The Important Techniques of Optimizing Interpersonal Competence in ESP Classes

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Abstract: In this article the author analyses the creation of ways and techniques for the teaching of interpersonal communication skills to ESP students. The profession of the ESP student combines the challenges of interpersonal communication with the need to efficiently determine information needs of a diverse client base. The combination of skills required means that teaching these skills remains a significant challenge in training ESP class as in many other professions. The task is particularly complicated by the need for both ways and techniques to be communicated clearly and unambiguously if students are to learn effectively.

Key words: ESP class, digital video, interpersonal communication, skills, approach, curriculum.

Training students in these skills is an important part of the curriculum of the Ministry of higher and secondary-specialized education in the universities of Uzbekistan. Experience with teaching these skills has revealed that many students find professional communication challenging and teaching the skills in the universities is further complicated by the need to support a large proportion of students who are taught at a distance. The experience of teachers, suggests that video tape can provide a means of effectively delivering this material, and such tapes have been used historically in the VUW MLIS programme (WCE, 1989). A significant advantage of video clips is that they can be crafted to show very specific good or bad behaviors that might be difficult to observe in reality or which need to be studied repeatedly. This is particularly relevant when the material of interest relates to human communication skills. Early use of video material for teaching interpersonal skills found that the video material had significant advantages over traditional classroom approaches (Shulman, 1986; Cronin & Cronin, 1992; Campbell et al, 1995)[11, 1986, p 110; 4, 1992, p 53-85; 3, 1995, p 223-239].

Despite the usefulness of these tapes, the need to regularly update them with more modern material reflecting the use of new tools such as electronic databases, and the opportunities for interactivity and control offered by digital video technologies such as Apple’s Quick Time software has encouraged the adoption of an even more flexible approach.

➢ It can be delivered over the WWW, removing the need to distribute tapes in advance
➢ It can be quickly and easily edited on desktop computers by both academic staff and students to remove unnecessary material
➢ Material can be broken down into many small clips that can be accessed directly rather than requiring a laborious fast-forward/rewind search
➢ It can be readily combined with other media, such as text or still images, to provide context or additional activities
➢ It can be made interactive.

From a student perspective, digital video also supports a more social and constructivist approach to exploring the material as rather than being presented with a linear narrative and presentation
of material, they can explore aspects that directly interest them. The video provided acts as a reference point both for the teacher explaining concepts which are hard to express as words, and for the students in their own discussions by reducing ambiguity when acting as a conversational artifact (Pea, 1993). When the students then use the understanding derived from the video material supplied to express the concepts learnt in their own video productions, they engage in an authentically constructivist experience (Kearney & Treagust, 2001; Squires, 1999)[9, 1993, p 265-277; 5, 2001, p 64-79; 12, 1999, p 48-54]. In this paper we present the design and evolution of a web and CD-ROM based digital video resource for the teaching of interpersonal communication skills to students, both locally and at a distance. The challenge was to provide a resource that could be used within the classroom both by students and the teacher and also at a distance in order to recreate aspects of the classroom experience for those students. Additionally, the intention was that the resource would be extended and developed over a number of years and thus it had to be easily maintained and expanded as required. Aspects of the development of this resource that relate to the interactivity and web delivery have been presented elsewhere (Marshall & Cullen, 2003)[8, 2003, p 80]

Although the resource has evolved in complexity and in quality since its original conception, the learning and teaching goals have remained relatively static as they included right from inception the idea that the resource should grow as technical limitations were overcome and as money became available to pay for the creation of additional video material. The resource was required to meet four main objectives for the students:

- demonstrate particular aspects of interpersonal communication clearly and effectively through good and bad examples
- provide detailed examples of interactions which could be analyzed
- provide an opportunity for students to experiment and reflect on effective communication
- support the creation of videos by students by illustrating what a short video clip demonstrating communication looks like.

It is important to appreciate that the assessment of the student learning was done separately to this resource and depended on the students preparing a short video similar to those on the CD that displays their understanding of the material and an appreciation of the skills that they need to demonstrate as professionals[4, 1992, p 86]. The interactive section extends the ideas of the case section by giving the students the opportunity to control the flow of the conversation, choosing between different responses. The system provides a short introduction which sets the scene and then students choose which response to make. Responses include different tones of voice and manner of delivery as well as different choices of words. The student gets to preview the different response choices and once they decide, the conversation continues until the next decision point. Upon completing the conversation, the student is presented with a detailed report of the choices that they made along with specific feedback about the responses and the way in which the conversation was conducted. Students can then review the choices they made and watch the individual segments of video again and they can also look at a model answer for the particular conversation [7, 2002, p 70].

Conclusion This program has benefited from the use of the resource presented in this paper. The ability to teach effective interpersonal skills in a manner that allows for reflection and detailed examination by students has been a key benefit of the resource. A key to the success of the project has been the use of digital video that has given the resource the flexibility to be useful both to students and academic staff and has allowed for an incremental growth in the range of video material provided and in the teaching use made of the material. The resource has supported student’s adoption of a constructivist method of learning in the following ways:

- the provision of a range of video material designed to concepts and support exploration rather than the linear narrative adopted with traditional analogue video;
the creation of conversational art if acts to support discussion and debate between students as well as delivery by the teacher. The response from both the student and the staff teaching the program has been positive and the project has definitely achieved the original objectives. Looking to the future, the flexibility of design adopted provides us with confidence that the ongoing evolution and growth of the materials will continue irrespective of the pedagogies adopted in the delivery of the program.

References


