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The evaluation of a group Business English role-play delivered via a computer mediated environment (WOLF)

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Background and rationale

Between 90 and 110 Direct Entrant students arrive from overseas partner institutions each year and undertake the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Business Language Programme. The overall aim of the modules is to increase students' command of English and communicative skills in order in the short term to allow them to cope well with undergraduate Business Studies, and in the longer term to enhance their communicative capabilities in an international professional environment (Assiter 1995, Ramsden 1992).

In addition to the traditional communication skills of oral presentations, meetings, and report writing, today's graduates will need to develop a familiarity with virtual written interaction—e-mail computer conferencing and document exchange—(Gruba & Lynch 1997), which will involve a recombination of a variety of skills for this new medium, including an ability to develop an appropriate range of professional relationships using the spectrum of formality styles, balanced with an unambiguous and explicit method of signalling intentions and requirements (Chapelle 1998), and an understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of virtual interaction in terms of time management, all with interlocutors who are anonymous in the sense that little or no face-to-face contact has taken place. It was assumed that the sensitivity required to perform this type of interaction effectively could be fostered through a virtual, asynchronous, anonymous simulation task (Warschauer et al 1996), which recent research suggests could at the same time increase the motivation, time on task, and development of linguistic accuracy of students (Freeman & Capper 1999, Gibbs 1999, Harper & Hedberg 1997, Li 2000, Liaw 1998)

The innovation

In an attempt to achieve this, it was decided to utilise a basic role-play framework, relating to crisis management and corporate communications, but to deliver it via WOLF (Wolverhampton Online Learning Framework), thus enabling the students to gain experience of intranet communication relevant to their likely future workplace. This medium also allowed for more efficient mixing of students across seminar groups and nationalities (left to themselves, students prefer to select co-nationals as group work partners, for reasons of familiarity and compatibility of timetable, and are tempted to use their own first language rather than English) thus reflecting a type of interaction common in international business communication i.e. between foreign language speakers of English, who may not have met face to face.

The role-play involved four roles in a potentially adversarial stance, based on the Huntingdon Life Sciences animal testing case, of Enterprise, Investor, Department of Trade, and Animal Rights Campaign. Students working in groups of 2–3 represented one role and were asked to co-produce three documents; a strategic analysis of their objectives, and two public statements, the first reacting to an external event (an act of violence) and the second in response to the public statements of the other three roles. Students were invited to gather relevant information by researching the Huntingdon Life Sciences case in newspapers and via the internet, and required to interact using Group Folder and email functions of WOLF either confidentially (within their role), or publicly (when posting up public statements for other roles to access). The assignment would be graded according to the quality (of both language and content) of the three documents, with

insufficient individual participation, as evidenced by poor quantity and quality of contribution in the Group Folder, being penalised.

Evaluation

In order to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of the experience, as seen through the eyes of participants, a small focus group was interviewed to gain an understanding of what they regarded as the most salient points to arise from the experience, and all students were asked to provide, in report format, a written evaluation of the utility of the assignment under the headings of; Task (task management), Participation (group dynamics), Content (subject knowledge), Language, Medium (usability of WOLF). Aside from providing information to the tutors, this task was seen as having sound pedagogical motives, as it encouraged reflection and therefore, it is hoped, improved learning (Weil & McGill 1989). The next section reports student reactions.

Outcomes

To varying standards of linguistic and informational control, every role-group produced its three documents. There were a number of different approaches to the tasks, sometimes varying over time within role-groups, as well as different levels of participation from individuals, ranging from very high to minimal or even non-existent. Of 96 students registered, 13 did not participate, and from the 83 final evaluations received 68 (82%) were available for analysis.

Task (task management)

Approaches varied, with different groups developing more effective approaches as time went by, or falling back on less thorough but less time-consuming behaviour as work pressures increased. Variations occurred at research, planning, drafting, editing and finalising stages from the extremes of fully collaborative on all three tasks to delegation to one individual for each task. So, one group approached each task by individual research which was then pooled, and then used by each individual to produce a separate document outline which was then pooled, evaluated and worked up into one collaborative outline, after which each member of the group was allocated a section to write as a first draft. The group members then emailed their sections to each other and evaluation and editing comments made. Each individual retained responsibility for their allocated section and the group eventually agreed on a final version to submit.

At the other end of the range, in one group there was only one active member who emailed drafts to other students but receiving no response submitted them in her own name, while another group, pressed for time, shared out the three tasks, with each student taking total responsibility for one task only, and no group work taking place. Interestingly, in another group the three students submitted competitive first drafts, with one draft being judged the best after which that student, borrowing ideas from the other drafts if they wished, took responsibility for producing the final version. For the next task the two remaining students competed, leaving the final task for the student who had been unsuccessful in the previous two attempts.

The anonymity which it was hoped the platform would provide could not be assumed as students could inadvertently encounter their virtual collaborators in the flesh or even purposely arrange to meet if they wished. 23% of students admitted to arranging face-to-face meetings (discouraged but not expressly banned by the assignment criteria) in order to overcome the frustrations of virtual communication and to arrive more quickly at final versions of documents.

In line with the experiential learning aims of the task, a large proportion of the sample perceived key elements of the task as challenging, and thus it is hoped beneficial.

negotiation of meaning - 72%
time management - 61%
'listening' attentively - 48%

Clear improvements as a result of doing the task were reported in the following areas:

sharing of ideas	- 69%
research skills	- 54%
computing skills	- 35%

The following reactions to the task were also highlighted:

relevant & motivating	- 76%
novel & stimulating	- 33%

Participation (group dynamics)

The very positive collaboration within some groups was contrasted by varying degrees of conflict and coercion in a small number of others. A dominant planner or drafter appeared in 28% of cases, while for the rest of the students the struggle to arrive at an effective collaborative approach (both in terms of practicalities and interpersonal rapport) was highly involving, as witnessed by the fact that descriptions and analysis of behaviour dominated their evaluative reports. Although some students were very frustrated by the experience, and some requested that future cohorts be allowed to choose their own group members, all students in writing the report were required to analyse group dynamics carefully, and explicitly to consider ways of ensuring improved collaboration in the future.

Content (subject knowledge)

Although there was generally an interested response to the topic, very few students listed any specific increase in awareness of crisis management, corporate communication, or pressure group politics. General comments related to the difficulty of accommodating legitimate but conflicting demands (20%), the need to listen carefully to others' views instead of instantly dismissing them (48%), and the need for cross-cultural awareness when dealing with others (23%). In terms of preparing students for the world of work, a large proportion 76% (listed above 'relevant and motivating') perceived the communication skills of virtual group working as the key vocational learning achievement.

Language

Not surprisingly, as the primary aim of the module is to improve communication skills of non-native speakers of English, and the tasks both in terms of interaction within a role-group and with other roles were complex and challenging, the vast majority of students commented on linguistic benefits from the assignment. This study cannot measure actual improvements, but the students' perception of improvement, or their reporting of increased attention to particular linguistic features, can be seen as contributing to their overall linguistic development.

increased concentration on linguistic form generally	- 84%
perceived general language skills improvement	- 79%
increased concentration on appropriacy in writing	- 67%
perceived increased ability to explain ideas persuasively	- 64%
perceived increased knowledge of vocabulary for formal style	- 58%
perceived analytical reading skills development	- 58%
perceived peer language learning (learning from other students)	- 33%

The reported increase in attention could be interpreted as a result of the following factors:

public performance (publishing text to other role-groups)	- 58%
competitiveness/standing within role-groups	- 48%

There was a small minority (4%) of students who felt that their language skills had not developed in any way from doing the assignment. They had a command of English and familiarity with

business studies, independent learning and ICT well above the average for the cohort, and may well have been frustrated in having to collaborate with less accomplished peers on a role play which had been purposely designed not to involve the very specific details present in a business simulation, so as to allow students to concentrate on the communicative aspects of the case.

Medium (usability of WOLF)

Students generally felt that the induction to WOLF was not thorough enough and this hampered their efforts initially. The module tutor decided at the outset that no attempt be made beyond introducing the group folder and e-mail functions to familiarise students with the whole range of tools available, and many less techno-proficient students regretted this. Several students were absent during parts of the task, and some were pleased to still have access to WOLF via the university website, while others lamented the fact that they did not have a PC available, or did not have the requisite Internet Explorer 5 or above. The design and functionality were generally well received but the most common comments were negative, relating to unreliability of access including system failure, and problems with the email function. These problems were eliminated or greatly reduced once reported to the technical support team. Only two improvements were suggested; displaying documents uploaded to group folder chronologically rather than alphabetically (originally the case, but changed to allow documents on the same subject to be grouped together!); and allowing for several windows to be open at the same time. The paucity of constructive comment may be explained by students' attentiveness to the assignment task, and lack of familiarity with or perhaps uncritical acceptance of the medium.

Benefits

The task provides an open-ended, student-led task which can generate enormous learning opportunities in terms of personal transferable skills of time, task and team management, as well as research skills, and appears to greatly increase attention to linguistic accuracy and appropriacy. The medium is motivating, because of its general usability and its perceived relevance to the workplace, and efficient in that it focuses attention on communication and group dynamics in a way which face-to-face collaboration does not. Due to of the complexity of the task and its public dimension, it can motivate students to devote more time to produce a higher quality product, and the increased demand on tutor time to answer email queries can be offset by communicating the response to the whole cohort through class email or the group folder.

Future developments

After this piloting of the assignment it will continue to be included in the module with various improvements. Further research into the motivations behind the reported increase in attention to linguistic form and appropriacy, as well as an attempt to analyse more closely students' perception of the differences between virtual and face-to-face group work dynamics will take place with the next cohort. Virtual group interaction of the type supported by WOLF is expected to be increasingly used in Higher Education, and the greater the understanding of its effects on students' learning the more appropriately it can be utilised.

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