

Language learning across borders: use and role of live online sessions

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Abstract

Because distance learning is not constrained by geographic considerations, it offers opportunities in situations where limits are set to traditional training. For students who are not able to attend classroom training online courses are often the only way to participate in education programmes. However, self-studying courses require a lot of self-motivation and self-organisation by the learner.

At the same time, collaborative learning means that the learner – though being at home – does not have to learn alone. He can be part of an (international) learning group and he can be coached by a trainer. For most learners it is easier to organise their learning process if an e-Tutor or e-Coach is involved. Regular communication is often the key to learning success. Today there are many tools available that enable communication with the group and/or the trainer.

The use of live online sessions is one way to communicate with the group and/or trainer. In the last years this kind of virtual classroom training has been more and more often used not only because of the very cost effective way of training but also because of the many advantages it offers, especially for language training.

The presentation will give an introduction to the functions and features of live-online-sessions as well as an overview on the advantages and benefits. Furthermore the challenge to give a good training without direct contact and nonverbal communication is discussed and some solutions are given. The focus will be on the use of online training in a language learning context.

1. Introduction

Today, chatting and the exchange of instant messages have become regular communication means in everyday life of (younger) people. Virtual classrooms have also become more and more popular by universities and companies for education purposes. However, there is not much information available on the use of virtual classrooms in the context of language learning. This paper will give a description of the so called synchronous computer based communication, the general functions and features of virtual classrooms and the special benefits of their use in language training. Furthermore some examples will be given for games and exercises especially designed for language training.

2. Online-Learning in international learning groups

The use of eLearning environments has made it possible for a tutor to teach learning groups of students living in different areas or countries. The teaching can take place in a blended learning environment or in a pure e-learning environment. Blended learning means that online training and classroom training alternate. As in this context traveling is necessary this approach is usually not used for international learning groups.

In a pure eLearning environment the students get the knowledge from online content or CBT. Usually a Learning Management System is involved where the students find all the information, learning materials and deadlines for the eLearning course. Often the LMS also provides the communication tools such as forums and chats.

2.1 Role of the teacher

Self-studying requires a lot of motivation and organisation by the learner. For many people it is hard to follow a self-study program until the end. For most learners it is easier if an e-Tutor or e-Coach is involved. The terms e-Tutoring or e-Coaching describe the managing and supporting of learners by a trainer within the range of e-learning. E-Tutoring happens media-supported. The support can either be synchronous or asynchronous.

The Tutor has different functions:

- Organizational functions: structure discussions, pacing, put forward initiatives
- Social functions: monitor groups
- Intellectual functions: answer questions, guiding students on the internet, help the learner to optimize his learning processes, motivate students
- Assessment functions: give feedback to assignments, correct submissions.

Reliable and instantaneous communication from the side of the Tutor ensures that the learner feels associated to a Learning Community. Thus, a possible drop out will be avoided. Answering inquiries, an e-Tutor is not simply mediating knowledge, but gives assistance, which enables the learner to gain knowledge autonomously.

E-Tutoring can be more or less active: The Tutor may act as counsellor and reacts only on inquiries of the learner. A more active Tutor tries to induce the learning by actively requesting to a dialogue. In practice, a mixture from active and passive e-Tutoring has been proved to be useful.

2.2 The role of communication

Communication plays a very important role in language learning. An authentic communication environment is the best way to perform a foreign language.

The communication tools such as the virtual classroom can simulate live, spoken language, since response time is instantaneous and the language used tends to be informal and conversational. It can be an opportunity to apply language knowledge in a safe environment.

3. The virtual classroom

The virtual classroom is a tool for synchronous communication which means that the involved learners and the trainer exchange information at the same time. Basically, there are different types of synchronous communication:

- Text based synchronous communication, such as Chats
- Audio or video based synchronous communication, such as video conferencing or internet telephony

The virtual classroom is a combination of text based communication, a desktop video conferencing system and some other supporting tools.

3.1 Functions and Features

- **Whiteboard:**
It is a shared interface which can be used by the teacher and all the participants for writing and drawing. Furthermore it is possible to upload a presentation on the whiteboard either during or before an online session.
- **Application Sharing:**
It is possible to share an application installed on one computer with all participants.
- **Textchat:**
Usually there is a private and a public chat available.
- **List of participants:**
Shows the names of the people attending the online course. It helps to organize the course. The participants can „raise their hand“ if they have a question or something else to say.
- **Video:**
Usually the video shows the participant actually speaking.



- **Polling tool:**
The teacher can prepare question or create them spontaneously. A window appears on the screen of the participant with the question and the possible answers or a field for typing the answer. The moderator can view and share the results with the participants.
- **Breakout sessions:**
The moderator can organise several breakout sessions which occur concurrently and where a small group of people work on a special topic. After a certain amount of time the moderator can bring them back together and each group can present their results.

Most of the commercial systems offer similar functions and features. There are also some free virtual classrooms available which are usually limited in functions and features. However, as software is quickly updated, revised and enhanced it is not recommended to give a detailed product descriptions.

3.2 Benefits of a virtual classroom

- The flexible participation via a web browser offers several opportunities. It is possible access people at different locations of the world. Thus it is also possible to access experts that were otherwise not available.
- The easy way to use visualisation of the learning content and the support of breakout sessions add to value of online learning.
- The virtual classroom with international participants can support the understanding of different cultures and offer interesting possibilities for language learning.
- A VC can provide a motivational framework to keep learners engaged and making progress.
- The virtual classroom can support team building in self-studying environments.
- Discussing and interactions are the core elements of each online session
- A guest can easily be invited to present something on a special topic.

3.3 Challenges of virtual classrooms

- Technical problems can occur. Today they most often result from bad infrastructure (i.e. bad quality of headsets) or operating errors.
- Parallel activities of the moderator (audio, textchat, visualisation) require high concentration.
- Participants are easily distracted and are not always fully concentrated (telephone, colleagues, private chat). The trainier needs to take care that information does not only flow from teacher to students but also vice versa. The students need to be involved.
- Moderator has to deal with different behaviours of the participants (dominance vs. reservation)

4. Some examples for language learning exercises

- **Filler before the actual sessions starts**

The slide shows fields of different colors. The students who have entered the session early can start to name the colours in as many languages as they know by typing the words into the appropriate fields.

- **Role play**

The slide shows a table with lots of food and beverages. There are also some chairs around the table. Each student sits virtually on one chair. Now he has to ask his fellow students to pass him some of the things that he can not reach. So everybody is involved and is contacted by others.



- **Students sharing pictures of their county**

Each student can present and describe some photos of typical motives or the students can visit together typical internet sites. Thus the intercultural aspect can be covered.

- **Crossword puzzles**

Crossword puzzle need to be solved in breakout sessions. Which group has the fastest solution?

- **Taboo-Game**

Die students are divided into two groups. The moderator sends by private chat word to one of the students which he must explain without using this word or part of this word. The first student who delivers the solution by public chat has won.