Group Webinars: a real alternative to the classroom?

Why are we investigating this research question?

To identify if courses run remotely via video software are effective.

To identify the most suitable software for a group class via the web.

To critically evaluate the findings.

To begin to explore how the experience gained in the project can be incorporated into longer blended courses.

Data collection, method and analysis

A survey was completed by 40 Entry Level learners on current ESOL workplace and community classes. Learners were asked if they would be interested in English classes over the Internet, their existing experience with IT and video conferencing and on the equipment they use. A small cohort of learners, happy with the concept of participatory research, was chosen from current workplace learners to participate in the trial.

The project staff researched different video conferencing software for suitability for a classroom (keeping costs in mind). Practice classes were held.

Class observations by project manager were held, followed by tutor feedback.

Learner evaluations took place in the form of follow-up paper-based questionnaires and spoken interviews. Recommendations were then noted.

Impacts

Several impacts from the project were observed . One significant impact was that staff enthusiasm for a new class 'medium' was noticeable and the experience was shared between departments. Secondly, learners enthusiasm increased and subsequently retention and referrals to the classes.

Research triggers: why move to blended LLN courses?

Funding: No ESOL workplace funding; Reduced community class ESOL funding; Employers unable or unwilling to fund classes; Pressure to deliver shorter, more condensed courses

Other Factors: Work shift patterns – difficult to access community classes; Lone parents and those with busy lives; Financial constraints of attending class by low paid workers; Employers financial constraints

Q: What would be the biggest challenge in delivering our on-line course?

A: The practicalities of group video conferencing!

Q: So, what do we research and evaluate?

Soft/hardware	Training	Effectiveness	Evaluation
• Evaluating software • Testing hardware	• Staff familiarity • Learner confidence	• 'Practice runs' • Sample classes • Observations	• Learner feedback • Peer & tutor reviews
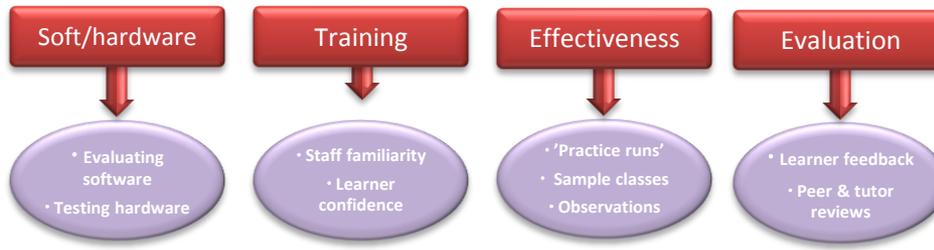
A: Learner survey before classes

Learners interested in on-line courses:

92% Yes, 5% No, 3% Unsure
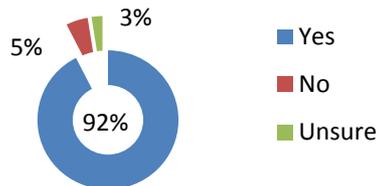
A: represents responses from 40 learners surveyed

B: Evaluation to classes

Learners who positively evaluated the experience:

87% Yes, 10% No, 3% Unsure
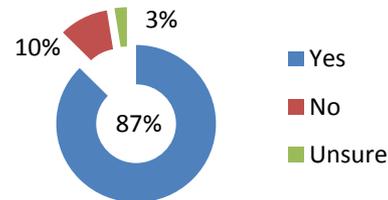
B: represents responses from participating learners

Findings

General recommendations

Skype Premium webinars are a practical, easy-to-use, user-friendly medium to deliver on-line webinars; they are:
- Commonly known by learners
- Easy to use & inexpensive
- Can accommodate classes of 6 learners at a time.

Pros

o Classes can be held at a convenient time for learners in different geographical areas.
o Classes suit learners with differing personal needs: single parents, shift workers, those with busy lives!
o Learners are studying in a comfortable familiar environment.
o Provider costs can be kept down; less tutor travel, no room hire fees for example.

Cons

oThere can be a delay in what you have said or what you are showing on screen to be seen by the learner at the other end.
o A learner may not feel totally confident on-line and interaction may be less when learners do not know each other and haven't built up that relationship.
o Any written word, flash cards or images used had to be held close to the camera for all to see.
o Learners cannot be muted by the tutor within the software package used, if there is a disturbance in the background (telephone, baby crying etc.).

Practical Recommendations

1) Ensure that teachers have an intermediate level of IT skills to deal with the technology (screen sharing etc.).
2) A good standard of technology is required: good Internet connection, good webcam and a noise reduction headset may be required.
3) Assist learners to feel more confident with the system before and have a reasonable webcam themselves.
4) Set up time must be considered before starting a course; you will need to make sure all connections are made and that a learner understands the process (1-1 session?). Learners need the same version of the software, be up-to-date on Adobe Reader to open files etc. Send all learners the latest link of the software.
5) Consider emailing materials for use in the class in advance. This will avoid struggling with holding flash cards close to the camera or waiting for the instant messaging attachment tool to load.
6) When using the software, instructing learners, you should leave a gap before moving on to allow for this time lag.

Strengths of the project: This project allowed us to focus on one specific part of setting up on-line courses, that of the video conferencing for class use. The time given allowed a thorough research into system suitability and to try out a small scale course which was free to the learner.

Limitations of the project: This was a small-scale project with a sample number of learners drawn from the workplace ESOL cohort. It is therefore difficult to assess how effective a standard course of 12 weeks would be and what results there would be in terms of learner overall satisfaction, retention and achievement.

Next steps: The final stage of the project is to trial other software, preferably more tailored to academic purposes, to choose the most suitable 'medium', then to start more formal short courses delivered 'on-line'.

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