White Paper
The virtual class in language learning.
Good and bad practice.

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Introduction

Like Aesop's "Tongues"[1], the virtual class can be the best and the worst of things.

The Virtual class is a technological distance learning device which allows a group of learners to have an experience similar to that of a face-to-face training group. Used correctly, it can work well both for learning and for budget.

Alas, there is now more often a misappropriation of this tool for marketing purposes, and this creates disastrous results from both a pedagogical and a budgetary point of view.

Good practice for the virtual class

In principal, the virtual class combines the main advantages of face-to-face group learning and the attractive logistical features of distance learning: rapid interaction, simplified organisation and, above all, group dynamics.

Several studies show that in similar conditions, virtual class training and face-to-face training can obtain similar results.

The results of both are identically affected by the conditions of the training

The right conditions are:

- A calm environment
- A homogeneous group
- A small group (restricted to 8 learners, maximum)
- The same participants over several sessions
- A good teacher

[1]Aesop's master asked him to go and purchase, for a banquet, the best food and only the best. Aesop only brought back tongues! For starter, main course and desert, only tongues! In the beginning the guests were pleased but quickly became disgusted.
- Why did you buy only this?
- But tongue is the best thing. It is the thing than binds civilisation, the key to the sciences, with it we can teach, persuade, and rule the assembly…
- Well then, for tomorrow, buy me the worst of things, I want variety and the same guests will be here.
Aesop bought tongues once more, saying that they were also the worst of things, the mother of all arguments, the nurse-maid of complaint, the source of war, slander and lies.

In these conditions, both face-to-face classes and virtual classes produce a group identity which allows each participant to benefit from the positivity created by cohesion, to make connections and to build knowledge together.

A very bad practice: open and constant access virtual class

The idea of a virtual class that is constantly open and available to learn a language sounds great in theory. Several distance learning solutions propose this solution at a fixed rate included in the price of their e-learning package. Unfortunately, as we will see, this practice removes all of the attractive pedagogical features of a virtual class and proves to be bad budgetary decision.

The teacher is the conductor of the group, it is the teacher who defines the common goals and who breathes life into an atmosphere in which learning and teamwork can thrive.

This complex task requires both great people and great professional skills.

The first job of the teacher is to reassure the learners, to guarantee the security and comfort that they need to be able to learn. This is as shown in the lower levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (physiological needs, security, social recognition).

In a group training programme, the first session always plays a special role: the group gets to know each other, the learners are reassured, connections and trust are established, and a common group project and working rules are established.

When a virtual class is open access, the teacher and the learners find themselves in a new group that they do not know every time. Each time is like the first class! Some are using the virtual class interface for the first time and are getting used to the tool. During a one-hour session the socialisation work needed to create a group takes up half of the time, and all of this work is lost when the session ends.

The self-service virtual class quickly becomes no more than a semi-open discussion space in the target language.

More often than not, participants leave the session before the end and this disturbs the entire group; not to mention certain classes which learners can join after the lesson has started.

Participation rates are very low and good teachers lose motivation because both the personal and the teaching experience is extremely frustrating.

Most of the time when the cost of a 24/7 virtual class is included in the package price of the e-learning platform it looks harmless in the eyes of the purchasing department: in fact, the service providers propose unlimited access speaking practice and, thus the e-learning platform covers, in principle, all training needs. This theoretically exempts the trainees from the need to participate in more structured group learning or in individual lessons.

THERE ARE HIDDEN COSTS

As was detailed above, in one hour of 24/7 virtual class, the first half hour is spent creating a group dynamic and the second half hour in open discussion. If the training takes place during work time the cost of the time spent is greater than the gains made in learning. These training courses are not widely followed; they represent a false economy for the business.

The service provider however, anticipates low rates of participation and therefore, knowing the very limited number of participants, can easily include the virtual class "for free" in the offer due to the very low number of teachers needed to facilitate it 24/7.

Open access virtual classes are used very little and demotivate learners who, firstly, feel guilty for not using this tool to improve their speaking, and, secondly, form a low opinion of the virtual class and therefore of distance learning in general.

> *24/7 virtual classes can therefore damage the overall effectiveness of a training programme and make it less relevant from a budgetary point of view.*

Good practice to optimise oral expression

A well-structured and planned virtual class works very well from a pedagogical standpoint insofar as it is based on homogenous groups who continue to meet over several sessions.

It is recommended to organise groups by level, by professional interest, either within a company or across several companies.

This type of training is more economical than face-to-face training for logistical reasons, on the other hand, there are no economies of scale. The quality of the teacher and the homogeneity of the groups are all that assures a good ROI.

Individual distance learning with a teacher represents an undeniable visible cost, but used in a considered fashion, the return is satisfactory both in terms of motivation and in the improvement in spoken language.

Social learning is the most economical way to stimulate both written and oral expression in either a synchronous or asynchronous, independent or semi-supervised manner

It is not enough to simply provide learners with social networking tools and expect them to spontaneously interact in a diligent fashion and improve their foreign language expression.

Social learning must be conceived as a complete learning ecosystem that must be maintained and in which trainers have a certain role.

- Learning communities allow for the creation of groups who end up knowing each other and creating a dynamic alternating synchronous and asynchronous discussions, in both written and oral format.
- The participants each have technical, linguistic and people skills, which they share within the community of learners.

The time spent by a trainer to facilitate or fuel the discussion within the learner communities has a much greater pedagogical impact than the equivalent time spent facilitating an open access virtual class. Every hour that the teacher spends on the social network, either in a synchronous or asynchronous fashion has an augmented effect. For example, a teacher can start a debate on a topic, ask for personal accounts, organise a synchronous session, record it, post it, comment on it, and even correct written discussions between learners.

Conclusion

The virtual class in its current form is only one of a number of training tools. In order to be economically viable, it must be used sparingly and in the right conditions.

Each component of a blended learning package has its advantages and its disadvantages; depending on the objectives for each learner, a specific one will be given priority.

| | Practicality /logistics | Group dynamics | Economies of scale | Effectiveness | | | |
| | | | | Comprehension | | Expression | |
				Oral	Written	Oral	Written
Face-to-face group lessons	☹ ☹	☺ ☺	☹	☺	☺	☺	☹
Face-to-face individual lessons	☹	☹ ☹	☹ ☹	☺	☺	☺ ☺	☹
Individual distance learning	☺	☹ ☹	☹ ☹	☺	☺	☺ ☺	☹
Planned access virtual class	☺	☺ ☺	☹	☺	☹	☺	☹
Open access virtual class	☺ ☺	☹	☺	☹	☹	☹	☹
Online independent learning	☺ ☺	☹ ☹	☺ ☺	☺ ☺	☺ ☺	☹ ☹	☺
Social Learning	☺ ☺	☺	☺ ☺	☺	☺ ☺	☺	☺ ☺

Contact

7SPEAKING SAS
27 RUE TAITBOUT
75009 PARIS - FRANCE

TEL: +33 1 44 75 09 77
contact@7speaking.com
www.7speaking.com