

Virtual Conversations through Skype - One Practical Model at School of Foreign Languages - Thai Nguyen University

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Abstract

The article suggests one model of using Skype software in order to develop intercultural communicative competence for students in the context of teaching in Vietnam, especially at institutions of higher education. This article also presents the practical model of Viet-Skype at the School of Foreign Languages - Thai Nguyen University and initial evaluation of its effectiveness on students' intercultural communicative competence development.

Keywords: Skype, model, communication, conversation, ICC

I. INTRODUCTION

There are some problems in learning English as a foreign language in Vietnam such as language and cultural barriers. Like language barriers, cultural barriers also contribute heavily to Vietnamese students' struggles in communicating with foreigners. These challenges may impede their opportunities to improve their spoken English and their understanding of English speaking countries' culture. Furthermore, they may create barriers to promoting cultural awareness of their own cultures among foreigners. The reason for this problem is that students may not have real opportunities to practice the language. Besides, it is pointed out that "teachers in different classrooms in different parts of the world still ignore the importance of teaching culture as a part of language study" [5]

With the development of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), some approaches can deal with the obstacles caused by the lack of an authentic English learning environment. One of them is using Skype, a telecommunication application software for online communication. Among all voice-based SCMC software, Skype seems to provide a better quality of sound over high-speed Internet or wireless connections [7]. According to Chang [2], Skype seems to be considered as the best-designed software because of its features and accessibility. Because of its advantages, Skype has been used in classes at different levels and provided a variety of possibilities for language learning. In general, by providing an easy, inexpensive way to communicate with people around the world, Skype is a good choice that can improve students' engagement and comprehension.

Considering the context at the School of Foreign Languages (SFL) - Thai Nguyen University (TNU), the English majors had almost restricted opportunities to have access to English inside and outside the classroom. As a result, the students cope with not only language barrier but also cultural barrier as stated above. According to Tran & Seepho [9], the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) to EFL learners is vital in English language training programs in order to help English learners to become intercultural speakers who can function effectively and appropriately in the 21st century. Therefore, this article will suggest a model of using virtual conversations through Skype software, namely, Viet-Skype, in order to develop intercultural communicative competence for students in the context of teaching at SFL and at institutions of higher education in Vietnam. This article also presents the implementation process of this model at SFL, TNU, and the initial evaluation of its effectiveness on students' ICC development.

II. MODEL OF VIET-SKYPE PROJECT

A. Objectives

The model aims at promoting cultural understanding among volunteers from English-speaking countries and students at TNU.

B. Procedure

1. Before the Project

- Recruiting the participants: volunteers who enroll in the project should be from English speaking countries. They have to provide the organizer with a photo as well as a CV to participate in the program. Besides, they should be interviewed via Skype and show a great commitment to helping students improve their oral proficiency after the project.

Students of English at SFL or any schools at TNU can participate in the project. They have to satisfy the following entry requirements. First, students should have real desire to improve their English level and be responsible for the time and the volunteers they have registered. Second, all changes must be notified via telephone or email to the organizers, which is necessary because many small changes will bring big changes to the program. Third, during the conversation time, students are required to speak in English to volunteers. Lastly, they should not include political, ethnic or religious issues or other

sensitive issues in their conversations. However, student recruitment should be based on the number of recruited volunteers.

- Making conversation schedules with foreign volunteers.

- Designing the syllabus of the course: First, the time of the project may be flexible. It depends on the school, staff and students. It is suggested that the course should last 3 months or 12 weeks because this period of time is enough for students to improve and not too long. The volunteers and students may spend from 45 minutes to an hour every week to talk about one topic. Second, the topics for weekly conversations can be designed based on the ones in the syllabus or students' interest and concerns. Finally, the various tasks/activities for Skype conversations should be designed following the ones in the textbook that students are studying in class or from real-life situations.

- Preparing the pre-questionnaire to assess students' ICC. The Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC) [4] should be chosen and adapted to serve the context as it offers clear definitions of cultural aspects such as Knowledge, Skill, Attitude and Awareness, and is empirically tested and documented in well-known projects [1].

- Holding an opening session: The organizer invites the recruited students to have a meeting so that she/he can introduce the project objectives, ask students to register for the conversation schedule with volunteers and share their expectations about the international experience. Then, tutorials are carried out to train participants how to manage Skype software during the project. Finally, the pre-questionnaire is administered to students. After this session, students are informed by e-mail about all relevant issues concerned with the project: weekly tasks, interaction sessions, and schedules.

2. During the Project

- Official sessions: Students are required to complete the tasks provided by the organizer through emails every week. They make conversations via Skype with their assigned volunteers, record them, and write a journal after each conversation and then upload them on the links given by the teacher.

3. After the Project

- The organizer administers the Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC) [4] to students again to measure the improvement of students' intercultural communicative competence. Then she/he collects all the students' recorded videos and journals for analysis and evaluations.

III. MODEL IMPLEMENTATION AT SFL

A. Objectives

The objective of the project was to promote cultural understanding among volunteers from English-speaking countries and English major students at SFL-TNU.

B. Procedure

1. Before the Project

- Recruiting the participants: the organizers asked Mr. Roger Gillespie, a Canadian retiree, to recruit foreign volunteers through a recruitment website of the project online. 20 volunteers from Canada, USA, Australia, Philippines, Venezuela, United Kingdom, India, etc. were chosen. Most of these volunteers worked in the educational sector and were mostly retired.

Based on the number of the volunteers, the organizers recruited the students on Facebook. As a result, 20 students were selected as the participants because of their commitment to the requirements of the project.

After the recruitment stage, the organizer arranged the conversation schedules with the volunteers.

- Designing the syllabus: the course was planned to take place in 12 weeks, and 12 topics in the course book, *Life Pre-intermediate* [6] were selected for students' weekly conversations because this textbook was being used for students to study the subject "Oral proficiency". The various tasks/activities for each topic: *Answer the questions, Visual-based conversation, Make a conversation for one of the following situations and Free-talks* were designed based on such components as *Goals, Input, Conditions, Procedure, and Predicted outcomes* [3]. The students were required to converse through Skype with their assigned volunteers on a topic in 45 minutes every week.

- Preparing the pre-questionnaire to assess students' ICC. The Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC) [4] with 53 items under four dimensions: Knowledge, Skill, Attitude and Awareness were adapted to serve the context.

- Holding an opening session: the organizer followed strictly the activities like the model presented above.

2. During the Project

Official sessions started a week later, and lasted for 3 months. The project was divided into two phases. In Phase 1 (from week 1 to week 8), the topics were *food, language and learning, health, film and art, sports, transport, environment, and festival*. For each week, the students and volunteers were provided with a topic consisting of four tasks through emails in advance so that they could practice before the Skype conversation.

In Phase 2 (from week 9 to week 12), the course concentrated on the following topics: *work, travel and holiday, people and free time, and technology*. The students were given the topics in advance so that they could practice before the real online calls.

The reason for dividing the course into two different phases was that the researchers wanted their students to move from controlled practice to the level

of learning awareness and self-management skills. Specifically, Phase 1 prescribed a particular structure the participants had to follow strictly. In Phase 2, the students “had a great deal of freedom to decide what to talk about, in what depth, when to talk about it, what other tasks or activities they might wish to engage in, what kind of language feedback or error correction they wish to give and receive” [8]. For example, in Phase 1, both students and volunteers were asked to find two visuals that will represent the theme of the topic (e.g., Google images, their own pictures): one for Vietnam and the other for the volunteer’s country. They were also asked to prepare five discussion questions for each visual image. They had to produce a list of at least 5 differences and 5 similarities between 2 cultures in terms of the topic in the pictures or photos. In contrast, in Phase 2, the volunteers and students should prepare their own questions relating to the topic provided every week to make a conversation. As a result, the students could develop their autonomy in the language learning process.

The students were asked to gather their video recordings of conversations and journals to the organizers weekly so that they could keep evidence of these oral interactions.

3. After the Project

The Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC) [4] was sent to the students to assess their intercultural competence after the project. All the students’ recorded videos and journals were collected for later analysis and evaluations.

C. Initial Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Project

Due to the scope of the paper, we do not explicitly present quantitative assessments, but rather briefly present the results of the experiment at SFL to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Viet-Skype project on the students’ intercultural communicative competence.

The results revealed that the learners had higher gains in overall ICC (knowledge, skills, attitude, and awareness) after their chats with English-speaking volunteers through Skype in the 12-week course. However, there was no significant difference in their overall ICC. The maximum progress was made in knowledge while the least was achieved in awareness.

For some items of knowledge, significant growth was demonstrated. This growth was related to the knowledge of the host country and Vietnam's day-to-day norms and taboos, historical and socio-political situations, signs of culture stress and some strategies for overcoming it, model of cross-cultural adjustment stages, and knowledge of cross-cultural learning and adjustment strategies. The findings gain more insights into the acquired knowledge because of the virtual conversations. First, the Vietnamese students got knowledge of what they had not talked

about before. Second, though the students and volunteers did not individually know each other long enough to construct the deep knowledge of the other culture, they really developed at least knowledge that one cannot obtain due to geographical distances.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the objective of this paper was to suggest the model of virtual conversations through Skype and present the implementation of the model at SFL to give initial evaluation of its effectiveness. The results demonstrated ICC growth over the course, with the greatest gain being in Knowledge and the minimum being in Awareness. Also, the results indicated that there was significant difference in many individual items of intercultural knowledge although all the ICC dimensions differed insignificantly. Overall, this findings demonstrates that the model can be applied at Thai Nguyen university and other higher institutions to enhance students’ overall ICC. The findings will draw attention to the importance of authentic language and culture learning brought by educational technologies, such as Skype. If students have a chance to communicate with English speaking volunteers, they may gain a better understanding of cultures in English speaking countries. Therefore, it is recommended that such a project as Viet-Skype should be incorporated in English language proficiency curriculum.

In view of the findings of the study, several suggestions are recommended for future research. First, the model should be applied with bigger samples to explore its effect on students’ ICC. Second, the researchers gave the initial evaluation of the effectiveness of the model; therefore, future studies can focus on examining thoroughly this impact by incorporating multiple instruments such as interviews, observations to triangulate the data in order to prove the effectiveness of the model.

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