

Integrating New Online Tools to Enhance Cross-Cultural Communication in an International Educational Telecommunication Project “Global Understanding”

Victoria A. Fadeeva

Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia

Author Note

Victoria Aleksandrovna Fadeeva, Candidate Degree in Teaching, Senior Teacher at Linguistics & IT Department, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies, Lomonosov Moscow State University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Victoria A. Fadeeva, 119192, Russia, Moscow, Lomonosovskii prospect, 31, Bldg. a. Foreign Languages and Area Studies, Lomonosov Moscow State University.

Contact: vickyfadeeva@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the technical features and didactic characteristics of two online tools (VoiceThread and TodaysMeet) which have been found to be effective for developing the communication and collaboration skills of students as well as promoting their engagement outside of the language classroom. To meet these goals, the developers have created both of these tools as cloud applications. In other words, there is no software to install as they work within any modern updated web browser and on almost any Internet connection. The main focus of this article is on the experience of implementing these online tools in a blended language course: “Information Technologies in Cross-Cultural Communication” which is based on a cross-cultural program named “Global Understanding”. A number of VoiceThread practical activities with the objective of developing the abovementioned skills were used in the classroom and are discussed in this article as well. Conclusions drawn from this research indicate that VoiceThread activities encourage language learners to develop listening comprehension, speaking skills, and to enrich their knowledge of the subject with the help of their peers' previous experience. TodaysMeet chatrooms provide a place to discuss conversation questions during online meetings and to negotiate collaborative projects (topics and content) asynchronously.

Keywords: VoiceThread, TodaysMeet, innovative online tools, distant learning, blended learning, Information and Communication Technologies, ICTs in foreign language teaching, listening and speaking skills, communication and collaboration skills

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Introduction

Rapidly developing technologies have transformed all spheres of our lives with education not being an exception. Current educational systems tend to include more distant, blended and collaborative models. Integrating innovative online tools into the learning process creates opportunities for learners to develop their autonomy, flexibility, creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving skills as well as their communication and collaboration skills. As for educators, there are obvious advantages for implementing new online tools in the course delivery process including: time-saving (all materials are online), the growing number of students who can enroll in the course, flexibility in management, overcoming limitations of classroom time and space, easier management of a variety of learning styles, tracking feedback, creating backchannels, etc.

When we consider the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in foreign language teaching, it is evident that modern ICTs help to connect people living in different cultures and speaking different languages. They contribute to the development of communicative and cross-cultural skills, providing types of practice required to enhance each of these skills. This paper describes the experience of implementing media-based discussion via VoiceThread and text-based discussion via TodaysMeet in a blended learning course, “*Information Technologies in Cross-Cultural Communication*”, in order to enhance student cross-cultural interaction inside and outside of the classroom.

Description of the Course “*Information Technologies in Cross-Cultural Communication*”

The course “*Information Technologies in Cross-Cultural Communication*” is designed to improve students' cross-cultural, informational and communicative competences through

communicating with the representatives of other cultures by means of ICTs. It is based on the international project “*Global Understanding*”, initiated by East Carolina University (USA) (<http://www.ecu.edu/cs-acad/globalinitiatives/course.cfm>), in which Lomonosov Moscow State University has been participating for over 11 years. Today, “*Global Understanding*” (GU) is a freshman-level course offered through both International Studies and Anthropology courses. The program provides a unique format for students where they can communicate with their peers through live video conferencing and chat technologies without leaving a classroom. Partner countries swap in a round-robin fashion during a semester so that each culture is partnered with two or three cultures, one at a time, for approximately 4 weeks. Students discuss a number of set topics e.g., College Life, Cultural Traditions and Family, Meaning of Life and Religion, Stereotypes and Prejudices and carry out collaborative projects with their individual foreign partner. In addition to live video links where students speak with each other onscreen, there are local introductory and summary classes before and after classes with each partner university, where students discuss what they have actually learnt about the culture and traditions of their partner country. As a result of mutual dialogue and interaction, students become more culturally aware and develop important skills for their future intercultural communication opportunities. Due to serving as learning sources for each other since there is no textbook to rely on, students exchange adequate, relevant and reliable information by means of a target language.

However, the experience has shown that Russian students have difficulties expressing their ideas about their native culture and country in a foreign language due to various reasons (i.e., age, different backgrounds, level of school education, psychological barriers in speaking English as a second language, etc.) and are therefore not actively engaged in live video discussions. Consequently, it was decided to create a supporting online course (<http://moodle.ffl.msu.ru/course/view.php?id=6>) using Moodle LMS to prepare our students

for more efficient and fruitful participation in the project. The combination of a supporting course in Moodle and local classes (i.e., both live videoconferences and chats when all Russian students and the teacher are physically present in one classroom in addition to traditional face-to-face introductory and summary classes) illustrates the blended nature of the course “*Information Technologies in Cross-Cultural Communication*”. Moodle LMS, being a unifier of cutting-edge asynchronous and synchronous communicative tools as well as a means for creating learning content, provides a lot of advantages for both learners and teachers which were already discussed in previous articles (Nazarenko, Sizykh, & Fandei, 2013). Nonetheless, it lacks a tool for developing speaking and listening skills simultaneously while using visual support at the same time. Thus, it was decided to use VoiceThread (<http://voicethread.com>) which provides a visual-centric and participatory learning environment to supplement the course designed primarily in Moodle.

VoiceThread (VT) is a cloud application which allows for the creation of no more than 5 VT projects in a free account and the uploading of over 50 different types of media where a student can add voice, text and video (web-camera) comments as well as upload files as comments. Moreover, comments can be moderated by the creator of the project who can make them viewable to all the participants of the discussion or make them hidden when they are left as direct replies. Participants of VT can doodle on the slides when recording their comments, use multiple online Identities (e.g., a teacher, a friend, an imaginary hero) and share the discussion with others. In addition, projects can be accessible via a link or be embedded in a LMS.

VoiceThread Practical Activity Used in the Course

The aim of this activity was to develop students' speaking and listening skills, especially in expressing their opinions as well as increasing students' engagement and breaking psychological barriers in speaking English as a second language. The group consisted of 10

students. The equipment necessary to implement this activity included an internet-connected computer with a microphone and a free VoiceThread account for the instructor. Each student is required to create a free VoiceThread account which requires an email address and a name. In our case students already have accounts because they learn VoiceThread as a part of university IT course. A VoiceThread project with 4 slides (<https://voicethread.com/share/7919579/>) was required with each slide containing a thought-provoking image with a question from the teacher which was uploaded using text and voice commenting.

The rationale behind this activity was that students have different abilities in speaking and listening skills. It may well be that those who hesitate in speaking because of natural shyness or lack confidence in English fluency may express themselves more confidently. For instance, they may adopt a new online Identity (VoiceThread feature available for all license types). In addition, students can practice speaking as many times as they like before sharing it with their teachers and groupmates, allowing them to improve their pronunciation, language use, etc., using a VoiceThread function by making multiple recordings before saving one. They also have an opportunity to work asynchronously at whatever pace and time is convenient for them. Moreover, by listening to each other speaking English on the topics that are relevant to them, they develop listening comprehension skills and enrich their learning experience from the previous students' along with the instructor's guided responses. As far as student engagement is concerned, due to a highly interactive discussion, learners collaborate more actively, expressing their ideas on the topic and constructing common knowledge of the subject. Thus, they become more involved in the learning process. Furthermore, they receive peer voice feedback as well as the teacher's guided questions which keeps them motivated and encourages them to continue media-based discussion.

Prior to attending class, it is required that students already have some experience in working with VoiceThread from an IT university course (i.e., by studying Web 2.0, VoiceThread is included and is a part of the curriculum). However, if needed, it is still recommended to provide them with tutorials and handouts describing basic options of the cloud application. Before taking part in VoiceThread discussion, students should have studied informative texts on the relevant subjects, created sample questions to be discussed during live communication, viewed topic-based mind maps and completed tasks aimed at mastering thematic vocabulary (i.e., studying the glossary and doing a quiz on matching terms and their definitions), all of which are Moodle based tasks.

Next, students carefully study the task explanation in Moodle (VoiceThread Task). The VoiceThread tool is integrated in Moodle, so there is no need to open the cloud app in a separate tab and it is enough to be signed into your VoiceThread account (Figures 1 and 2).

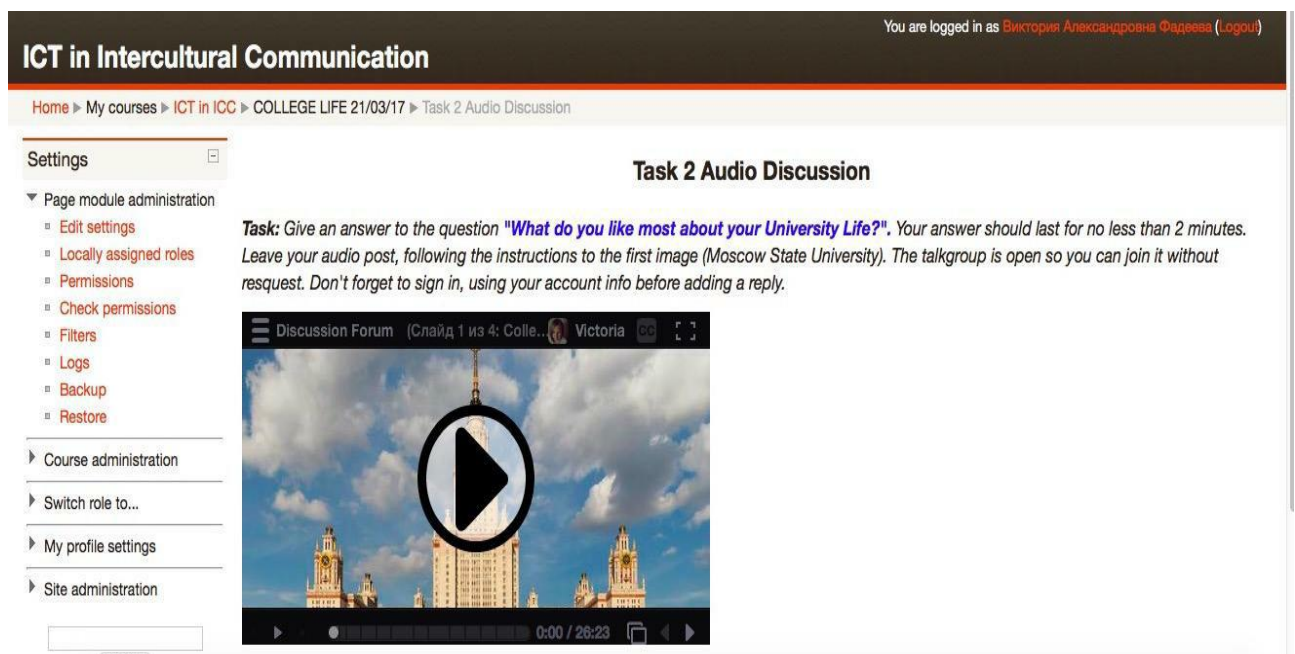


Figure 1. Voice Thread tool as viewed within Moodle.

“Dear students, please, study the first slide and give an answer to the question “How do you think your culture is perceived by the rest of the world”?”

Your answer should last for no less than 2 minutes. Please, listen carefully to the answers of your peers, by tapping the play button at the bottom of the screen or Identity images in the conversation channel on the left side of the VoiceThread, discuss your ideas, leaving a voice comment to their audio posts. To do it, tap the plus button at the bottom of the first slide, then choose a microphone button and agree to use microphone to record your message. Start speaking, when you see a red signal and a button Stop recording. To stop recording press the button Stop recording. You can Save it if you're satisfied with your answer or Cancel, if you want to try again”.

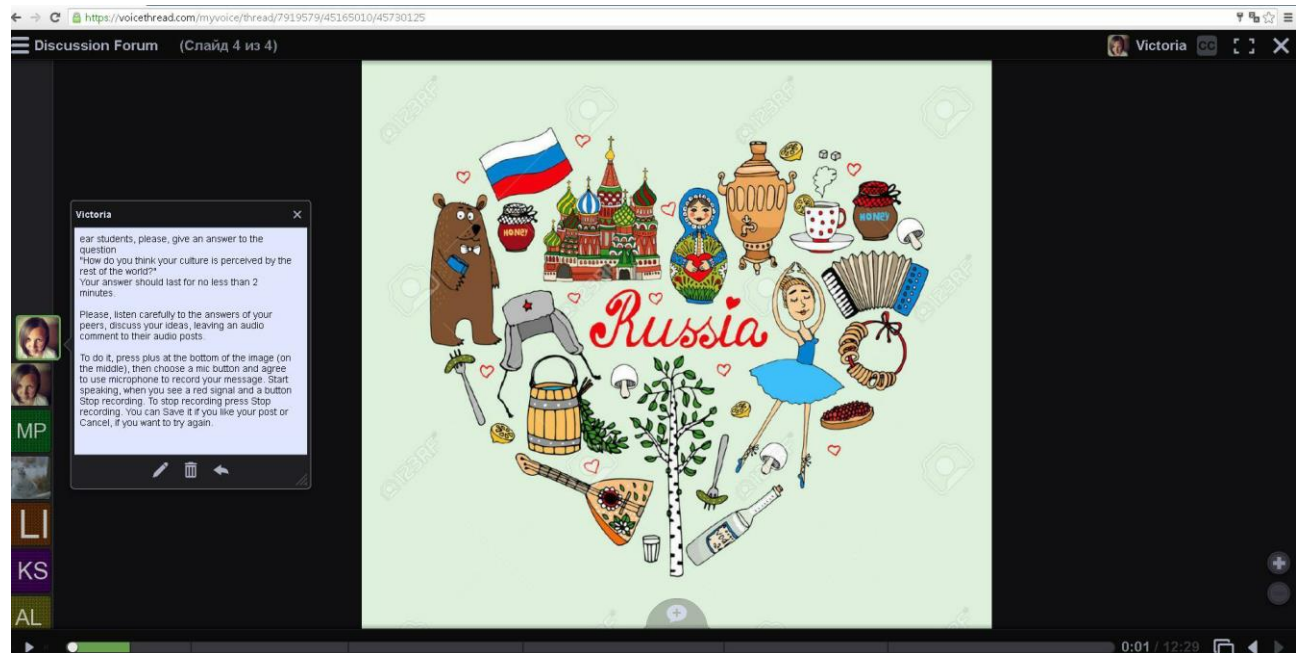


Figure 2. VoiceThread Task description on the topic “Stereotypes & Prejudices”.

Afterwards, the teacher may wish to give feedback on anything she/he noticed in terms of the use of language. The students might receive individualized text or voice feedback about their responses via direct replies in VT. The effectiveness of VoiceThread pre-class media-based discussion is measured during live communication with foreign partners by the content and structure of students' answers to the discussed questions.

Since tracking the progress of students in live communication during the fall semester, it should be noted that their speaking skills improved on a number of ways: fluency and coherence, linguistic range, accuracy and pronunciation. Surely, our attempt of integrating VT in the course to enhance a student's communication skills is not the only option of using this web-tool in the GU project and there might other ways to implement it such as:

- A video/audio welcome greeting recorded by students/teachers.
- Introductory materials/presentations accompanied by text/audio/video comments.
- Video/audio/text student or teacher feedback on the GU course.
- A place to work on collaborative projects.
- Plan B for topic discussions (when synchronous communication is not available due to various reasons such as technical problems or the time difference). We already tested this option with ECU in the Spring Semester 2017 when the time difference and daylight savings time change didn't allow us to have scheduled classes. (<https://voicethread.com/share/6282780/>).

Taking into account the abovementioned features, VoiceThread provides certain benefits for education. It promotes highly interactive and engaging discussions as well as creates a sense of being a member of a virtual classroom. It also facilitates collaborative learning by allowing for multiple commenting options for people with different learning styles.

Today'sMeet Practical Activity Used in the Course

According to the Core requirements of the GU project, synchronous chat in class should be provided by IRC client programs such as MIRC. However, MIRC in fact turned out to be inconvenient because it requires software to be installed on certain PCs and seems to be rather outdated for students who are used to chatting via mobile applications (e.g., WhatsApp, Viber etc.) or social networks (e.g., Facebook Messenger). The latter doesn't allow teachers to monitor discussions which is a disadvantage for this particular project. Misunderstanding might become a reason for a cultural conflict between students and their counterparts therefore it should be tracked and prevented.

In order to meet the demands of both sides, it was decided to integrate TodaysMeet (<https://todaysmeet.com>) in the course as a substitute for the IRC client program with our first partner (UTAlca) in a fall semester of 2016. TodaysMeet provides space where group conversations are collected and shared in one place from anywhere in the world with no software to install. Open chatrooms can be accessed via public/private links or embedded in a LMS (Moodle, Haiku etc.).

There were 10 chatrooms (Figure 3) created under a teacher account where each pair of students was provided with a private link to enter the rooms for synchronous online communication during the link time. They could also use it asynchronously for regular communication outside of class or as a place to discuss collaborative projects because all of the messages in chatrooms were stored until the room is closed. The teacher could monitor the discussion by joining the room or reading a script available for downloading while the room is open. The time limit for a room to function varies from 2 hours to one year.

The screenshot shows the Today's Meet web interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the logo and a notification about updated Terms of Service. The main content is divided into two sections: 'Open a new room' and 'Your rooms'.

Open a new room: This section includes a text input for 'Pick a name' (containing 'MyRoom'), a dropdown menu for 'Keep the room open for' (with options: one week, one hour, 2 hours, 8 hours, one day, one week, one month, one year), and a 'We've updated our Terms of Service' notification.

Your rooms: This section features a 'Sort rooms' dropdown (set to 'Closing first'), a search bar, and a list of rooms. The first room, 'student_community', is expanded to show details:

Transcripts	Info	Access Controls
Access, share and embed transcripts of closed rooms with Teacher Tools!	Opened 5:10pm, Mon, Jan 9, 2017	Who can see this room? <input type="radio"/> Anyone
Upgrade now!	Closed 7:10pm, Mon, Jan 9, 2017	<input type="radio"/> Logged-in users
		<input type="radio"/> My School
		<input type="radio"/> Only me

Below the expanded room, a list of other rooms is visible: lmsuuta10, lmsuuta9, lmsuuta8, lmsuuta7, lmsuuta6, and lmsuuta5.

Figure 3. Example of chatrooms in Today's Meet.

The analysis of students' feedback has shown that most students like this tool for several reasons: all the messages are collected in one place, there is an opportunity both for synchronous and asynchronous online communication, and the transcript can be downloaded. Taking into consideration the abovementioned features, Today's Meet provides certain benefits for education such as expanding language classroom, embracing the backchannel, making access to transcripts more readily available, monitoring discussions, providing a common space for discussion, and facilitating synchronous/asynchronous online communication.

Conclusion

To sum up, it should be noted that the VoiceThread practical activity helped students to purposefully acquire knowledge of relevant semantic fields and plan their speech strategies to fulfill communicative tasks. Moreover, students develop listening comprehension skills and enrich their knowledge of the subject with the help of their peers' previous experience and teachers' guidance. Today's Meet chatrooms create space for synchronous or asynchronous online communication where students can discuss all topic related questions or their

collaborative projects. With all things considered, it should be concluded that the innovative online tools VoiceThread and TodaysMeet made it possible to intensify and to enhance students' communicative and collaborative skills necessary for effective cross-cultural communication.

Nazarenko A.L., Sizykh L.G., & Fandei V.A. (2013) Teaching through technologies:

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