

# Discussing the Euro

Inés Carradice

Teaching context	
<b>Subject area</b>	Spanish.
<b>Course level</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> year undergraduates.
<b>Participants</b>	Staff                    3 Tutors. Students                11 at two sites. The two student groups had never met. The tutors had.
<b>Type of use</b>	Tutorial.
<b>Teaching methods</b>	On-line presentations and discussion, off-line groupwork.
<b>Support materials</b>	Preparative reading: background on Euro. Programme for event circulated beforehand.
<b>Length of use</b>	Single use. This was the first time I used it with 2 groups of students.
<b>Project background</b>	Support activity for existing courses, student participation was voluntary. No special funding.
<b>Sites</b>	University of St Andrews and University of Abertay Dundee.
<b>Prior experience</b>	TALiSMAN training but this was first use of the medium. Enthusiastic about technology.
Technical context	
<b>Conference type</b>	Point to point.
<b>Technology used</b>	Studio based MAN conference.
<b>Additional equipment</b>	Visualiser, video recording equipment at one site.
Contact	
<b>Contact name</b>	Inés Carradice
<b>Contact details</b>	Spanish Section, Languages, Communication and International Studies Division, Dundee Business School, University of Abertay Dundee, Bell Street, Dundee DD1 1HG. Tel: 01382 308660 Fax: 01382 308400 Email: bstic@tay.ac.uk

## Background<sup>1</sup>

The TALiSMAN Roadshow, a demonstration of ATM technology, was held at St Andrews in March 1998. It was at this event that I encountered the videoconference medium for the first time. I was aware of the investment in networked communications by SHEFC and have a Postgraduate Certificate in Vocational IT obtained from St Andrews University in 1997. With many years experience as a language teacher I was thrilled with the potential offered by this medium to promote real communication activities between distant groups. Language activities mediated by technology can only be successful if the quality of the audio and/or video transmission is very high and the ATM set-up offered very high quality indeed.

## Why videoconferencing was chosen

On April 20<sup>th</sup> 1998 I organised a videoconference session between students of Spanish of the Universities of St Andrews and Abertay Dundee. This was an interactive session looking at the Euro from the Spanish perspective. Designed as a language practice session, the aims were to explore the potential of the videoconference medium and observe students' and tutors' perceptions. The existing technology was not geared up to record both sites at the same time but we managed to get a video recording of the St Andrews transmission.

## The Execution

There were 6 participants from Abertay Dundee and 5 from St Andrews. These were advanced students of Spanish in Year 1 of their university careers. Most were planning to study in Spain as part of their year abroad with the Erasmus programme in Year 3, i.e. 1999/2000. The facilitators were tutors from the Spanish Department in St Andrews and myself, tutor in the European Business Management course in Abertay Dundee.

My plan was based on the principle that variety breeds interest and enjoyment. I followed the organisation guidelines suggested in the TALiSMAN booklet "You and Your Videoconference".

- 3.00 Overview of the Technology by the technical team. (In English)
- 3.10 Introductions (Only Spanish to be used from this point)

<sup>1</sup> An online report of this exercise, including video clips from the sessions, will be available from the WELL (Web Enhanced Language Learning) site at <http://www.well.ac.uk/>

- 3.15 The Euro - Presentations of about 2 minutes
- “Historical context” by St Andrews student
  - “Legal requirements” by Abertay student
  - “Countries involved” by St Andrews student
  - “Problems for the Spanish public” by Abertay Dundee students. (Illustrated situation dialogues)
- 3.25 (off-line) In home groups decide whether the creation of the Euro is a positive or negative step for Spain and be ready to justify opinions on-line.
- 3.35 Opinions -2 minute slots each- and close.
- 3.40 Design the Euro currency:
- Show and describe examples of European currency as it is today.
  - (off-line) In home groups design, draw and be prepared to describe your design. Can be coin or note, or one each.
  - Each group will take turns at describing and the other group will try to draw following the description. Then both original and interpretation will be shown on screen and compared.
- 3.55 Close

At each venue all the participants sat facing the cameras, with the controls operated from the same table. I chaired the session with one of my students operating the console at the Abertay Dundee end, and one of the tutors doing it for St Andrews. Interaction was ensured by careful planning and role allocation. Two cameras were used at each site, one with the ability to pan, which was pre-set to focus on single speakers, and the other fixed on a wide-angle position. We made extensive use of the visualiser. Firstly, to show the illustrated cartoons of conversations which were read off camera to represent appropriate situations; secondly, to show real 3D objects (coins) and finally, for the most entertaining (and positively hilarious) of the sections, projecting the students’ drawings. One group described a prepared design (not shown) for the other group to draw and the visualisers were used simultaneously to compare accuracy, projecting both drawings at the same time.

### What support was needed

There was a half-hour preparation videoconference meeting the week before between the tutors involved. The purpose of this was for the St Andrews tutors to experience the technology for the first time and discuss the activity itself in order to help the students prepare for it. We discussed issues such as “Should we correct their mistakes?” and “Should the tutors intervene if there are gaps?” We decided on “No” to the first and “Yes” to the second, amongst other things. The students were allocated topics to develop

for the event, and some lessons were devoted to the preparation of the vocabulary area.

### Evaluation comments

There was a follow-up exercise designed to elicit further language production and establish attitudes among the students. They were asked to write me a letter with comments on their experience, and to express both negative and positive impressions.

All the letters received were overwhelmingly positive. They all expressed surprise at the quality of the transmission, “like being on television”, and delight at the ease with which they could communicate. Some were more enthusiastic than others about the planning, some would have preferred a more spontaneous approach throughout, but they all enjoyed the experience. Some finished their letters with suggestions on what to do “next time”. There were no adverse comments.

### The Barriers

The major problem was finding a suitable date for all the participants. Timetabling across different institutions can pose major difficulties. We tried to recreate the experience in April this year. We managed to settle on a date on the last week of teaching, but when the time came there was construction work at St Andrews and we had to cancel the exercise.

### The Enablers

The technical support was very good and the equipment worked flawlessly. The students were cautious at the beginning but positively enthusiastic as soon as they experienced the medium. The tutors, new to the technology, were surprised at the ease of use and high quality of the environment. It was a learning experience for them too.

### Advice for new users

My advice to any newcomers to ATM videoconferencing in Scotland is: find someone who is familiar with the medium and allow yourself to be drawn in. Technical support will be close at hand in most institutions, but find an enthusiastic amateur to share the experience with. Students are more likely to gain confidence if led by an enthusiast. Planning and preparation help ensure an effective experience, as does a mix of activities.

I strongly believe in the multiple media approach to teaching and learning. There would be much more benefit in the occasional videoconference session which is the climax of a series of activities and is then followed up by others. To be more than an optional extra it would need to be built into assessment.