessions were scheduled and students in both groups received the questions and the text a few days prior to the online session.

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/language/wordsinthenews/>

All students were asked to familiarize themselves with the text, questions and key vocabulary prior to the session (asynchronous learning). However, students in the ONLINE+ condition were given worksheets with questions and 10 key lexical items, while students in the ONLINE condition received worksheets with questions only. Learners in both groups were encouraged to read the original article on which the learning materials were based. This would allow them to form their opinions about the topic and to have the language necessary to engage in a meaningful discussion.

The reason to give students vocabulary sets or to ask them to look up unfamiliar lexis before the session was based on the premise that we can hold only three or four new items in working memory at any one time. This places a huge limit on our ability to solve problems (Christodoulou 2013). Allocating information such as new vocabulary to long term memory by memorising it prior to the session, frees up the working memory and enables students to participate in the conversation unconstrained by a lack of vocabulary⁴. It would also reinforce the target lexis and aid their fluency.

Findings

The results of this study suggest that Online Video Conferencing tools such as Google Hangouts can be applied successfully in adult ESOL contexts and the results are indicative of the applicability of this medium of delivery in ESOL contexts.

The data show that both experimental groups showed a better knowledge of the target lexis compared to the control group. Students in the ONLINE condition appear to have made greater progress than students in the ONLINE+ condition. However, it was students in the ONLINE+ condition that achieved the greatest average scores on the post-test.

13 (out of 15) participants completed the Online Learning Questionnaire. Learners' responses to the questions indicate that the online course had a positive impact on their learning and their language skills. For example, all respondents found the course useful and felt that it helped them to learn new vocabulary and improve speaking skills:

"[The course] was useful because I did practise my speaking and listening, learned new vocabulary and got different opinion of the topic we spoke about."

⁴ Christodoulou, Daisy (2013-06-16). *Seven Myths about Education*. The Curriculum Centre. Kindle Edition.

Moreover, all respondents felt that their English had improved as a result of completing this course and that they spoke more English following the course:

“[My English improved] because i [had] about one hour speaking & listening , and before the lesson i read all topic, I mean I can use all of speaking, listening, writing and reading skills by it, we learn a lot of new vocabulary.”

Conclusion and recommendations for further research

This study was carried out in a very specific context, i.e. adult community learning and with a specific group of learners, i.e. third country national women. It should therefore be repeated in other contexts before any generalisation of its findings is attempted. However, the results are certainly promising and demonstrate that with careful planning internet video conferencing tools such as Hangouts can be used effectively in an ESOL class and to the benefit of the students.

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