

Using Technology Supported Learning Within The Context Of An Interpreting (BSL/English) Course

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Abstract

The rapid developments in communication technologies and visual media have provided unexpected benefits for deaf sign language users. Webcams, videophones, SMS, MMS and email have facilitated greater access to information, other deaf people and wider society. It is natural then, that the visual focus of these technologies also presents excellent opportunities for the learning and teaching of sign languages. This paper provides an analytical account of the planning, implementation and evaluation of digital video resources within a series of level zero modules. It explores the benefits and limitations of a Technology Supported Learning (TSL) solution within the context of a sign language classroom, and draws upon current learning and teaching theories that have been influential in the project's development. The discussion also provides insight into a personal reflection and understanding of the role of eLearning in the tertiary sector, which is made evident by the transition from behaviourist to constructivist usage of the chosen media. The better versions of these approaches, such as that articulated by Laurillard, are based within the context of sensible reflexive theories of human endeavour. These reflections are then combined with student evaluations to form the basis of future recommendations for the use of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) within sign language teaching. It is clear that there is immense potential for effective eLearning within this field. Therefore, the challenge for this project was to create positive change, which would advance the TSL in current use whilst working within the technological limitations presented.

Introduction

The rapid developments in communication technologies and visual media have provided unexpected benefits for deaf sign language users (Power and Power, 2004). Webcams, videophones, SMS, MMS and email have facilitated greater access to information, other deaf people and wider society. It is natural then, that the visual focus of these technologies also presents excellent opportunities for the learning and teaching of sign languages. E-learning in this field has been optimised so far with the development of online training courses such as Sign Online (DWP 2005), Art Signs and CD-ROM phrase books. Some universities offering interpreter-training courses have installed digital labs, giving students the opportunity to use webcams to record signed pieces and email them to tutors for feedback.

Over the last five years, the University of Wolverhampton department of Sign Languages has seen the move towards DVD and CD technology reflected in the resources and demands of the student body. However, the transferal of its irreplaceable BSL archive to a more user-friendly digital format is a long-term process. Therefore most British Sign Language (BSL) teaching still takes place within VHS-based language labs, and relies on an extensive archive of video cassettes for student materials. Despite this, the use of video technology is deeply embedded within the learning and teaching programme from the very beginning of the student experience.

However, little research has been undertaken to assess how effectively this technology is implemented, to what extent it enhances student learning, or if in fact it does at all. Therefore, the challenge for this research project was to create positive change, which would

advance the Technology Supported Learning (TSL) in current use, while working within the technological limitations outlined above.

To achieve this, research was centred on a series of level zero modules using two groups of fifteen students. These are designed as an intensive course in British Sign Language (BSL)¹ for beginners with a practical, rather than theoretical focus. The student profile included diversity within socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, and also in the age and educational experience of the cohort. It was felt that as new students to the university, a positive introduction to technology supported learning would not only equip them with the necessary skills at the earliest opportunity, but would also realign the variety of student expectations regarding the nature of learning in higher education. It is also widely agreed that the early weeks of a student's university experience are crucial in terms of retention (May and Bousted, 2003, 2004). Therefore, increased interaction with other students could potentially provide a support network that could go some way to addressing this issue.

This small-scale pilot project was designed to compare two ways of using the available technology, both differing greatly in the levels of student interaction they required. They were housed on the University of Wolverhampton Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which, in contrast to VHS, allowed most students a greater level of off-site access, and thus complied with the idea of flexible learning as advocated by HEFCE (2005).

The first TSL solution was designed, as suggested by Littlejohn (2003), with a particular 'driver' in mind. In this instance, this was to resolve a particular teaching problem. In all of the basic sign language modules examined, evaluation questionnaires delivered by the students consistently requested handouts that represented BSL vocabulary items in pictorial form, or even written lists of the vocabulary covered in the session. Sign language is not standardised, has no widely used notation form, and the most comprehensive pictorial dictionary was created over twenty years ago. Therefore, these important resources – widely available when learning spoken languages – are very difficult to source and produce. Written lists of vocabulary are easy to create, but are of little use to students when they need to recall handshapes or movements. In the classroom, such a lack of resources increases levels of anxiety, as students feel increased pressure to retain information. Such anxiety is only increased by the pace of learning that this intensive, practical course demands.

The proposed solution utilising technology was to film lists of vocabulary relating to the different topics each week, and then upload these on to WOLF, the University of Wolverhampton Virtual Learning Environment (see Appendix 1). These clips were then supported by uploading separate Word documents in the group folder, containing translations of the signs. Students had access to these over one semester and then gave qualitative feedback about their experiences with both online tasks through an evaluation questionnaire (see Appendices 3 and 4).

The questionnaires for both TSL solutions provided a cohesive set of responses, from which may be drawn four main areas for discussion. Each raises relevant questions and issues surrounding technology supported learning that are applicable across many disciplines, and the responses provide an interesting insight into the student experience.

In general, the student feedback regarding the online BSL clips was centred around a single theme:

“An excellent reminder”;

“A useful visual record”;

“I used it for revision”;

¹ On completion of these modules, and the corresponding semester two modules, the students are equipped with the sign language skills that they need to access level one of the Interpreting(BSL/Eng) degree. Other students can enter the course directly at level one with CACDP Level two accreditation.

“It helped me remember all the signs we’d covered in class”.

Establishing this reusable learning resource not only reinforced the learning that had taken place in the classroom, but also had the potential to maximise class time in other ways. Maier and Warren (2003) state that online video clips can serve to “prepare students in advance and make the best use of their time”. Although the English translation of the signs could have been incorporated into the video, a separate list enabled students to watch the video clips without translation, and also test their own knowledge. Moreover, it serves to support students who had been unable to attend class, most often because of family and work commitments, and gives them the opportunity to keep up with a certain amount of content that they would not find in any text or resource book.

The student response to the resource was, according to the feedback, very positive, although it did raise concerns over the level of learning it promoted. In response to the question, “What are the advantages of this learning resource?” students commented on physical features regarding access, time and flexibility. When asked directly about how the online learning resource improved their learning, all of the students’ comments were linked to memory and knowledge.

It seems that even though the learning resource has many useful attributes, in actual fact the resource has a limited connection to learning at all. It supports learning at a very basic level as defined by Bloom (1956), Marton and Saljo (1997). The above approach focuses solely on course content, which limits the learning experience, as learners have no reason to interact (Oliver, 2002). The desire to find ‘the driver’, and conveniently resolve an ongoing issue raised through student feedback, lost sight of the competencies and outcomes that should form the basis of lesson plans and face-to-face sessions.

Research by Marton and Saljo (1976 cited Biggs 2003, p.11) split student methods of learning into two. The surface approach is where a learner skims through allowing facts to be absorbed but not the overall point the author is making. So here we are exposing students to ‘new’ knowledge for assimilation not necessarily for understanding. In the deep approach, the learner delves below the surface to understand the meaning. Biggs’ definition of good teaching (2003, p.13) is one in which the deep approach is encouraged, and to maximise the chances of this happening, he suggested a theory of Constructive Alignment (2003, p.32), where levels of understanding are defined which become the activities that students perform.

These activities are encouraged by the teaching methods and addressed by assessment tasks, allowing an evaluation of how well students have met their objectives. The twin principles are constructivism in learning - teaching methods become a learning catalyst - and alignment in teaching - teaching methods are aligned with activities to trap students into learning. The video clips adhere more to the behaviourist model relying more heavily on teacher dominance (Atherton, 2005).

Practitioners who emphasise the content delivery side of e-learning very often have a behaviourist or cognitive conception of learning, whether consciously or not. They focus on the development of clearly presented content, facilities for testing the learner and multimedia materials for increasing learner motivation (Mason, 2002).

It is common for university staff and students to regard online technology as another didactic tool, a shelf for lecture notes and other resources. Evans (2000, p82) defines a framework of five stances, which represent ways of thinking about Internet technology. The approach described above is categorised as ‘Neutralitarian’, however, this study sought to take practical steps towards the ‘Transformationalist’ viewpoint, which embraces the potential for TSL to transform pedagogy and curriculum.

When compared with the students' responses to the same questions about the second online task, it is immediately obvious how students are engaged in different learning processes. They reacted to the video clips on a surface level by focusing on knowledge and facts, whereas the responses to the forum indicated that the students were reflecting, comparing and assessing progress in their own learning.

However, it is important to note that memory skills do play an important part in the learning and teaching of languages, especially during the early stages. Feedback showed that students appreciated and used the resource, and requested more of the same. It also served as a simple introduction to the VLE, and possibly resulted in a more confident approach to the forum.

As stated previously, the medium of digital video streaming has much potential within the learning and teaching of BSL. However, in order to facilitate a deeper level of learning, the focus must be placed less on the video itself and more on the activities that structure its existence:

The epithet 'interactive' is applied to video because a cassette allows students to carry out activities in between watching sections, and to carry out analytical exercises on the video material itself. These are excellent ways of using video cassette, and of exploiting its controllability, but they are not interactive in the strong sense, and are essentially the same kind of activities as reading a book, re-reading it, analysing passages, doing activities between reading, etc. The medium itself cannot provide intrinsic feedback on what the student is doing. It is 'active video' perhaps, but not 'interactive video'. (Laurillard, 1993, p117)

Following on from Laurillard's (1993) important distinction, there are still certain limitations in the level of interactivity it is possible to create. If none of the students in the class have prior experience of sign language, much of the start of the course focuses naturally on 'lower order' competencies, such as comprehension and knowledge. Even though these can be approached from a constructivist perspective, it could be argued that the level of students' skills and knowledge does not allow enough flexibility to warrant an online task so early in these modules.

Therefore, an opportunity to implement the TSL solution that formed the second part of the research was taken towards the end of the semester. The driver for this was based around a module outcome which was to "Demonstrate elementary translation skills from BSL to written English". As this involved working towards the written modality, it was evident that there was real potential for the WOLF Forum to deepen the learning experience as well as offering opportunity for formative assessment in a constructive, peer-led environment.

This series of tasks was designed to combine interaction with the learning material (digital video clip), and social interaction about the learning material (peers and teacher). These are two contexts of interaction identified by Bates (1995) as "important to learning". Learning outcomes were identified for the task, and broken down to achieve the following:

- i) Apply knowledge of communicative translation principles to a BSL/English translation.
- ii) Provide constructive feedback to peers' work

First of all, students were required to watch a signed video clip in the VLE and understand the content. They were then instructed to apply the theory that had been discussed in class by writing a communicative translation, post this on the forum and then respond to the work of two of their peers (see Appendix 2).

As the task progressed, the lecturer responded to the first few postings using the same pattern of feedback that had been suggested the students use, and at the end of the week an email was sent to the class summarising points of good practice and attaching a model answer and a copy of the postings attached. This allowed the students to review their work and that of their colleagues, and also gave them the time to reflect on the interactions. It also enabled students to read the group feedback and then go directly to the primary source of the good practice. Again, on completion of the task, students were asked to complete a series of open-ended questions relating to the activity and the quality of their learning experience (see Appendices 3 and 4).

It is interesting that the most common student response in the questionnaire revealed the extent to which students valued the interactive nature of the task:

- “It’s good to see where you could improve yourself”;
- “Interacting with the others improved my understanding”;
- “It was really useful to see the different interpretations and interact with the group”;
- “It helped me to see if I was on the right track”;
- “It helps you to realise you’re not the only one struggling to translate”;
- “It helped to have feedback and input from other students”.

The questionnaires show that the students have a keen sense of the value of learning from each other, thus reinforcing the constructivist theory that individuals learn as a result of interactions with others within a particular social context (Lewis and Allen, 2005). The level of reflection displayed by one particular student was such that, upon being impressed with another student’s posting, he went back to his own translation and approached it in a different way.

It is interesting that a minority of the students also highlighted a different type of interaction. For them, a distinct benefit of the online task was the opportunity it presented for group bonding and social contact:

- “It helped to get to know the others a bit better.”
- “I learnt more about my classmates.”

It is perceived that a key reason for the implementation of e-learning, a concept broadly defined by HEFCE (2005) as “the use of technologies in learning opportunities”, is as a mechanism to cope with recent changes in the modern tertiary classroom and to radically restructure higher education (Cornford and Pollock, 2003) Ryan et al (2000) paint the following picture of the contemporary university:

The reality in most campus universities today is that due to the growth in student numbers, courses are structured around large impersonal lectures, where the teacher dispenses ‘the knowledge’, and small tutorial groups where some level of interaction takes place about the subject matter. Individual interaction between student and tutor is limited and often rare. (p101)

There are obvious features about the small class of students in this study that do not comply with these oft-cited reasons for incorporating TSL. Indeed, when Littlejohn (2003) encourages the question, "What value does technology add to this activity?", the answer may not immediately be clear. The class is small (fifteen students), which already fosters strong teacher/student relationships, and the practical nature of language learning promotes a high level of interaction in the classroom. This is not the typical university learning environment and it could be argued that it would have been simpler to translate the task into a classroom activity.

However, as student responses reveal, an online forum discussion is far from an extraneous exercise within smaller classes. Widening participation and lifelong learning encourage a new profile of students who fit university around work, family, travel and other commitments (Biggs, 2003, Ramsden, 2003). These commitments outside the university have significant consequences as outlined by Martin and Webb (2001).

Perhaps even more damaging, the informal and social exchanges between students, such a large part of the experience of most undergraduate students in the past, are also less likely to occur (p55).

If students are only on campus at scheduled times, they can forfeit the incidental learning that is an important feature of socialising with colleagues. Even within a small group it is possible for students to remain isolated, as is potentially illustrated by the responses to the questionnaire. The online environment obviously broke down some social barriers for a few people, who, even after eight weeks of being together, had not yet formed a cohesive unit within class.

An asynchronous learning activity is an excellent way to address this as it encourages interaction with other students. In contrast to synchronous communication, such as chat rooms, it does not require all participants to be present and active at the same time. They are not required to respond immediately to questions or interventions, and can contribute at a time convenient to the individual (Ryan et al, 2000). It also allows for individuality in terms of personality, pace of learning and linguistic differences:

The more introverted students can reflect on other contributions, contribute in their own time and increase their level of input. Everyone can contribute more equally. This is particularly important in international courses where students are studying in a second language. (Ryan et al, 2000, p109)

Although there are no international students on the Foundation year of the Interpreting course, there is one deaf student for whom neither English nor BSL are first languages. In this way, the time delay inherent in asynchronous activity could potentially provide essential space to form confident expressions of views and opinions.

Also, the implementation of a forum task that can be accessed off-site has obvious benefits to these students as it emphasises time on task (Chickering and Ehrmann, 1996). The work can be efficient as well as effective without hours spent commuting to and from the university. Even within the small group studied for this paper, at least half needed to make a journey of an hour or more to attend lectures.

Further to this, Shabha (2000) proposes that online learning forums can also improve opportunities for students in relation to performance levels. He claims that many shy, inhibited students are often intimidated by the conventional classroom environment and rarely ask questions or voice their opinions. However, the communication methods of the online environment, chat-rooms and forums can provide these individuals with increased confidence and are often less intimidating. It would seem that online learning offers a greater variety of people whom are in many different situations, the opportunity to proceed in HE,

perhaps also offering a chance of performance improvement to a selection of individuals. Brace-Govan and Clulow (2001) conducted a study comparing face-to-face with forums, from a learners perspective. Students were interviewed by telephone to measure their views about online learning. The students responses proved to be overwhelmingly positive and often enthusiastic about the amount of flexibility offered by remote participation, something they considered to be important in view of the other commitments they had, for example, work. Relationships can also be fostered within the context of an online environment and is a powerful medium particularly for part time work based students who find the erratic attendance patterns and study difficult, O'Donoghue and Singh (2001).

The final area highlighted in this study is the students' responses when asked if contributions to the forum should be assessed. Given that these language modules are already quite heavily assessed, the students were unexpectedly positive about the idea:

“Yes, for the feedback”;

“Yes, but not as harsh as pass or fail”;

“Yes, but it shouldn't be given a mark – just feedback”;

“Yes, it's always good to have feedback”;

“Yes, to learn how to improve and check progress”.

It is interesting and encouraging, therefore, to see that the students had focused on assessment (a term that was left undefined) as a tool *for* learning, rather than *of* learning. The process they requested was essentially formative assessment.

Ramsden (2003, p186) cites a study which reveals that, “an important contributory cause of student failure was an almost complete absence of feedback in their first term of study”.

Although in-class peer feedback, alongside teacher feedback, had been an essential part of the course so far, it usually happened in pairs or small groups. This makes it difficult to monitor the level and quality of feedback the students are giving to each other, owing to the transient nature of the spoken word. Therefore, another obvious benefit to forum usage is that the written peer feedback acts as a lasting indicator of their development in this area, as well as an effective way for students to monitor their own progress.

However, it is also possible that their focusing on their need for feedback could be an indicator that students felt they did not receive enough during the task itself.

This is not entirely surprising when the quality of peer feedback, an important outcome, is taken into account. Indeed, only one of the fifteen participants successfully achieved this outcome. All of the students felt confident in feeding back on areas they liked; however, most chose to ignore the instruction about making constructive comments. This lays bare any assumptions about the easy transferal of verbal skills to the written word. Despite displaying constructive verbal feedback skills during a structured class activity, students were evidently reluctant to transfer these skills to the written modality demanded by the online task.

Benfield (2002) also stresses the importance of tutor feedback, especially as students do not receive non-verbal responses such as “confirming eye-contact or approving smiles” in the online environment:

Even the simplest online events, from the submission of an assignment to the entry into a discussion of a previously reticent student, or the uneven contributions of members of a particular group, will need to be actively acknowledged in a way that is different to the face-to-face context. (p4)

It could be argued that absence of this is even more keenly felt amongst students who are used to operating within a BSL classroom. Non-verbal communication is not only a social

strategy; it is inherent in the grammar of the language, and therefore fundamental to any successful communication process.

Although the provision of feedback arose as an issue for the students, the advantage from a teaching perspective was the removal of the need to mark thirty individual transcripts. Feedback could be given to the group as a whole, identifying patterns and mistakes that many students made. Praising students for elements of their work served to motivate and encourage them or if any students posted work that needed personal correction or comment, it could be delivered in an email as advised by Benfield (2002) and Littlejohn (2003).

Conclusion

The structure of the forum was loosely based on the facilitative mode proposed by Heron's (1976, 1999) six category analysis model, which includes releasing tension, eliciting and supporting. This was chosen in preference to the more authoritative mode, as all the students were new to this mode of study and to the University and, whilst issues to confront, inform and sustain their interest in the discussion forum were developed, the direction was mutually agreed rather than tutor-dictated. This loose but structured style had more appeal to this cohort of students, but they felt that if the group had not been undergraduates much more direction would have been necessary.

Teachers and students collaborate, as do students and their peers. Garrison (1997) argues effectively that the use of computer conferencing via forum activity is the most feasible and effective technology for achieving the ideals of a collaborative approach to education at a distance, claiming that such a technology can support learners in the processes of "collaboratively constructing meaning and confirming understanding" (p. 3). Laurillard (1993) adds that the primary function of computer conferencing in this format is to bring people together for active debate and discussion. Gibson (1995) claims that the real promise of these computer mediated communication tools for learning is to enable "connection to other learners and to resources within a potentially rich, discursive learning environment" (p. 8). Within the context of this activity, one might say that 'the tutor is the student is the tutor'. This did not create a tension here as the all those involved were clearly within their own personal comfort zones.

The traditional boundaries between the roles, responsibilities, and activities of teachers and learners were blurred, if not eliminated entirely within the forum. Therefore open and direct questions were put to the forum in a form of active engagement. This active engagement involved bringing one's experience to learning, being willing to expand one's understanding, integrating new perspectives into one's thinking, and applying that changed thinking to one's own perspective.

As a result of student and peer feedback, four main areas of recommendation emerge:

It would be interesting to analyse student responses over a longer period of time, and see how the students respond to opportunities to expand the discussion further than one response.

With regards to assessing contributions, students are currently content with its role as a vehicle for formative assessment. This could possibly be due to the number of assessments that the students currently have, and so one option to explore is to replace one of the current assessments to make room for deeper embedding of the forum within the learning and teaching programme. However this does present issues in terms of making sure that students' translations are their own, but there is potential to assess the feedback that the students give each other.

When implementing future forums, further exploration of the concept of feedback with the students before and after the event would be of benefit to all. It is important to replace assumptions with clear communication of expectations.

Finally, it is necessary to improve the evaluation system for the online tasks, by improving the structure of the task in general. If clear, specific objectives had been implemented from the start, it would have been a simple process to translate these into questions that promoted clear, specific evaluation that links to learning outcomes. However, the fact that these issues have been highlighted provides a strong foundation for devising and implementing new, improved TSL solutions in the future.

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APPENDIX 1

(BSL video clips online)

The screenshot shows a Mozilla Firefox browser window displaying a video player. The browser's address bar shows the URL <http://wolf-nt.wlv.ac.uk/common/newframeset.asp?modd=wh2897>. The page title is "WOLF : IG0000/ IG0001 Basic British Sign Language Part 1/ Basic BSL". The video player is titled "C:\Documents and Settings\Christine\Desktop\Masking_questions.wmv" and shows a woman with short blonde hair, wearing a black top, with her hands raised in a BSL gesture. The video player has a yellow background and navigation buttons for "Previous 0 of 13" and "Next". To the left of the video player is a blue sidebar with a navigation menu containing items like "Chat", "E-mail Class", "Email Tutor", "Evaluation", "Events", "FAQs", "Forum", "Group Folder", "Noticeboard", "Pager", "Profiles", "References", and "Shared URLs". The date "3 Jan 1:06" is displayed in the top left of the sidebar. The Windows taskbar at the bottom shows the Start button and several open applications: "Isl project - Micr...", "quotes - Micros...", "WOLF Topic : IG...", "http://wolf-nt.w...", "Adobe Photoshop", "ASUSDVD", and "C:\Documents a...". The system clock shows "24 01:07".

Communicative Translation Task

Dear all,

Welcome to your first official online learning task!

Aim: To complete a communicative translation and feedback to two of your peers.

Deadline: Thursday Nov 17th 2005 @ 6pm

Task:

- 1) Write a communicative translation of the Tom Johnson video 'Housing' that you recorded on Thursday. Write this as a Word Document.
- 2) Access the forum, click on POST NEW, and cut and paste your translation into the Message box.
- 3) Type your name as the SUBJECT and click on POST.
- 4) Read two of your peers' translations and reply to them with two things you liked about their translation and one area for improvement.

The deadline for this task is Thursday Nov 17th 2005 at 6pm. I will be monitoring the postings and will feedback to the first few.

Happy posting!

Christine

APPENDIX 3



BSL Video Clips: Evaluation Questionnaire.

1. How often did you access the BSL video clips on Wolf?

2. What are the advantages of this online resource?

3. In what way was it a useful learning experience?

4. How could this online feature be improved?

APPENDIX 4



Wolf Forum Task: Evaluation Questionnaire.

1. What are the advantages of this online resource?

2. In what way was it a useful learning experience?

3. How could this online feature be improved?

4. Should contributions to the forum be assessed?
