

Diploma in German for secondary teachers by distance learning

Alison Borthwick

Teaching context	
Subject area	Language Learning (German Language and Cultural Study).
Course level	1st year of 2-year part-time postgraduate diploma for teachers.
Participants	Staff 3. Each tutor individually taught several sessions. Students 9. 2-4 per site. Only 2 students knew each other before the course started. All participants met at a 1-day induction in Dundee just before the first videoconference.
Type of use	Interactive communicative language tutorials.
Teaching methods	Cross-site presentations, off-line task-based groupwork followed by guided inter-site discussion.
Support materials	Homework and preparation supported by CAL activities, WebCT email and discussion board.
Length of use	5 months. To date, 16 x 2-hour weekly sessions, organised in 4 blocks.
Project background	Course development, converting an equivalent in-house course to distance learning, received a SHEFC CPD Course Development Grant. The course is part of the regular provision offered by the Centre for Applied Language Studies, and is intended to be self-financing through fee income.
Sites	Dundee, Napier and Paisley Universities.
Prior experience	None, but tutors had training and a trial session, giving us confidence but no great technical competence.
Technical context	
Conference type	Multi-point: 3 sites.
Technology used	Studio based MAN conference.
Additional equipment	Visualiser, audio cassette player.
Contact	
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Background

The aim of our course is to enable practising Secondary Modern Languages teachers, who are not qualified in German, to study during twilight hours for an Additional Teaching Qualification in that language. The conversion to distance learning was intended to widen the course's accessibility and increase long-term viability, at the same time adding a technological dimension likely to enhance its educational value.

Why videoconferencing was chosen

The high quality and reliability of MAN-based videoconferencing made it an attractive medium for interactive teaching and learning of practical communicative skills at a distance.

The Execution

There was little flexibility in seating, with two of the suites having fixed rows. However, having a small number of participants meant that the row arrangement did not inhibit communication. The semi-circle formation at Dundee, with the tutor seated in the middle, was felt to be more inviting. It was helpful if tutors remembered to alternate the camera focus appropriately between themselves and local participants.

Careful planning in advance of the course and before each session was essential to promote successful interaction. In selecting sites, we tried to accommodate the preferences of the participants, but also to achieve an even distribution across locations. This facilitated communication and furthered learning. We ensured that no participant would be alone at any site. In some cases, this meant that people had to travel further, but, on balance, the educational benefits appear to have outweighed any inconvenience.

Each session was structured so that periods of whole-class interaction across the 3 sites were interspersed with short periods of group work at individual sites. In their groups the participants undertook a wide range of clearly defined contextualised tasks whose outcomes they subsequently communicated to the other sites. The relaxed atmosphere of small-group "off the air" communication allowed time for confidence building in preparation for whole-class "on the air" communication. Everyone took turns to act as group spokesperson. Usually, the tutor invited the contributions, varying the order in which the groups

presented their material. Variety held the attention and gave everyone the opportunity to initiate. Instead of routinely asking each group to report back to the centre in Dundee, tutors also designed interview tasks to generate direct exchanges between the other sites. At appropriate moments more spontaneous interventions were also encouraged. In our experience, subtle control by the tutor helped to smooth the transition between speakers and to ensure equal participation by all class members. However, tutors had to be particularly conscious of the need to co-ordinate, rather than intrude, dominate or intimidate. A good sense of humour helped!

A further step taken to facilitate communication was the planning of a detailed homework programme. We used textbook exercises, graded Computer Assisted Language Learning activities, www-based information retrieval tasks, and the closed environment of WebCT with e-mail and bulletin board, in order to pave the way for effective videoconference interaction.

Overall, we were pleased with the lively and competent communication, mostly in German. The participants were mature and highly motivated. Remarkably quickly, they developed strategies to cope with the new teaching/learning environment. Due to its highly structured nature, the inter-site communication was more formal and intense than real face-to-face communication in a language classroom, but it was by no means strained. There was a stimulating pioneering spirit which possibly even inspired the participants to take more risks.

Regarding props, we used the visualiser at each site and an audio cassette player. Each group displayed written outcomes to set tasks, allowing other sites to comment. The visualiser was also useful for showing authentic teaching aids brought in by the participants. The visualiser at Dundee served as the tutor's "blackboard". As far as possible, we tried to anticipate "blackboard" data and to prepare large-font sheets in advance. Writing on a horizontal surface in the focus of a television camera is more disruptive to communication than writing on a vertical surface in a classroom.

What support was needed

Prior to the course, tutors attended several events on the use of videoconferencing in teaching and learning, offered through the SHEFC-funded TALiSMAN initiative. "Hands-on" activities developed familiarity with the medium and the presentations/discussions/documentation provided useful guidance. We found this initial training to be sufficient, though, as technology and teaching expertise continue to advance, further discussion would be welcome. We followed up the TALiSMAN training with an

illuminating pilot videoconference session of our own, linking sites at two local universities and involving already established groups of our own students.

Technical support at our own site was excellent. This reassured tutors who were able to concentrate fully on adjusting to the new mode of course delivery. Technical staff at the other sites also co-operated in a helpful way, particularly during the early stages, putting students at ease. There have been few technical hitches to date, with many of the sessions problem-free.

Evaluation comments

We have held informal feedback sessions: individually by telephone; and with the whole group during a language immersion day in Dundee. A formal evaluation will be conducted at the end of the first year of the course.

The result of the informal feedback is positive, with both students and tutors apparently happy with their experience. MAN-based videoconferencing seems to be conducive to effective communicative language learning, as student performance compares well with that of previous groups on our corresponding in-house course.

The Barriers

The principal barrier was apprehension of the unknown. Tutors and students both worried about coping with the technology and initially felt self-conscious about performing communicatively over the air in front of their peers.

There is a constant worry that universities might at any time raise their fees for videoconference use to commercial rates, which we could not afford. We would argue that this would go against the principle of widening educational opportunity, according to which the MAN-based videoconference network was set up.

The Enablers

We were very appreciative of the technical and janitorial support which we received. The confidence of tutors was increased by training events, enlightened technical support, pilot sessions, and practice. Students were helped by personal contact at the induction and immersion days in Dundee. A practice run at the Dundee videoconference suite, followed by discussion with the Video Services Manager, was useful. Regular telephone calls or e-mail communication between tutors and participants also aired and alleviated concerns. It was important to create a sense of openness, solidarity and fun, stressing that together we were attempting to break new ground.

Advice for new users

Most of the advice for new users is contained above - suitable training, careful preparation, planning and timing; steady building of confidence, a spirit of collaboration and enterprise, and good relations with technical staff. It is important to ensure that the sessions involve structured interaction, a variety of activities allowing a change of pace. A practice session is helpful not only in showing up potential problems but in giving tutors confidence in using the technology.

Our course is to continue for another 18 months. In our view, videoconferencing has enormous potential

which we are only beginning to explore. In future, we hope to use video clips, to link videoconferencing with the Internet, to video the performance of tutors and participants for feedback, to conduct videoed assessments, e.g. oral presentations, and to set up collaborative projects with teachers in Germany. This type of structured interaction, with a variety of activities and changes of pace, is well suited to videoconferencing.

A parallel Distance Diploma in Spanish, based more exclusively on computer technology, will soon be launched from Dundee. We intend to compare the effectiveness of the two approaches.