Using skype to improve students' speaking skill

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Abstract: *Skype have enabled students to engage in authentic, student-centered, communicative activities such as audio and video chat. Skype constitutes a useful Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) tool as a means for exchange of language knowledge and information. The article mentions the using SKYPE to improve student's speaking skill.*

Keywords: *Technology, language knowledge, communicative activities, foreign teacher, practice speaking English, linguistic and social situations, student.*

1. Introduction

Teaching speaking tends to be a demanding task for many foreign teachers due to the fact that "organizing lessons to practice speaking English can be a big challenge for both teachers and students" (Baker & Westrup, 2003, p.1). Taking into consideration, teachers should provide as many opportunities as possible for their students to enhance their speaking skill in the target language so that they can communicate with people of other countries, ethnic groups, race and so on in certain linguistic and social situations. The acquisition of speaking involves the mastery of different language subsystems to the point that they can be employed automatically in spontaneous communication; hence, the ability to speak in a foreign language, according to Pawlak, Waniek-Klimczak, and Majer (2011), is a difficult and arduous task. Recently, with the spread of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), more and more teachers have opted for incorporating such emerging technologies into their everyday teaching practices. In addition, open-type computer assisted language learning (CALL) classrooms which refers to a classroom with network-based language teaching (NBLT), high-speed Internet access, and free Internet telephone software such as

2. Research content

2.1. Rationale

In Vietnam, the teaching method is now innovated towards the trend of communicative language teaching (CLT) in a number of academic institutions. However, there is modest amount of interaction in a language lesson and the interaction only takes place in live classroom. Teachers should bear in mind that language teachers' and students' communication is not limited exclusively to live classroom interaction. In this case, NBLT, which "offers a learning environment in which students can interact and exchange information

with various unknown people in the real world full of authentic English (Kern, & Warschauer, 2000; Nishihori, 2005) seems ideal for the practice of CLT and Skype is considered as an effective ICT tool for students to practice their speaking skill with numerous people from all corners of the world.

Vietnamese students are not currently fulfilling their potential in English oral communication. There exist some contributing factors such as the monolingual environment, significant syntactic and phonetic differences, Vietnamese traits of shyness, fear of losing face.

An overview of Skype

Skype is a communication tool that allows users to make audio and video calls over the Internet. These calls are free to other Skype users. Skype also offers a computer-to-land-line service which is a fee-based service for both local and international calls.

A Skype account is required in order to make and receive calls. It is similar to creating an email in order to send e-mails. Users choose a user name by providing an email account or other technologies. When the account is activated, user can log in to use Skype. Users need to have a microphone and audio capabilities available on their computer. If not, users must buy a Skype headset with earphones and a microphone.

Skype works computer to computer, not necessarily person-to-person; therefore, Skype may be used to teach groups of people.

Advanced features

Sky has some advanced features that make it useful for educational purposes as following:

Instant messaging or chat

Chat function of Skype servers various purposes. Users may chat while in a real-time audio or video call and they may signal that they are unable to see or hear well in case the connection breaks up. Moreover,

if another call comes in while a user is in real-time call, he/she may send the other partner a quick instant message to inform them that you cannot answer them at that time.

Conference calls

Skype enables users to make conference calls with up to six users on the line at one time. In this case, the conference call features audio only and video calls can only made with two parties on the line.

File sharing

Users can send files to others or receive files shared by others except real-time audio and video call. Users can send someone an attachment that they may normally send as an email attachment. Using this feature, teachers can share activities or resources with students during a lesson.

Merits of Skype

Skype is free software and shows text chat, voice chat and video chat synchronously and it is simple to use. In addition, students can enjoy authentic communicative activities without being concerned about other students' scrutiny and evaluation since all students engage in the task concurrently. This means "their affective filters (Krashen, 1985) become lower.

Anticipated demerits of Skype

One drawback to classroom use of Skype is that the sound quality through Skype is poorer in a school environment than that on a PC used at home. In addition, lower volume, noise and other students' talking voices hindered the smooth conversation. Furthermore, sound and video image problems happened regularly even if there was no defect on PC devices. In the situation in which technical problems occurred, both the teacher and students were discouraged from using English to fix the problems immediately (Debski, 2000).

2.2. Literature review

Educators have been applying Skype in their classroom for a number of years now .The teachers who used Skype in the classroom as pioneers immediately noted the potential for international connection between classrooms and students. This application fit language educators' interest in creating cross-culture exchanges with students using Skype.

Online course students are requested to take part in an international voice chat room by Noguchi (2004) and one of the most important findings is the gradual decrease in student's motivation. The reason for this is Japanese students' oral communication ability is significantly lower than not only native speakers but also L2 learners in other countries.

2.3. Research questions

Based on the research gaps discussed above, this research aims to explore the effectiveness of using Skype among university students within Vietnamese educational setting. The empirical findings of the study aim at figuring out the answers for these three questions:

How does Skype improve students' speaking skill?

What are the factors motivating students to engage in a Skype-based lesson?

What are the pedagogical implications for teachers?

Pilot study

Voice chat using Linux version of Skype between forty non-majors intermediate freshmen university students at Hanoi National university of Education and native speakers from English speaking countries will be conducted to investigate the effects on students' motivations and oral communication skills before the research. The empirical findings of the pilot study will guide the researcher in terms of what data to collect, how to collect, and what instruments will be employed for data collecting.

Methodology

Action Research is more of a holistic approach to problem-solving, rather than a single method for collecting and analyzing data. Thus, it allows for several different research tools to be used as the project is conducted. These various methods are generally common to the qualitative research paradigm. In this study, the author will collect data by employing pre-test and post-test, participant observation recordings, reflective journals, questionnaire and interviews.

Context and Participants

The research will take place at Hanoi National University of Education. The action research focal group consisted of 20 EFL adult A1 learners aged 18. Four of the participants are males and the rest are females. The learners' educational backgrounds also varied as they come from different socio-economic groups and academic backgrounds. The study population consists of students from different faculties of the university. All of the students involved in this research are those who will have to create Skype accounts and activate them. The students will be randomly selected so that the empirical results of the research can be used to make generalization of the population.

The researcher will look for 2 native teachers at "Langmaster", a language center in Hanoi, and invite them to take part in the research. The 2 teachers will

interact with the students via Skype within the period of 2 semesters.

Data collection

Students will engage in 30-minute Skype video chat sessions with the native speakers around 10 times per semester.

To collect data, interviews, a pre-test and a post-test, a questionnaire which consists of 5 Likert scales, 15 multiple choice questions and 4 open comments were employed. Students are also asked to write reflective journals about the activity at the end of each session in English or Vietnamese.

To observe and analyze the class activities, DVD recordings will be used. In addition, Skype consists of free software named PAMELA, which was installed to obtain discourse data. Students will save the MP3 files in their USB or their laptops to transcribe conversations in class and as homework. Consequently, they will be able to recognize their mistakes in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary themselves without teachers' explicit corrective feedback and listen to the discourse repeatedly. For students who are at weaker elementary level, the first priority should be speaking freely not accurately; thus, the researcher will request the teachers not to correct students' error excessively.

Procedure

In the very first session, students are instructed how to create a Skype account and how to use Pamela in English. The students first create their own Skype accounts then they add their classmates on their Skype lists and practice chatting with other students in the class via Skype. They are also encouraged to use Skype to communicate with different people all around the world. After each class, the students have to write reflective journals in English or Vietnamese about what they have gained in the class and summit them to the researcher.

In the second session, the students will be asked to practice a model conversation created by the researcher using text to speech (TTS) model reading by taking part in role-play activity.

In the third session, Skype video chats will be conducted and after the class, there will be a discussion of the activity.

Thereafter, the next topic will be set and the same task cycle will be repeated.

Ethical issues to anticipate

Researchers need to anticipate the ethical issues that may arise during their studies. First the author should pay attention to personal privacy and confidentiality. In a survey conducted with questionnaire, the researcher will disassociate names from responses during the coding and recording process. A consent form created by the author will be given to the participant to make sure that they are willing to participate in the study and their personal information will be confidentially kept by the researcher. Second, the researcher has to respect the research site, which involves gaining the agreement of individuals in authority to provide access to study participants. Last but not least, the author has to ensure the participants that they are secured in the research since the research conducted based on application of Skype which mainly involve audio and video chat with other people. In other word, the author has to make sure that Skype will do no harm to the participants because participants may be annoyed by other people who use Skype.

3. Conclusion

The gaps of the previous studies and the teaching context of Vietnam, any English language teacher, instructor or learner who decides to implement Skype audio or video chats with the aim of promoting speaking skills towards English language learning should take into account these recommendations: Teacher should motivate students to practice their speaking ability via Skype by designing a wide range of activities for them to participate in and a various topics to discuss with the intervention of Skype. When students feel interested in interacting with their mates via Skype, their motivation in language leaning will be gradually promoted. Regular practice online will help students build up their confidence to communicate with other people and to speak in public.

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