

## **On-line Videoconferences: How to Make Intercultural Collaboration Effective for All Participants**

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### **Abstract**

On-line videoconferences with students from different cultures is a form of learning which provides participants of the Global Understanding course with unique opportunities for studying English and investigating other cultures. Current research highlights advantages of the Internet as well as videoconferencing technology for foreign language acquisition. However, these advantages might manifest themselves at maximum only if all the participants are actively involved in intercultural collaboration with their partners. The experience of Ural State Pedagogical University (USPU) testifies that there are a number of factors which may decrease activeness of interaction which means less learning effectiveness of videoconferencing technology for students. The article considers three groups of such factors which were observed during the Global Understanding course: objective, language, and psychological ones. The paper also analyses reasons for these factors and suggests psychological and pedagogical techniques aimed at compensation for their influence.

### **Introduction**

The Global Understanding course provides students with an opportunity to be involved in synchronous intercultural interaction in English with students from all over the world (Chia, Poe, & Yang, 2011). Thanks to modern technology participants of the project do not have to change their place of residence and incur extra costs. Collaboration is carried out through such information technology tools as chats, social networks, e-mailing, and on-line videoconferencing. Among them on-line videoconferences are the most effective in drawing academic collaboration closer to the real interaction and in providing students with detailed information about the other culture. However, our experience shows that face-to-face collaboration is more difficult for non-native speakers. We suggest that it might be determined by a number of factors. Firstly, participants should be prompt enough to respond to questions with the English language they have at disposal. Secondly, they should speak in the presence of other people including strangers, which is a rather stressful situation for some people. While observing students during on-line conferences the authors noticed different degrees of involvement of students in collaboration. Since involvement in active intercultural collaboration influences the use of all advantages of such collaboration for foreign language learning and culture investigation, the authors decided to focus on factors which may lead to decrease of such involvement during on-line videoconferences. The

authors differentiate at least three groups of such factors: objective, language, and psychological ones (individual and group factors). The paper analyzes content and reasons for each group of factors in detail and suggests several ways that might reduce their undesirable influence.

## **Objective factors**

The term “objective” indicates the origin of these factors highlighting their independence from persons’ intentions and actions. On-line interaction is carried out in the environment which has its own objective characteristics: spatial, temporal, and technical. The authors’ experience proves that effective on-line interaction might be influenced by such factors as time difference and quality of videoconferencing determined by technology.

## **Time Difference**

### ***Description of the Problem***

During the Global Understanding course the authors witnessed the situations as well as students’ utterances which drew our attention to the importance of such a factor as time difference in countries of partner-universities. Below are the examples of influence of time difference factor on students’ interaction. E.g., students from one partner university have a link at 8.00 AM (local time), while students from another partner university have their class in the afternoon. From the perspective of dynamics of physiological indicators time period from 8.00 AM to 12.00 is a period of maximum physiological and psychological activity during 24 hours (Bünning, 1969). On the other hand, 8.00 AM is the beginning of classes, which is the so-called stage of inclusion in work. This stage lasts from several minutes to an hour and manifests itself in gradual increase in ability to work up to the optimal level (Egorov & Zagryadskiy, 1973). Students with a more extended stage of inclusion in work may demonstrate less activity during the first morning class. Therefore students from a partner-university might observe that some of their partners are less active.

Videoconference creates an illusion that all the participants are present at the same place and at the same time in the same conditions. As a result, participants unintentionally ignore time difference. That is why students who attend the Global Understanding class in the afternoon and as a result feel more able to work might consider behavior of their less active partners unusual. According to Attribution theory by Fritz Heider (1958) people have motivation to explain other people’s behavior by the behavior or actions of others towards themselves, especially if such behavior seems unusual or differs from their expectations. Besides, Attribution theory says that people tend to underestimate influence of the situation on other people’s behavior and account for the reasons by inner dispositions (interests, attitudes, moods)—the so-called fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977). Consequently, students whose local time is the afternoon may subconsciously interpret their partners’ behavior, for whom it is the morning time, as a lack of interest. Since collaboration is a two-way process, such interpretation may influence participants’ behavior. Misinterpretation may lead not only to misunderstanding but also to decrease in collaboration intensity.

At first we suggested that time difference factor should be taken into consideration only when difference in local time between partner universities exceeds 8 hours. However, later we came to a conclusion that for the adequate interpretation of partners' behavior it is not absolute difference in local time that matters but difference in time of day when videoconference takes place: morning-afternoon, afternoon-evening, morning-evening.

### ***Possible Solutions***

To prevent unconscious tendency to "extrapolate" their local time onto videoconference partners we employed a very simple technique: we reminded the students before each video session what time it is at the moment in a partner university. Thanks to it USPU students understood reasons for late coming and slow involvement in collaboration of their partners whose class started in the morning. As a result they did not perceive such behavior as a lack of interest or disrespect.

We also used this technique to avoid false interpretation of long breaks in e-mailing. If the time difference is considerable, e-mail sent by a USPU student may be delivered to their partner only late at night or early in the morning. Their partner cannot respond promptly enough because he/she is sleeping at night and goes to university in the morning. Besides, sometimes partners cannot answer straight after the classes, for example, if they have a lot of homework. In its turn their answer may be delivered to the sender also at night which prolongs time between sending an e-mail and receiving the answer. As a result of all these time shifts even diligent pen-pal partners may produce an impression of being indifferent and undisciplined. Therefore, it is crucial to discuss possible period of delay connected with time factor before the collaboration. According to the authors' experience, such discussion improves psychological atmosphere of intercultural collaboration and decreases tendency of wrong interpretation of partner's behavior.

### **Quality of the Video**

#### ***Description of the Problem***

During group on-line videoconferences participants can only see video images of the partners' faces. In case there is a picture of the whole group due to technical conditions, images of separate faces become very small. That is why it is almost impossible to differentiate mimic movements on a speaker's face. Mimic movements (together with gesticulation and pantomimic) provide the interlocutor with information about their partner's emotional state, preferred type of relationship, desired level of communication (Andreeva, 2009). Difficulties relating to differentiation of mimic movements lead to loss of information which could contribute to speech utterances (Andreeva, 2009).

Referring to Edward T. Hall's concept (1976) of high context and low context cultures we may assume that lack of non-verbal information might interfere with understanding one's interlocutor only for representatives of high context cultures such as Russia. The reason is that communication in high context cultures (China, Japan, France) depend on the context of non-verbal component of communication to a larger extent, while in

low context cultures (USA, Scandinavia, Germany) communication is focused on verbal messages (Hall, 1976).

### ***Possible Solutions***

Quality of video images is an objective factor, however, its influence might lead to such psychological consequences as deterioration of understanding of one's interlocutor. Measures that might allow to compensate for the influence of this factor are the following: it might be effective to use zoom of the video camera to make the image of the speakers' face bigger. In authors' view, influence of this factor is not significant. That is why, if understanding among students is satisfactory, it is possible to ignore this factor.

## **Language Factor**

### ***Description of the Problem***

Language factor is all the factors regarding knowledge and use of the foreign language. The basic means of communicative interaction during videoconferences is the English language. Low proficiency students are less active in intercultural collaboration because of limited instrumental opportunities for such collaboration. In USPU Global Understanding classes are heterogeneous: one half of participants are students of Foreign Languages Department while the second half includes both students majoring in sciences and humanities. Although the English language is integral part of the curriculum, number and quality of classes is insufficient for successful intercultural communication.

### ***Possible Solutions***

One of the ways to enhance students' English language competence is to increase the number of tasks carried out in the English language. Undoubtedly, participation in the Global Understanding course enhances level of language competence. All the participants study ethnographic materials about culture of partner countries, read newspaper articles and write essays in English. They also practice their speaking skills during local classes. However, students who do not major in English may lack confidence to ask a question and participate in discussion. Such students are offered to prepare mini-reports on one of the subtopics in written form in advance. A ready-made text in front of the eyes allows the student to feel more prepared to take part in collaboration. The authors realize that this technique may lead to decrease in spontaneity as well as in value of videoconference as form of learning. On the other hand, students acquire positive experience which influences their readiness for collaboration in further video sessions.

At the same time authors' experience proves that language proficiency is not always in direct proportion to students' activity during videoconferences. Among participants of the project we could observe students with limited vocabulary and knowledge of basic grammar rules who actively collaborated with their partners. That could be accounted for by psychological factors.

## **Psychological Factors**

Psychological factors are further subdivided into two groups. The first group includes individual psychological factors—individual characteristics of participants of the Global Understanding course which manifest themselves in interpersonal collaboration. The second group includes group psychological factors which describe group's influence on person's behavior.

### **Individual Psychological Factors**

#### ***Description of the Problem***

Videoconferencing technology allows to bring on-line collaboration closer to real face-to-face collaboration. Therefore, individual psychological characteristics will manifest themselves to a larger extent in such type of collaboration rather than in anonymous forms of Internet collaboration (email, chats). However, not all individual psychological characteristics manifest themselves equally in interaction between people. One of such characteristics which significantly decreases student's involvement in collaboration is shyness. Shy people are afraid of strangers because they do not know what could be expected from them. They try to avoid situations of interpersonal communication as well as actions which may draw attention to them (Zimbardo, 1977/1990). Representatives of other cultures are not only strangers but also people with other value system and social norms. That is why it is possible to suggest that discrepancy in their behavior and expectations of the "shy" representative of the other culture might be wider in comparison with situations of collaboration within their own culture. Therefore, such manifestations of shyness as fear and avoidance of interpersonal collaboration might be more obvious in intercultural contacts than in contacts with representatives of one's own culture.

The authors' observations show that participation of such students in face-to-face collaboration amounts to formal presence at videoconferences. At the same time shy students are actively involved in other forms of intercultural collaboration, e.g. emailing. They also fulfill tasks which require use of written English. This way they partially compensate for lower grades for participation in videoconferences. However, this problem is not very serious because there are few really shy students. As a rule, in Russian student groups it is one person per a group of sixteen people. Such people stand out because of their reticence.

#### ***Possible Solutions***

Obviously, shyness of separate students as a psychological problem cannot be solved within educational process. However, we could suggest some steps which may help shy students to enhance level of their activity in intercultural collaboration during videoconferences. While designing these steps we defined shyness as insufficiently formed social skills (Zimbardo, 1977/1990). It means that a shy person avoids interaction with other people because he/she does not know how to initiate and support contact and he/she is afraid to look ridiculous. To make forthcoming collaboration more predictable and as result less frightening for shy students, like in the case with low proficiency students, we offer them to prepare and rehearse aloud a mini-report on each topic of the videoconference. It is also possible to inform shy

students beforehand that a group leader will ask him/her to talk during the videoconference which increases personal responsibility for the given commitments.

To stimulate participation of shy students in on-line interaction it is important to use both verbal (praise) and non-verbal (eye contact between a student and a teacher, nodding, smile) techniques. It is important for all students, especially for those students who are afraid of demonstrating their activity.

## **Group Psychological Factors: Influence of the Environment**

### ***Description of the Problem***

A group psychological factor which may lead to decrease in student's involvement in intercultural collaboration during videoconferences is the presence of *others*. During videoconferences students interact with peers from their culture as well as students from partner university. In the presence of other people a person is worried about the impression he/she produces on people around which leads deterioration of complex actions (Cottrell, Wack, Sekerak, & Rittle, 1968). Communication in English is a challenging type of activity for students with low competence in the English language. That is why they might experience more difficulties while making utterances in the presence of others.

Such failures may lead to their passive participation in collaboration. On the contrary, for those students who are familiar with interaction in English and used to it, presence of others may have a positive effect contributing to the improvement of their communicative activity (the so-called social facilitation effect).

### ***Possible Solutions***

While choosing the ways to compensate for influence of the environment we referred to the conclusions by R. Zajonc, who stated that in the presence of others the dominant response will be enhanced (Zajonc & Sales, 1966). Therefore it is necessary to enhance the level of communicative skills so that communicative activity acquires character of dominant reaction in the situation of intercultural interaction.

## **Group Psychological Factors: Group Formation**

### ***Description of the Problem***

Influence of the second group psychological factor is significant since participants of the Global Understanding course are members of an academic group which is a type of a small group. In a student group as well as in any other group there is change over time which is referred to as "group's development" in social psychology. There are various models of group's development. Authors of several popular models of group's development claim that at the first stage group members get familiarized with one another and establish relationships (Fisher, 1970; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Emotional state of group members is characterized as a primary tension (Fisher, 1970). Such tension arises since group members are surrounded by new unfamiliar people and they do not know what should be expected from them. Besides, at the first stage group norms regulating communication within the group have not been defined



yet. The authors suggest that at the first stage of group dynamics within the Global Understanding course participants may also experience emotional tension, and uncertainty of communication rules influences students' behavior as well as each participant's activity during on-line collaboration. This situation is especially topical for students in Russia. In Russian universities a student attends all the classes within the same academic group. That is why becoming a member of a new group as well as the corresponding adaptation is a less familiar task for Russian students rather than for students from other countries.

### ***Possible Solutions***

To compensate for this factor we have a two-hour class "Acquaintance Training" before links as such. This training session is aimed at further effective collaboration of group members and includes following objectives: 1. decrease of emotional tension in the group through acquaintance of group members with one another; 2. defining goals and expectations from participation in the project by group members. "Acquaintance Training" creates conditions for more active participation of each group member in group work during class session especially during videoconferences. Meeting members of the group before the links makes the situation more clear and predictable. Realizing personal goals regarding participation in the project forms motivation for more active participation.

Since "Acquaintance Training" is an educational one to a greater extent, a professor in charge of it does not necessarily have to possess psychological background. While choosing the exercises one may use, for example, a short guide "500 Tips for Trainers" (Race & Smith, 1995, 1996). At the beginning of the class students may be offered simply to get to know one another by introducing themselves one by one (students talk about what they find important). Then students are paired up so that they may ask and answer questions about each other. After that each member introduces his/her partner to the group. It is easier for students to talk about their partner to the group rather than about themselves. They may also describe their partner's merits about which the partner himself/herself would keep silent because of shyness. According to the authors' experience, the tasks which require physical activity are emotionally positive and useful. For example, the group is offered to divide itself into subgroups according to some characteristic. It is worth beginning with outward characteristics which are available for immediate perception such as eye color or clothes details. Then it is possible to proceed with more complex characteristics identification of which demands interaction with each other (who likes spaghetti, who would like to spend a holiday on the Caribbean islands, who likes singing in the bathroom, etc.) (Race & Smith 1995, 1996). It is also possible to divide group members into subgroups (not more than four people) to find out their goals and expectations with respect to the project. As soon as each subgroup formulates their goals and expectations, all the ideas should be discussed by the whole group. Sheets of paper with written goals and expectations should be kept until the end of the course – they may be used for final discussion during the last class.

## **Group Psychological Factors: Differentiation of Roles**

### ***Description of the Problem***

The third group psychological factor is determined by distribution of roles in an academic group. Differentiation of group members takes place in any small group during the very first stage, the criterion for differentiation is group members' abilities and skills which are necessary for acquisition of the group goal (Wilke & Wit, 2001). Observing students' behavior during on-line videoconferences the authors also discovered that participants' roles in intercultural collaboration varied. Almost in every Global Understanding group leaders may be clearly defined during the first links (approximately 3-5 people in a group of 16 students). Regardless the fact whether they are actually appointed as formal leaders of discussion or not they get actively involved in collaboration, and the level of their activity remains equally high during the whole link. On the whole, such leaders are a positive factor for both the group and the project since they provide uninterrupted on-line collaboration which in its turn leads to the accomplishment of the project's goals. On the other hand, active communication of group leaders decreases activity of the rest of group. They agree to be passive listeners because they doubt whether they will be a success in comparison with group leaders. Since role distribution gets stable along with the group development, gap in the use of videoconference opportunities by active and passive participants widens. The authors suggest that other professors also observed such cases of active collaboration between 2-3 students from each partner university. The rest of the group remains passive demonstrating only non-verbal communication. Besides, there are differences in space arrangement: active participants choose to sit closer to the video camera while "listeners" prefer background position. The authors suggest that division of group members into passive and active ones is more probable in large groups because in such groups there are more opportunities "to hide behind other people's backs".

In our opinion, the situation when two relatively small sub-groups on either side interact with each other during the videoconference limits participants' opportunities in enriching their ideas about another culture. Obviously, each participant while answering their partner's questions or reporting about some aspect of his/her own culture introduces subjective and therefore incomplete point of view. In order to obtain a complete image of some object one should have an opportunity to investigate it from various angles. By analogy, in order to have a complete idea about another culture it is important to listen to a number of opinions, not only to points of view of the most active students. This is one of the reasons why we think it is crucial to provide active involvement of all students in videoconferences.

### ***Possible Solutions***

To provide participation of all students in on-line videoconference it is possible to use experience of group discussion management accumulated by social psychology. Since only one student is chosen as a class leader during videoconferences, it is worth reminding him/her about the necessity to involve all group members in verbal interaction with students from the partner university. It is also advisable to make a class leader familiar with particular techniques which may be effective in regulating activity of group members. If there are too active students in the group, a leader may shift



attention to other participants using such expressions as: "This is one point of view. Are there any other opinions on the problem?" (Krueger, 1988). In order to activate shy students who do not speak a lot and speak in a low voice it is advisable to strengthen eye contact, let them feel that their opinions are equally important and interesting, invite them to answer the question calling them by their first names. As soon as a participant has said something, it is easier for him/her to participate in the conversation again. On the whole, the role of the class leader is to equal everybody's activity in on-line collaboration: suspend too active students and involve passive ones. Since each student should experience the role of a class leader, it is important to form an idea about effective supervision of the discussion. After each videoconference students may reflect upon effectiveness of the class leader's actions in organizing discussion.

In conclusion we would like to mention one more factor which does not lead directly to decrease in students' activity in on-line collaboration with students from a partner university but may be used to enhance the degree of students' involvement in such collaboration. This is evaluation: correlation between the number of points a student may receive for participation in videoconferences and the number of points for the whole course. For example, if participation in videoconferences brings 20 points at maximum, and the sum total of points for the course is 400 points, then even if a student is only present at videoconferences without demonstrating any activity, he/she may have the highest grade for the whole course ( $\geq 360$  points). Such correlation of points is reasonable for those students who are native speakers of English because participation in videoconferences is natural speech activity for them. For speakers of other languages it is crucial to increase the number of points given for immediate intercultural collaboration so that they cannot get the highest grade in case they remain passive in this type of activity. In the above mentioned example the number of points should be increased up to 40 points. We do not consider that the grade should be the leading motive for participation in the project. Nevertheless, the number of points for each type of activity draws students' attention to significance of this type of activity for the acquisition of the goals of the Global Understanding course.

Perhaps, the authors could be criticized for being too particular about psychology of the education process. The authors together with prospective critics share the point of view that students are responsible enough for their involvement in learning. At the same time if we know how to improve the situation to make the learning process more effective, we should employ our knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

The idea of the authors of the Global Understanding project to provide students from all over the world an opportunity to immediately collaborate with each other by means of videoconferences is very productive. Students have a chance without any financial or time costs to perfect their language competence and enrich their idea of the world diversity through collaboration with native speakers of English as well as representatives of other cultures. However, the authors' experience shows that immediate cross-cultural collaboration is a necessary but insufficient condition which helps to achieve the project's goals. Students do not always use potential of intercultural communication fully because of the range of factors. Some of these factors are not consciously realized by students but influence their behavior which

leads to decrease in their activity in cross-cultural collaboration. Professors involved in the Global Understanding course should investigate these factors and choose adequate means which may help to reduce negative effect from these factors.

Summing up our observations of students of Ural State Pedagogical University participating in the Global Understanding project we discovered a number of factors which may lead to decrease in students' activity in immediate intercultural collaboration with the use of videoconferencing technology. That is why we focused our efforts on the search of psychological and pedagogical means which would allow to compensate for the influence of these factors and help students use all the advantages of on-line collaboration. The authors offered and tried out the following techniques:

- drawing students' attention to differences in time zones and associated behavioral variations during intercultural collaboration;
- helping students to overcome language and psychological barriers through setting simpler communicative goals so that they could be involved in intercultural collaboration and obtain positive experience;
- exercises aimed at facilitation of group formation, building more comfortable emotional atmosphere in the group, reduction of fear of talking in the presence of unfamiliar people during the first class;
- making discussion leaders familiar with techniques which may allow to involve those group members who prefer passive role;
- stimulating the role of evaluation by increasing the number of points given for participation in videoconferences throughout the course.

We clearly realize that there are other psychoeducational techniques which may allow to enhance students' activity in intercultural collaboration during videoconferences. However, techniques described in this paper proved to be effective while organizing students' work during the Global Understanding course in USPU. Perhaps some of these techniques reflect peculiarities of the Russian culture and mentality and therefore will be less effective with students from other cultural backgrounds. This question needs further discussion.

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