

Interactive learning media for language, communication and culture study

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The cross-cultural interaction in a modern global society is proceeding with amazing speed thanks to advancement of telecommunication technologies. It means educational organizations are challenged to prepare students for new capabilities of such technologies as e-mail, WWW, forums, IRC, etc. and research how to develop its properly and efficiently in education. Here we present some successful methods were used for language and culture learning at Linguistic Institute of Rostov State Pedagogical University, and Philology Department of Institute of Management, Business and Law, Russia and English and Communication Departments of Western Kentucky University, USA, during 2000-2002 years. Our permanent projects provide students develop in social (collaboration) settings, the use of telecommunication technologies to connect gives them a more appropriate learning media for language and culture learning. We define this educational activity as correspondence projects or virtual classes, virtual learning communities. We present here some results from our Correspondence, Culture Value and Communication Projects.

Main idea of these methods is that students from different countries themselves can be language teachers and a source of culture knowledge. This idea is built on the best known of Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist theoretical concepts, the zone of proximal development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky the culture gives students the cognitive tools needed for development. Foreign students are conduits for the tools of the foreign culture, including language. The tools the culture provides students include social context, language and telecommunication technologies for interactive connect and information exchange. In turn contemporary telecommunication technologies bring additional methods, tools and criteria for successful learning media development. Thus we gradually see the evolution of learning media bases both upon theoretical and practical grounds.

The first thing that helps educator in this reunion is that student, as learner themselves become more active player in the way learning media. The second is the acceptance of previous and current learning practices from different subjects such as language, computing and telecomputing that rely upon emotional and social factors. Thirdly, many successful learning tools were initially not aimed at learning: word processors, spreadsheets, simulations programs, expert systems, e-mail, mailing list and all WWW-based communication tools. At our project virtual learning communities develop with the goal to activate these tools for new learning media.

It seems that effective learning is a many-faceted process that benefits from new tools. Generally, positive characteristics of these application tools for effective learning are follows:

- Stimulating relatively active intellectual involvement on the part of the learner.
- The student, rather than teacher, is in charge of learning activity - students determine when and how they use the computing and telecomputing to support their efforts to present information, collect data, solve problems, collaborate, and persuade others or foreign respondents.

- The learners have a great deal of control of the writing communication via e-mail. Students use word processor with grammar and spelling checkers, the thesaurus, vocabularies, various editing aids such as replacements, block moves, coping, citing, etc.
- The correspondence project methods are usually aimed at accomplishing more creative tasks than are traditional teaching language, computing and telecomputing methods.
- These learning media assimilate new genres, fashion in writing (handling, slang, emoticons, abbreviations, signatures, etc), new network etiquette (netiquette) in the way to express meanings.
- Collaboration upon learning media promote mutual tolerance and provides responsibility to make students from both countries conscious of their identity and their responsibility to help one another to learn culture and language as well.

The both teachers from virtual class role are to help learners with their communication and linguistic skills. Learners periodically send to their teacher and /or partner teacher a request or a copy of their email to see the communication problem or how they progress and help them if they wish. The pedagogic (cultural and educational) aim is:

- to encourage learners exchange cultural information,
- to comment / "correct" the language of each other as a form of mutual self-help among students (peer collaboration).

Before begin of Correspondence Project e-mail partners provide some guidelines from their virtual class teachers. For example, the guidelines adapted from the International E-mail Tandem Network. (Jane Woodin, 1997 Brammerts, Kleppin, Szymanski 1996-1998) <http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/email/help/helpeng01.html#questions>. The same approach was used at the Correspondence Project to create learning media between students from Rostov State Pedagogical University and Valenciennes University, France for Russian and French languages study.

Among methods to prepare ideas and materials for Correspondence Project is brainstorming. For example, we encourage students to brainstorm about their impressions and knowledge of the other country. Then we provide students the Internet survey about traditional impressions, or the list of perceptions, beforehand prepared at partner class or our Cultural Value survey and talk about some topics.

Thus in a class at Rostov State Pedagogical University, students were asked to brainstorm and express their perceptions of Americans and to freely express what they know about the U.S. Were some repetitions and some contradictions. We discussed students' own lists for recording and categorize impressions. If we have enough answers from partner class most interesting pen pals' responses share aloud in class, then discuss any one, and give cultural information as to why these differences might exist. We can divide their responses into positive and negative descriptions. At our current project we try to list all terms in the order of frequency it means a last version of database terms those listed first or second were provided by more than one student, perhaps even several students.

In Culture Value Project both the Russian and the American students fill out the surveys (hard, soft or Web-based form http://rspu.edu.ru/li/cultural_value/survey_e.html) and exchange finding results (personally forwarded to partner or collected as full database of all students responses). Culture Value survey database some values were rated the highest on the Russian responses and

certain common or different on the American responses. We came up with a few questions in class for them to ask their pen pals. Teacher help them with providing a little bit of information on the types of things that might be different when comparing the Russian and American culture. Students discuss results and ask questions based on their partner's most important values and full database results.

In the Communication Project the goal of assignments is to analyze the mediated (e-mail) communication (computer-mediated communication, CMC) with colleagues from a different culture — American and Russian. To do this, students analyze their e-mail conversations by applying interpersonal and CMC theories we've discussed in this class. Teachers pair up students for responsibility to maintain e-mail contact between students. Usually at least three -five interchanges occur between partners. If partner in other class does not respond, teachers try to assign their student a different partner. Students save copies of all e-mail correspondence (including the copies of messages they send out). Print out copies of these e-mails use for student final paper. For example, American students used any three or more of the communication theories (Norm of Reciprocity, Differences between Men and Women in Communication, Social presence Theory, Media Richness Theory, Hypersonal Interaction Theory). A final paper identifies the theory that they use to analyze the communication with their e-mail partner, give a brief overview of the theory. Students need to determine what communication behavior the theory seeks to explain or describe, use examples taken directly from collected e-mails to either confirm or disprove the specific tenets of each theory.

Usually students conduct the email exchange for one semester. Once each student had a partner, we encouraged them to exchange emails as often as possible. Many of them corresponded more than once a week. We met at a class officially once a week, and teachers mentioned the time and day of our meeting in a mass email to the both American and Russian students, so that they might try to send their replies before the beginning of our class period each week.

We conducted the class in both a formal and informal manner. So students mostly feel free to disclose and then revise their initial impressions and correspondence problems. As the students received responses, they would share them with the group. The responses were disclosed usually in the form of reading their partner's original text aloud. We are not sure if they ever revised their initial impressions, since they didn't share many of these original impressions on the lessons.