THE USE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS TO MOTIVATE SPEAKING AND COMMUNICATION IN EFL THROUGH AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE EXCHANGE VIDEO CHAT

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**Abstract**

EFL students in UNAE in Ecuador have had very few opportunities to interact with native English speakers (NES) and do not see speaking to NES as a reason to learn English. Therefore, the professor created an international language exchange program with a Spanish language professor in California to give students the opportunity to communicate through an authentic video chat platform. The objective of the research and this course was to give students a virtual space to practice English using authentic materials with NES to find out if this activity would increase intrinsic motivation and ELL. Various types of video chats were utilized by 26 intermediate EFL students from UNAE and 26 beginner Spanish language students from Cal Poly State. This study followed a mixed method approach using questionnaires, informal interviews and observations. The investigation included a prequestionnaire about language levels and motivation. Students participated in video chats once a week for eight weeks and completed short assignments during each chat to support conversation using the same topics being studied in the students’ EFL classes. At the end of the program the participants answered a short questionnaire about their opinions of the course. Throughout the activity the professor consistently discussed any problems, concerns, opinions and positive or negative aspects students were experiencing during these weekly language exchanges. Throughout the experience it became apparent in class that participants became increasingly more motivated to increase their fluency to be able to communicate with their native English-speaking partners. Most students also began to understand the more they interacted with native English speakers the more comfortable they began feeling speaking and communicating.

**1 Introduction**

In Ecuador a foreign language course is mandatory for all university students, most study English and the government mandates that to graduate students must take an exit exam showing proficiency. According to El Consejo de Educación Superior (2016) current requirements for all graduating students is that they have a B2 level of a foreign language when they finish university. Park and Son (2009) found that most EFL students are also pushed by the government to study English for job opportunities, further study and graduation. The research showed that some of the participants of this study have chosen the English language since they studied it a little in school and most post graduate courses and many professions require a certain level of English language proficiency. Wen-chi,Wu, Yen, & Marek (2011) explain how English is a global language and it is used around the world as a common language in international settings. However most of the university students participating in the study explain that these reasons only provide a small amount of motivation to learn English. They explained that they are only taking a foreign language because of the graduate requirement. They do not plan on studying a post graduate degree, do not think they will need much English after graduation and do not have daily contact with the language. Thus, the professor found intrinsic motivation or a drive to learn English lacking for most of the English as a Foreign language (EFL) participates. It was found by Wen-chi, Wu, Yen & Marek (2011) that lack of motivation can decrease students’ abilities to internalize and ultimately learn EFL**.** Oletić (2014) explains that without intrinsic or a personal motivation to learn a language it can be almost impossible to become proficient.

Therefore, it has been one of the goals of the professor to find activities, methodologies and strategies to motivate EFL students in UNAE to want to learn English inside and outside of the classroom. Finding alternative ways to motivate students who do not think they need English but have no other option but to learn has been a challenge. A new strategy the professor has been promoting in the classroom is the use of technology as an authentic material through international video language exchange chats with university level native English speakers who are studying Spanish as a second language in the United States.

The activity allows the students to practice English and Spanish languages with native speakers on a weekly basis. It has been completed by the participants meeting once a week, for one hour, for an 8-week period. The research completed in this paper includes 26 participants. The participants from UNAE are intermediate EFL university students and their partners are upper beginner Spanish language students from Cal Poly State in California. The research is ongoing, and the researcher has used action research and a mixed methods approach through pre-activity questionnaires, post activity questionnaires, observations and student interviews. The activity has focused mainly on how the use of technological tools as an authentic material in an EFL classroom through authentic interaction with native speakers can aid in increasing EFL student’s oral communication skills, motivation to learn English and speaking comfort levels in English.

As this is on going research only preliminary results have been given in this paper. The researcher plans on repeating the activity with more EFL students to verify the effects of this language learning strategy for oral communication and motivation in an EFL university class. At this point the research has shown that most students participating in the video chats are more comfortable speaking in English and are speaking more naturally after participating in the activity. The post questionnaire has shown that students who did not have a motivating factor before participating in the video chat have now found a personal reason to learn English other then the need to pass an exit exam, they now have found a more authentic connection to English. In the beginning there were some administrative problems which were an unmotivating factor, but once these problems were solved the students began to make meaningful connections with their partners in the United States, which was observed by the professor in the EFL class as an intrinsically motivating factor improving overall English language learning (ELL) for the participates.

**2 Literature Review**

**2.1 The use of technology for EFL learning**

Kasapoglu-Akol, P. (2010) explains how technology and the internet are part of students’ everyday lives and is everywhere in the world today. The research from the present study suggests that when it is connected to EFL it can create a more authentic learning environment. A study conducted by Carey and Crittenden (2000) found that the use of web CTs allowed for more effective learning, especially for communication skills. This study specifically looked at the use of the internet to support communication skills among students.

A study completed by Park and Son (2009) showed that appropriate use of technology, specifically computer use in the classroom can be an effective teaching tool for language professionals. Technology can give EFL students with little opportunity to have authentic interaction with native L1 speakers allowing them to practice different skills in a genuine manner. Park an Son (2009) also found students can be active learners with technology which also gives them more control over their learning.

Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson, & Freynik, S. (2012) completed a comprehensive review of hundreds of studies focused on the relevance of the role of technology in language learning. This review gives a basis for focus of this article since they found that technology can play an important role in aiding in foreign language learning by increasing authentic interaction and students’ connections with the new language being learned. Ryobe (2009) found that use of technology, specifically video chat not only increased students abilities to communicate, but also gave them a sense of confidence they did not have before participating in the authentic activity.

**2.2 The Use of Authentic materials**

Authentic materials are defined as “materials which are prepared for native speakers and not designed to be used for teaching purposes Al Azri and Al-Rashdi, 2014, p. 249”. Al Alzri and Al-Rashdi (2014) explain that these types of materials have become extremely important for EFL teachers around the world to use as a teaching tool to emphasize real life situations in the classroom to aid in student learning. Their study discusses how authentic tools are necessary to utilize in EFL classes which have little or no interaction with native speakers. Like the participants this study Carey and Crittenden (2000) completed their research with participants that have very little access to authentic English speakers. They found that the use of video and audio technology allowed for authentic communication to occur between the participates and fluent English speakers. This interaction was seen to be a very effective tool aiding in increasing oral communication. Wen-chi, Wu, Yen & Marek (2011) explain how teachers must be creative in providing authentic teaching strategies in the classroom to create opportunities for language learners to participate in real-life communication activities. Reiterating the idea Peacock (1997) claims that authentic materials can mimic actual social interactions, which is exactly what a video chat between L1 and L2 language learners could be. The professor used authentic materials as an innovative mode of communication practice using video chat, where the EFL participates interacted with native speakers in a comfortable reliable setting.

**2.3 Intrinsic motivation**

Oletić, A. (2014) defines motivation as the reason people persevere and attempt to attain anything. When motivation is connected to students this tends to stem from students’ personal experiences or eagerness to prevail in the area being studied. When EFL students have very little authentic interaction with L1 speakers many feel unmotivated (Gilakjani, 2012). The research in this paper showed that very few of the participants had regular interaction with L1 speakers. Wen-chi, Wu, Yen & Marek (2011) explain that this phenomenon happens in many countries around the world where EFL is taught since many learners around the world do not have the opportunities to speak English in authentic settings and therefore lack meaningful interactions in the L2. The researchers went on to explain that this ultimately results in a lack of motivation among students’ which tends to decrease their abilities to reach an advanced language proficiency. The researcher of this study saw this phenomenon in the participants since many of them did have the need to use English in their daily life. It was not seen as a motivating factor to learn and improve EFL. As the participants began participation in the video chat language exchange program similar results were found from the study d’Eca (2003) conducted. d’Eca explains how various forms of internet chat provide an extremely motivating experience for language learners when there is very little opportunity for authentic communication. This strategy not only aids in oral communication but can give students an intrinsic reason to better English language learning by allowing them authentic interaction with L1 speakers.

The participants in this study explained they did not feel motivated to truly learn English or become fluent since most of their reasons for taking EFL was to pass an exit exam at the end of university. Since most students were uninterested in EFL it was seen in the research presented that learning was very difficult for the participants. “Students learn best by seeing the value and importance of the information presented in the classroom. If the students are not interested in the material presented, they will not learn it (Gilakjani, 2012, p. 57)”. The professor of the course used video chats to connect learning to real life interactions, which in turn created an authentic reason to increase their language skills. Gilakjani (2012) also suggests that when different types of technology are used in EFL this can increase student motivation, just as the present study shows.

**3 Participates**

The participants of this study were intermediate level EFL students in UNAE in Ecuador. They were comprised of 26 native Spanish speakers from two intermediate EFL courses. These participants had little or no authentic or meaningful opportunities to practice English with native or fluent English speakers outside of the classroom. For many of the students, participation in the video chats was the first time they had long or meaningful conversations in English in an authentic setting.

**4 Method**

This study followed a mixed methods approach through action research. The researcher used qualitative and quantitative research tools to gather information about the use of technology and authentic materials in the classroom and how these educational tools and strategies effect the motivation of EFL students at a university level. The researcher used a pre-activity questionnaire which asked:

a) previous use of video chat, comfort level for technology use and opinion of this type of technology

b) previous interaction with native speakers

c) present level of EFL

d) motivations for learning English

Throughout the video chat activity, the professor had regular interactions and 15-20 minute informal sit-downs with the participants about their feelings and thoughts about the video chat weekly meetings. The reasons and expectations for participation in video chat was also initially discussed. At the end of the 8-week period their positive and negative experiences were also discussed.

At the end of the 8-week period a post questionnaire was administered to find out:

1. if speaking to a native English speaker increased English language skills?
2. their thoughts about the use of the authentic material such as video chats and technology used as an educational tool for language learning
3. if they are motivated to increase their EFL fluency
4. interest in participating in this type of activity in the future

These tools were used as the preliminary research methodology for the action research completed by the professor.

**5 Results**

**5.1 Pre-questionnaire results**

The following results from the questionnaire give data about the students. This data includes what level the students were, their knowledge and previous use of video chat technology, previous interactions with native English speakers, motivation for learning English and reasons and expectations for participation in the video chat.

**Chart 1** The pie chart below shows that all the students were from an intermediate English language level of either A2.2 or B1.1. It showed that most participants were from higher English language levels. They tended to have more confidence in their abilities to speak to L1 English speakers.

***Chart 1****: current level of students’ participants*

**Chart 2** This chart looks at the results of participants prior interactions with native speakers. It can be seen from the results that very few of the participants ever had opportunities to speak to native English speakers. Only one student at a B1.1 level spoke to an L1 and only two participants had a similar opportunity. These students explained that the native speakers were their neighbors, immigrant family members who currently lived in the United States, or a friend.

***Chart 2:*** *Prior interaction with native English speakers*

**Chart 3** This chart shows results for the participants use of technology as a means of communication. It explains the results for all the 26 participants. The results show that all 26 have access to video chat technology, but only 20 are comfortable using this technology while the other 6 students are not comfortable with it because they have never used it before.

***Chart 3:*** *The use of technology, specifically video chat as an educational tool. Participants access and levels of comfort.*

**Table 4** This shows the results for the students’ reasons for taking EFL. 15.38% of the students thought English would increase their chances for future travel, 23.07% were planning on studying a post graduate degree outside of the country, and 3.86% percent thought it would help them meet new people in the future. While over 50% were taking English to pass the exit exam to graduate university. None of the participants felt the need to learn English for any aspect of their daily life.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Motivations for learning English | N | % of students |
| Future travel | 4 | 15.38 |
| Pass the final exit exam | 15 | 57.69 |
| Study a post graduate degree | 6 | 23.07 |
| Meet new people | 1 | 3.86 |
| Everyday life | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 26 | 100 |

**5.2 Informal meeting results**

The informal meeting took place before the video chats began, about once a week during the activity and at the end of the eight-week period. These meetings were utilized to discuss any opinions or thoughts students had about the video chats. Below are the results for the initial and post meetings. The participants comments of the discussions during the activity are included in the conclusion.

**Table 5** During the initial informal meeting the professor of the course asked what types of expectations students had for this activity. Their responses are shown in the table below. 11.5% said they would like to meet new people their age. 30.8% thought this would be a meaningful real way to learn English, 19.2% thought that this would be a good way to improve speaking because they would be interacting with native speakers, 23% were nervous about their English-speaking abilities, and 15.3% thought this would be fun way to improve English.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Initial thoughts and expectations about video chat | N | % of students |
| Meet new people | 3 | 11.5 |
| Meaning real way to learn English | 8 | 30.7 |
| Good way to improve speaking through authentic interaction | 5 | 19.2 |
| Nervous to speak to native speakers | 6 | 23.0 |
| Fun way to improve speaking | 4 | 15.3 |
| Total | 26 | 100 |

*Table 5: Initial informal meeting results*

**Table 6** Twenty students explained they had a positive experience, while six students had a negative experience participating in the video language exchange. Five out of the six students’ negative experiences stemmed from the fact that their partners did not show up for the meeting, the internet did not work, or their partner did not show any interest. Only one student felt speaking to a native speaker was too difficult. They were embarrassed and could not communicate properly.

**Table 7**

At the end of the eight-week period the professor discussed the positive and negative experiences the participants had during the activity. The chart below explains those experiences.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Positive and Negative students’ experiences | N | % of students |
| Internet connection problems | *2* | *7.7* |
| Partners did not show up | *3* | *11.6* |
| Made a friend | *2* | *7.7* |
| Spoke in English | *25* | *96.15* |
| Learned new vocabulary | *25* | *96.15* |
| Feels more confident speaking | *25* | *96.15* |

*Table 7: Reasons for Positive and negative experiences of students*

**5.3 Post questionnaire Results**

The post questionnaire was administered after the completion of the eight-week activity. Students were administered the questionnaire at the end of classes. They gave personal responses to the questions. Table 8 shows the data collected from those questionnaires. Almost all of the students are more motivated to learn English, enjoyed using technology to practice English, and all of the students would like to repeat this activity in the future with new partners.

**Table 8**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Students responses and opinions to video chat experience** | **N** | **% of students** |
| **Increased communication skills** | **25** | **96.1** |
| **Increased motivation to learn EFL** | **25** | **96.1** |
| **Good technological learning tool** | **26** | **100** |
| **Wants to repeat in the future** | **26** | **100** |
| **Total** | **26** | **100** |

*Table 8: Student exit opinions about language exchange video chat*

**6 Discussion**

The professor of this group found that the participants lacked communication skills when using EFL. They were shy, did not speak fluently, had poor pronunciation and were ultimately uncomfortable speaking in English in the classroom. When the teacher asked if they had access or any interaction with the English language outside of class the majority answered “no” they did not. They also did not feel that social oral interaction was a motivating factor to learn English, because none of the students used English in their daily lives. Most of the participants were only enrolled in English because it was mandatory, or they might need it in their future professional career. None of the participants felt English was necessary at the current time in their lives. They had no authentic connection to learning English.

Therefore, the teacher decided to use video chats with native speakers as a strategy to aid in increasing authentic interaction in English and helping to motivate students to connect English language learning to real daily life. Students at first were reluctant to participate in the video chats, since they did not feel they had sufficient levels of English to interact with native speakers even though the results show they were all at intermediate levels. However, after many of the student’s initial meetings they found they could converse and interact in English at a level they did not think possible. Some students even connected with their language exchange partners at a personal level and made friends. They continued their weekly chats even after the activity concluded. Students were surprised at how well they could interact, and many felt intrinsically motivated for the first time to improve their language skills, so they could converse in more depth with their partners. This type of feedback showed that the results in this paper will allow participants with little or no authentic daily L1 interaction to find motivation using authentic materials provided by the EFL professor.

The main drawbacks that were seen by the researcher was the inability to control the entire situation. Since this is an authentic interaction, there were two parties involved. The participants from the United States sometimes canceled or did not show up for their meetings. Students had little or no knowledge of video chat technology. These students sometimes had internet connection issues. When this occurred, it resulted in a demotivation of the participants from UNAE. However, with better administration from the two professors these types of problems will hopefully be avoided in future replicas of the present research.

**7 Conclusion**

The initial feedback from students has been positive. Students who participated weekly in the video chats were surprised at how much they were able to speak in English with their partners. One student said, “*time flew by*” he was shocked that he spoke to his language exchange partner for more than one hour. He explained that he didn’t realize he could communicate in English and was excited to speak to his partner again. This was the first time the teacher saw this student show any interest in ELL. Another student said, “*she was making a friend*”. This emotional connection with a native L1 speaker was unexpected for her and she felt personally motivated to improve her English for the first time, so she could talk more with her partner. The other participates who regularly met with their partners had similar feedback which supports the research found by the professor. This activity can intrinsically motivate students to increase oral communication and ultimately improve their English language skills.

On the other hand, it was seen throughout the video chat that if students did not commit or their partners did not commit to meeting regularly this created a frustration among the students who made the effort. One student explained that they made the time to meet three different hours over the course of a week and their partner never connected. After this experience they did not want to participate anymore. Another student explained that whenever they tried to connect on video chat with their US partners the internet connection would not work. This is a technological problem that is unfortunately unavoidable in Ecuador. However, it still decreased student interest in the program. These are administrative and technical issues the professors of the students are attempting to fix for future replications of the activity.

The research mentioned has shown that most of the students found a reason to be motivated to learn English other than passing an exam by using authentic materials. The students who regularly participated in the program became intrinsically motivated to interact with their US partners and therefore began to show more interest in ELL which increased their communication skills in English. As for the problems that arose, the professors plan to find solutions in future replicas to solve the unmotivating administrative and technical problems that happened during the language exchange video chats.

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