THE USE OF COMPUTER-BASED MEANS TO DEVELOP LISTENING AND SPEAKING SKILLS TO BUSINESS STUDENTS

Pop Anamaria Mirabela
University of Oradea Faculty of Economics

Sim Monica Ariana
University of Oradea Faculty of Economics

The aim of this paper is to analyze how business students can achieve communication skills, namely listening and speaking, through computer-based interactive simulations. In today's foreign language teaching, methods using computer applications and multimedia environments are more and more gaining territory to the detriment of traditional methods. These applications are used successfully in reading, writing, listening and speaking practices both by foreign language teachers and by students throughout the world. Moreover, these means are helpful in practising the four skills of a language: reading, writing, listening and speaking. With the advance of Internet, the computer has been transformed from a tool for information processing and display into a tool for information processing and communication. The instant worldwide connections enabled by the Internet have changed the way teachers and learners work in their teaching and learning of second/foreign language. The Internet provides the opportunity for business students to interact with native speakers and, in the same time, to listen to business people around the world, in this way getting acquainted with different accents and speeches. When students listen to a native speaker, they are automatically emerged in the latter's world. There are many idioms and phrases used by native speakers of the language but they hardly are included in the traditional lesson materials. Through specific Internet sites, the students become familiar with these idioms and phrases and most important is that they learn how to use them in a context. From a cultural point of view, the students become familiar with the turn taking habits, addressing different people, greetings, invitations and many cultural related issues. What is important to keep in mind is that the teacher must create an appropriate learning environment to suit the situation and conform to the needs of the class. A learning environment for the training of communicative competence has to take into consideration the complexity of human experience and the semantic flexibility that allows speakers to use meanings according to their communicative purposes.

1. Introduction

"What skills are important for business graduates?" "Are business schools graduates prepared for today's tough job market?" These are fundamental questions to be taken into consideration when teaching and preparing business students for their future career. Depending on their career choice, either computer or communication skills may be more important for them. However, in most fields, being strong in both is the ideal, and almost all faculties have the resources to help their students master technical and communication skills.

Most people spend most of their professional lives writing, speaking, and listening. According to a survey implemented in 500 American businesses, over 90% of the personnel officials stated that increased communication skills are needed for success in the 21st century. The importance of communication is not surprising considering the impressive amount of time people spend communicating on the job. A study based on responses from over 1000 employers at Fortune 1000 companies found that workers send and receive an average of 1798 messages each day via

telephone, email, faxes, papers, and face-to-face communications. Some experts have estimated that the average business executive spends 75 to 80 percent of the time communicating, about 45 minutes of every hour. (1) The Internet is one of the most recent and advanced tools in education provided by the advance of technology. The Internet can be useful with any skill area in learning a foreign language, being a great resource in practicing language skills. Having strong written, and oral, business communication skills will make business graduates more competitive and more productive on the job. As multimedia technology becomes more accessible to teachers and learners of foreign languages, it has become a practical tool to improve communication skills such as listening and speaking. Students can interact with textual, aural, and visual media in a wide range of formats. This paper presents different multimedia means used in foreign language (English) classes with business students meant to improve their communication skills, speaking and listening in particular.

2. The advantages and disadvantages of using computer-based means in teaching Business English

Together with great technological development of computers, increased speed and processing power, language learning computer-based means is undergoing a continuous change, becoming more and more elaborate and resourceful. The Internet activity can be particularly useful in teaching Business English to business students. It is a "comfortable method to learn some particular expressions in business English" and "imaginative". (2) According to Evans (1996),the results of a survey applied to students showed that students not only used the Internet activity on their own (74%) but preferred doing so (75%). (3)

However, the use of the Internet is more effective with some skills more than others. For example, it is more effective in speaking and listening than in translation. Although teachers' reaction to the Internet usage varies from those who strongly oppose it as a place with too much and very disorganized information, to those who are in favour of it, if the Internet is used effectively and under teacher supervision, it can be a good source and tool in delivering education. When teaching a foreign language, "The internet is [a] suitable place to practise languages as it offers the possibility, with the right software, of using images and audio resources at the same time, combining sounds and images as in communicative situations in the real world. It also provides users with a highly appealing and innovative format". (Labayen et. al., 2005:9)

2.1 The advantages of using computer-based means in teaching a foreign language

Some of the advantages considered when using multimedia in teaching Business English are: easy and quick access to words, sentences and files, advanced searching possibilities, automatic test giving and checking, progress evaluating and report generating facilities. There are many CD-ROMs containing glossaries and online scripts, so that when problems are encountered, the students can get online help. Moreover, many students wish to learn or use their computer skills, therefore the opportunity of developing computer skills along with developing their language skills may seem attractive to them. It also helps the students to become familiar with different aspects of the culture of the language they are learning.

Business students need a lot of help and resources to practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills, especially when they are learning specialized vocabulary in a foreign language. By using the Internet, the students have access to a wide range of audiovisual materials from radio, TV to videos in the target language. They have access to comprehension reading exercises, writing of abstracts and letters, vocabulary learning through business articles, searching for jobs or for a certain product, translation from English into Romanian or from Romanian into English and many more.   Apart from the multimedia packages on CD-ROMs, a large variety of exercises and examples can be found on the Internet. Except for the main portals: https://www.google.ro/, www.yahoo.com, www.bing.com, there are also direct links to specialized pages for business

English teaching and learning: resource pages: http://www.better-english.com/vocabulary.htm, online business dictionaries: http://www.businessdictionary.com/, business correspondence pages: http://www.englishclub.com/business-english/correspondence-samples.htm.

The use of the Internet is beneficial for the teachers, too, giving fast and competent language information, covering various aspects of use, facilitating lesson preparation by providing vocabulary, texts or recordings for classroom use, or providing resources for different vocabulary presentation. Electronic dictionaries, (http://dictionary.reference.com/, http://ro-en.ro/, http://hallo.ro/), for instance, have become a must in teaching Business English to Romanian students. Dictionaries undergo the process of transformation into more practical tools, becoming a combination of a variety of components. One of the main characteristics of CD-ROM dictionaries is providing fast access to words in hyperlinked word entries. Another important aspect is advanced searching possibilities (searching with and/or/not operators, specifying frequency for written or spoken words, style, part of speech), which is not only word search, but also multimedia search (looking for pictures or sound effects), subject search (words relating to a given topic), word origin search or pronunciation search. Electronic dictionaries store huge amounts of data, examples, grammatical information, definitions, pictures, synonyms or related words, interactive pronunciation practice and automatic feedback.

2.2. The disadvantages of using computer-based means in teaching a foreign language

At the same time, there are disadvantages that teachers and students alike should be aware of when using the Internet: lack of a person in charge of the information found on the Internet, easy access to improper content, surfing the web during and after the class time for the materials not connected with the learning process, or virus threat. Searching for materials online can be sometimes time-consuming and many students find it difficult to read papers on a computer screen. Also, there is the threat to be covered in too much information with little control over the quality and accuracy of the contents. Therefore, a certain technical expertise is required from both teachers and students. Other disadvantages include the high cost of the hardware, lack of quality software, and the necessity of additional training both for instructors and users. Financial limitations also include the investment in training for the use of the Internet in language teaching and learning requires some technological knowledge and computer skills from both teachers and learners. In addition to these problems, Rowe (1983) considers that one of the most serious drawbacks would be, as he describes, "Teaching language for the sake of language." (Rowe 1983:192). What the author means is the overemphasis on reading and writing. Yet, according to Rowe, language is two-way communication: listening and speaking, reading and writing. Furthermore, the written language is not a separate reality independent of the spoken language. "Language is a skill not just a body of knowledge. You can read for weeks about skiing and memorize all the rules, but you don't really start learning how to ski until you strap on the skis and head down a snowy slope." (Rowe 1983:192). Yet, the use of computer and the Internet is essential for the development of listening comprehension and oral skills. According to Kruse (2004), the web content can be updated easily and the information can be in use immediately. So, this allows the lesson contents to be much more updated which may eventually cause high levels of awareness and success. Also, Kruse (2004) emphasises the fact that the cost of using computer systems and Internet can be relatively low. (4) Video and audio resources represent an effective solution to development of listening and speaking skills of foreign language learners because they are available on the Internet and the maintenance costs are relatively low.

3. Means to develop listening skills to business students

If a student wants to develop good communication skills, he has to be a good listener. To be a good speaker requires being a good listener and a good communicator. In fact, communication starts with listening. In a business meeting, for example, it is very important for business people

to listen to their counterparts carefully, attentively and with an open mind. They can know other people's view more precisely by listening unbiased. In fact, better communication is listening more and more. It is better to start thinking process after listening and understanding others. A well known quoted phrase says "Think twice before you speak, because your words and influence will plant the seed of either success or failure in the mind of another."(5)

Listening skills have been regarded as the brain's ability to perceive and analyse music, heard aurally. According to Pratt (1990), "Aural perception is self-evidently indispensable in musical activity" (Pratt 1990:1). Karpinski (2000) suggests that, without aural skills, musicians are "usually condemned to thinking about music, without learning to think in music". (Karpinski 2000:4). In face to face interaction, listening enables complex interpretive processes. "Processing requirements such as reciprocity of interlocutors' perspectives, the etcetera principle (filling in the gaps of what one hears with knowledge of the language and the world), and combined retrospective and prospective meanings all come into play."(Meskill 1996:2)

Research indicates that even though some foreign language students are often required to speak in English in their social settings, they mostly enjoy listening especially when they are watching television or films.(6) Therefore, using videos and films in classroom can be very enjoyable for the students because for many of them learning is usually associated with boredom and dullness. Listening is one of the fundamental language skills because it is a key to the acquisition of language. In our case, business students need to be able to listen effectively because in their future career they will have to prove confidence and proficiency in all areas of their English. Also, due to the fact that business people and future business graduates will have to establish contacts with foreign business partners, they have to get acquainted with highly ambiguous factors such as accent, pronunciation, or speed. Students need to aurally comprehend far more than they need to speak. That is why in Business English classes, for the students to achieve communicative competence, greater emphasis must be placed on the creation of a listening environment which reflects and responds to factors encountered in the real business world. Another aspect to be considered in a business environment is represented by the details. Negotiating or making deals online require the ability to understand the detail, too. Business students should be able to deduce divisions between words to recognize elision, contracted forms, assimilation, and linking characteristics. Therefore, they should perceive listening as a way of helping their speaking by giving them expressions, exposing them to language, and allowing them to apply it in a business environment. Modeling the real world, decision making in a simulated environment occurs under pressure, often including conflict, emotional factors, and difficult circumstances. Simulation creates a unique environment for developing and executing decision-making skills. In a listening class for business students, the teacher should use authentic listening texts rather than coursebook texts whenever possible. Some of the main sources for authentic listening are: recordings of authentic texts from the media, films (e.g. "Margin Call"), live talk - listening (e.g. a business person developing businesses in Romania; students react well to listening to someone speaking especially for them. They can notice the body language which will help them understand better. The speaker can moderate the speed of the language and students have the opportunity to interact with the speaker), recordings of native speakers or other English speakers (e.g. radio recordings or TV/video/DVD). The advantages of authentic texts are that they are topical and varied in terms of genre and content, are spoken with a variety of accents by different types of speakers, and contain real language, with current expressions and natural hesitations, repetitions and so on. Radio is one of the most accessible forms of listening, but sometimes they prove to be difficult for the students to listen to because they cannot see the body language or the facial expressions of the speaker. The most successful resources in listening classes proved to be DVD/video recordings because they allow students to have access to more information when listening since they also have visual clues as to meaning. The Internet is a powerful source for the students to practise their listening. There are many sites which are

interactive and allow students to listen or listen and watch. Sites such as: http://www.businessenglishsite.com/business-listening-test1.html, http://www.businessenglishmaterials.com/ have activities especially designed for business students. Also, www.youtube.com is broadcasting many listening comprehension improving videos. YouTube is a video upload-watch-download site and is increasing its popularity day by day. According to statistics, the site has more than six million videos and the total time necessary to watch all these videos is 9.305 years. (7) This huge video pool offers priceless opportunities to practice listening in an entertaining and convenient environment.

4. Developing speaking skills by means of computer

According to Chaney (1998), speaking is "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" (Chaney 1998:13). In teaching and learning a foreign language speaking plays a crucial role. In the today's business world, the requirements for business graduates in terms of communicative skills in a foreign language are high. By teaching speaking teachers should improve students' communicative skills, because, only in that way, students can express themselves and learn how to adapt to social and cultural rules specific to each communicative circumstance. Practising speaking, students improve fluency (speaking smoothly), pronunciation (saying words properly), and enunciation (saying words/phrases clearly). Fluency can be improved through speeches or presentations, group discussions, role plays, negotiations and debates, interviews and meetings, chatting in small groups. Pronunciation is the ability to say words properly with the correct sounds in the correct places. In our case, business students need to listen to native English business people and then practice the pronunciation of specific vowels and to try to understand movement and location of mouth and tongue when making sounds. Enunciation is a very important aspect of speaking in that poor enunciation can make someone almost impossible to understand. Again, business students need to be exposed to native speakers and, then, to work on trouble word combinations, on reductions, on sentence level stress points, on word level stress points, or on sentence level intonation patterns.

The most important aspect of teaching speaking to foreign language learners is interaction. The teachers need to create a communicative environment based on real-life situations, authentic activities, and meaningful tasks that promote oral language. By using this method, students will have the opportunity of communicating with each other in the target language. Thus, teachers should create a classroom environment where students have real-life communication, authentic activities, and meaningful tasks that promote oral language. Business students must adapt their presentations to different business circumstances. It is useful for students to know that speech should differ in formality, such as when speaking to business people. They also need to learn about the differences among various dialects. Examples from the media may provide occasions for different forms of speech. Oral presentations can be derived from newspaper and magazine articles, as well as business reports. Dramatic acting and watching plays may provide the richest opportunity to see how character and circumstance affect speech. (8) Dialogues are useful in learning standard phrases and vocabulary used in common business situations. Storytelling is an excellent method to teach speaking for students can briefly summarize a tale or story they heard beforehand, or they may create their own stories. Story telling also helps students express ideas in the format of beginning, development, and ending, including the characters and setting.

There are many resourceful sites that can be used in Business English classes, such as: http://www.eslgold.com/speaking.html (for situations for practice, speaking tasks, quizzes, phrases for conversation, business communication tips), http://www.eslflow.com/roleplaysdramatheatregames.html (for role-plays),

http://esl.about.com/od/businessenglishdialogues/Business_English_Role_Plays_Dialogues.htm
(for business dialogues).

5. Conclusions
The technological explosion, the economic crisis and the more and more challenging requirements of the job market are main factors causing the urge to learn foreign languages. The urge of the situation calls for changes in educational practices in order to provide better results in less time and at an acceptable cost level. According to many researchers, the key to achieve these results is the computer, namely the Internet. Computer-based communication technology provides tools for language learners to improve their language skills. Learners are exposed to numerous software programs to improve their reading, listening, speaking skills and grammar knowledge. Texts and visuals are aids to language processing when appearing in conjunction with the aural text. The motivational aspect of video is as an advantage for language instruction. Combined media enhance target language processing, therefore rendering input more direct and obvious for the language acquisition process. The Internet offers teachers and students an impressive amount of materials and communication possibilities to improve their language teaching and learning. Yet, for the successful integration of the online environment in language courses, both teachers and students need to be prepared to adopt new roles and use the available technology in appropriate ways. Students, especially business students can only benefit from technology – based activities if these activities are relevant to their needs and interest.

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