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The 4th International Conference on
Distance Learning and Innovative
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8-9 December 2022
ANKARA / TURKEY

4. Uluslararası Uzaktan Öğrenme ve
Yenilikçi Eğitim Teknolojileri
Konferansı
8-9 Aralık 2022
ANKARA / TÜRKİYE

PROCEEDINGS BOOK *BİLDİRİ KİTABI*



Başkent University Distance Education
Application & Research Center



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Başkent Üniversitesi
Uzaktan Eğitim Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi
Bağlıca Kampüsü, Fatih Sultan Mahallesi
Eskişehir Yolu 18. Km TR06790
Etimesgut Ankara – Türkiye

Yayın Türü : Bildiri Kitabı
Yayın Kurulu : Prof. Dr. Şeref Mirasyedioğlu
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Editör : Doç. Dr. Serpil Yalçınalp
ISBN : 978-605-68615-9-8

*DILET2022 konferansı TÜBİTAK 2223-B programı kapsamında desteklenmiştir.
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ONLINE ENGLISH SPEAKING CLUBS AS A WAY OF PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT COLLABORATION

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Abstract

Computer-mediated communication despite its traps and pitfalls can become a valuable asset for both foreign language teachers and learners. Nowadays, while using Skype, WhatsApp or Zoom different educational institutions can arrange online sessions of English Speaking Clubs, Round Table discussions to stimulate students to get out of their cocoons and promote international partnerships through technology. Such online meetings of American and Ukrainian students have taken place during the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, the process of empowering students with new social skills in digital environment should be critically reflected.

The possible ways to facilitate student international collaboration transcending distance and overcoming psychological barriers are described. The chain of activities, including creative tasks and resources that can help educators to equip students with effective social skills, promoting cross-cultural communication are introduced in the article.

Keywords: foreign language education, distance learning, college and university students, cross-cultural activities, social skills development.

Problem Statement

As a result of Coronavirus quarantine measures in most countries of the world the educators have switched from face-to-face classes to online teaching. No matter whether such format has been either familiar or completely new to educators, it revealed its challenges and necessity of exploring new ways of planning and delivering lectures and seminars. Instructors use various online platforms for deeper student engagement with the course content. They also assemble reading and video materials according to the infrastructure of e-learning environment, modifying grading policies. All this required to take into account emerged problems with student attendance of virtual sessions, as well as other obstacles that go with online teaching.

Before designing the elements of online courses it is recommended for instructors to define so called student profile that comprises information about the average age of students in a group, their academic majors, specific course they are enrolled into, their access to and proficiency with technology. In terms of foreign language (FL) courses it should be taken into account what FL proficiency level students already have and what specific purpose for learning FL they outline.

Methodology of Research

At the beginning of a FL course (in our case it was English as a foreign language) the students of Ukrainian engineering universities were asked to complete a survey that would show to find out their attitude regarding FL studying in general and their expectations for this course which is included as a required one in their curriculum. The average age of participants was approximately 20 years old. There were representatives of such majors as Accounting, Economics, Mechanical Engineering, Metallurgy, Computer Systems, Power Industry and Automation. Nearly half of the students had pre-intermediate English proficiency level, one quarter had intermediate level, and the other quarter had just basic EFL skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening. In Ukraine the enrolment of students in EFL course is not based on their proficiency level, but their specialization. Thus, students' FL proficiency level can vary greatly within one group that usually comprises from 8 to 18 students.

The aim of the article is to introduce activities in terms of foreign language classes which can help improve students' social skills and promote intercultural communication. To make the best selections of such tasks we have analyzed the answers of students who completed "pre-course" surveys in 2015 (students who had only face-to-face classes before the COVID-19 pandemic), and those who had to switch to fully online learning format in recent years.

Results of Research

There were 151 students who completed the survey in 2015-2016 academic year, but in September 2022 only 32 participants joined this research study. This should be taken into account when interpreting the changes which took place in this seven year gap. As an example, two students out of 32 made approximately 6% while the same number of students was counted as 1% for 151 participants. Thus, the distribution of percentage could be different if more students participated in the recent survey.

Another difference that should be outlined is that in 2015-2016 the interviewed student groups included several foreign students who were from such countries as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Iran, People's Republic of China, Republic of the Congo, Tunisia, Turkmenistan. In 2022 the situation in Ukraine changed drastically, and only limited amount of Ukrainian students could submit their responses online.

The first question in the survey asked whether students were willing to improve their FL skills or not. The analysis of the replies in 2015 indicated that more than 90% of participants had desire to improve their FL skills (which was a nice indicator of their positive motivation). Nearly 9% of students were not sure whether they needed or not to focus on this course. The rest of the participants didn't support the idea of spending time on going through this course at the university level.

That proportion changed in 2022 in the following way. 88% of participants were willing and ready to improve their FL skills. 6% were not sure whether they should continue or not to invest their time and effort into this activity. The other 6% had no desire to study foreign languages at the university level.

As we have mentioned before, the slight changes that we see might be partially explained by the number of students who joined this research study. The proportion could be different if the number of participants was higher. Nevertheless, it could be noticed that overall the students understand the importance of this course and would like to develop and master FL skills.

Another question which had been included in the survey was to outline in what way the knowledge of foreign languages can become advantageous (for instance, to set new contacts throughout the world, to build a successful career, to get access to more information while studying various subjects, to feel secure while travelling). If more than one option had been indicated, the participants were asked to rank their choices.

The review of the answers from 2015 surveys showed that in most cases students elicited the category of “studying” which benefits more from the better knowledge of foreign languages. The youth indicated that knowing foreign languages was important to find more information, achieve better results and higher grades for the courses they took. “Career” option had been slightly less popular than the previous one, but was still outlined as an important category especially for older students. The priority of using foreign languages as a tool of communication or facilitation while travelling to other countries appeared to be the least significant in 2015. At that point of time the explanation could be that the participants of this survey were mainly Ukrainian students from various engineering faculties that did not come from high-income families who could afford travelling a lot.

An interesting shift happened in 2022 after two years of the forced distant learning education as a result of COVID lockdowns in 2020-2021 and Russia’s invasion in the beginning of 2022. “Travelling” as the least popular category in 2015 became the most popular option selected by students in 2022. The need to study FL to promote global communication became the second popular choice among Ukrainian students. Surprisingly, the importance of FL for the learning process was highlighted just by half of the participants and became the least popular category contrary to the results which we got in 2015.

Additionally, the students were asked to select specific FL courses in terms of the suggested curriculum. In some cases students indicated several types of EFL courses, so the answers of the same person could be counted more than once.

The analysis of the preferences the students made in 2015 are the following. In 64% cases the participants would choose an Intensive Foreign Language Speaking Course. 55% of students would also love to learn a Foreign Language for Specific Purposes (i.e., for Computer Science, Economics, Metallurgical and Materials Engineering, Electrical and Mechanical Engineering, and so on). Only 27% of respondents were interested in a Business Foreign Language Course, and nearly a quarter (24%) would prefer FL courses to get ready for FL international exam certification (the examples of which can be TOEFL, IELTS, BEC, CELTA, Delta, etc.). Nearly 14% have considered the option of starting learning one more foreign language. Mainly, students have outlined popular European languages, such as German, French, Spanish, but in several cases students have mentioned Arabic, Turkish, Chinese as well.

In 2022, up to 75% of students gave their preference to an Intensive Foreign Language Speaking Course. So, taking into account that lots of students were willing to travel and communicate with representatives from different countries it is not surprising that such a course remained the most popular choice among respondents.

Half of the participants also indicated that they would love to study Business English, which became nearly twice more popular than it was in 2015. In addition, 37.5% of students liked the idea of a Business Correspondence course which wasn't a popular choice at all in 2015.

44% of students were still interested in a Foreign Language for Specific Purposes which remained at the top three courses preferred by students.

Surprisingly, FL international exam certification wasn't a priority any more. Although such courses had been promoted a lot by various private schools before lockdowns, only 9% of respondents indicated they would need these certificates. It should be noted that real-life communication skills have become valued much more, compared to the responses provided in 2015-2016. The students were also oriented towards the improvement of one particular FL. Only two students felt like starting learning another foreign language. In one case it was German, in another it was Spanish.

To sum up, such kind of "pre-course" surveys and assessment of students' prior knowledge provided us with opportunities to build up the foundation and course structure that would be helpful in terms of online education. To help students improve FL skills and apply them in real-life communication a series of online English speaking clubs has been arranged between National University "Yuri Kondratyuk Poltava Polytechnic" (Poltava, Ukraine) and Santa Fe College (Gainesville, USA). Such online sessions provided participants with a wonderful chance to discover various facets of world cultures, build the bridges between Ukraine and other countries, which eventually helped overcome psychological barriers while speaking foreign languages.

Discussions

It has been noticed that various activities whether they are introduced in terms of face-to-face or online classes are usually much more productive if representatives from different countries and cultures are engaged in the discussions. Online sessions of English Speaking Clubs and Round Table discussions between American and Ukrainian students have taken place during the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Discovering new traditions while discussing different food, art, ways of greeting, celebration of holidays and so on have been just the first steps in a long-term journey. In this part of the article we will share the examples of activities that have become really helpful when equipping students with effective social skills and promoting cross-cultural communication.

For example, we have found out when the students and other participants of online Speaking Clubs are encouraged to tell more about the meaning of their first and/ or last names it helps create better connection between representatives of different countries and cultures. At the beginning of the course numerous fascinating facts can be discovered and discussed. As a rule, unusual names can be better memorized and some interesting extra information may be introduced regarding the person. In addition, attention may be paid to the traditions of changing or keeping by women their maiden names when they get married. More relevant topics to discuss can be chosen from resource books of speaking activities (Wallwork, 1997).

When inviting learners to a virtual journey around the world we also addressed more questions about national symbols and traditional things of various countries. Lots of countries use the combination of such colours as blue, white and red. Still, the symbolic meaning would be different if we are talking about the flags of France, Dominican Republic, etc. Interestingly enough, the same patterns (the cross design) can be noticed in Scandinavian flags. Certain similarities and differences can be found and

discussed. Moreover, students may be also asked to compare the flags of Sweden and Ukraine. Blue and yellow colours on Swedish flag symbolize water and gold, whereas on Ukrainian flag it depicts sky and fields of wheat.

It is not surprising that such encoding is reflected in the design of ethnic dresses as well. It should be noted that the combination of certain colours and patterns may vary in Eastern and Western, Northern and Southern parts of the country and could have changed over the centuries. Still, it is especially pleasant when participants from different parts of the world are motivated to wear national clothing for cultural and academic events even if they are online.

It should be noted that ethnic elements quite often appear on different banknotes or coins. We can find it amusing discovering the numerous details included by designers in the currency. The names of outstanding people, their quotations, important historical places can help us enrich our Pictures of the World, get better acquainted with different cultures, and discover new meanings. Teachers may suggest their students to design their own banknotes. As an element of Business English some extra issues can be brought up to discussion (like comparison of credit, insurance, tipping, tax policies set by the government).

EFL teachers also suggested noteworthy activities with proverbs, idioms and phrases collected and translated from different languages (Wintergerst, McVeigh, 2010). For instance, Americans may use the idiom “he makes a mountain out of a molehill” meaning that someone is exaggerating the severity of the situation. In Lebanon people would say “he makes a wine cellar from one raisin.” Another example is the translation of a Zaire proverb “By trying often, the monkey learns to jump from the tree” as “practice makes perfect” in English. Students may search for more interesting proverbs when studying a passive voice construction in English. Some of the clues are: “Lost time is never found again”; “A tree is known by its fruit”; “Beautiful flowers are soon picked”; “Rome wasn’t built in a day”, etc.

Each country’s unique DNA can be found in masterpieces of world literature, different works of art, great variety of music compositions, inventions. It is also important to discuss nonverbal signals that are a critical part of all our communicative endeavors. While short distance may be not acceptable in certain cultures, the representatives of other countries would prefer close physical contact. Misunderstanding in communication can also happen as a result of inappropriate human behavior through maintaining eye contact or avoiding it.

Not just the perception of space, but the perception of time may be crucially different for representatives of different cultures. How long do you wait if someone is late? Are you always on time? When would you go to the party if invitation says it starts at 5? Students may ask these questions and compare the answers. It is also interesting to see what the following phrases mean to them: “I’ll do it now / in a minute/ later.”

With specially designed educational complex programs students can come to recognize and understand this kind of “silent language” in order to function and employ the proper patterns in accordance with the sociocultural parameters of the specific situation.

Conclusion

To become responsible active citizens the students need to explore socio-cultural values through various discussions, filling their lives with new senses, deeper meanings and competences. It has been noticed that Online Speaking Clubs can contribute a lot into the development of students' Pictures of the World. Additional surveys with students' feedback will be analyzed at the end of the academic year. Still, a chance to compare different cultures generates the discovery and re-discovery of different facets of personality, develops student's own cultural identity, their sensitivity toward the needs and expectations of others.

The analysis of the "pre-course" survey completed by Ukrainian students in 2015 and 2022 indicates that online only format of education is not the best option for their social development. Real life communication becomes top priority when there is a lack of contact with the outside world. The issue which we should pay attention to is even in terms of distant learning we should find the opportunities to establish international collaboration and help students improve social skills.

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