Group dynamics and peer support in EFL videoconferences

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Peer interaction can be seen as a context for language learning and practice (Dörnyei and Murphey 2003; Philp et al. 2014). In collaborative videoconferences (VC), two or more groups of learners interact, while the teachers remain in the background, taking the role of observers.

During foreign language VC lessons, the participants are not only responsible for their individual performance, but also for that of their group. The shared physical space, group history and first language enhance the development of intragroup cohesion. Peers can help each other to maintain the flow of conversation and to prevent communication breakdowns. Intragroup peer support can range from reassuring facial expressions to the taking over of complete turns.

The extent to which the participants contribute to the discussion and assist the other group members can vary. Except for the pre-assigned role of the chairperson, the intragroup roles are developing naturally during the conversation. Informal leaders (cf. Dörnyei and Murphey 2003) feel responsible for the performance of the group and assist the other students even if help was unsought. The active listeners answer the questions addressed to them, but are less initiative in taking turns and providing peer assistance. The passive listeners tend to avoid any kind of contribution and thus get marginalized.

The present study investigates the group dynamics and the peer support strategies that characterized the English language videoconferences arranged between a group of Hungarian (N=10) and a group of Czech (N=6) university students in April 2014. Observations and video-recordings were made of the three, 60-minute long EFL lessons.

References


Keywords: group dynamics, EFL, videoconference, peer assistance.