Excursions as an Innovative and Motivating Tool in Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages

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Introduction

Innovation seems to be one of the most discussed topics of our century, the century when the world is facing the challenge to solve problems connected with multiple economic, environmental and social changes. The term has its origin in a Latin word "innovare" and means "to renew something or to introduce something new". Many attempts have been done to define the term "innovation", however, so far the authors have not come to agreement with a universal working definition of the term. The term "innovation" can be defined as a change in behaviour, attitudes. Other authors explain the term as a progress. The authors Green, Howells, Miles in their study on innovation in services in the EU countries mean innovation as "a process", in which organisations are doing something new, i.e., introducing a new practice or process, and creating new methods of delivery for goods and services. "Innovation is not merely synonymous product (goods or service), or adopting a new pattern of intra-or inter-organisational relations with 'change'. Ongoing change is a common feature within most businesses. But this may only be described as Innovation where particular qualities are displayed" (Green – Howells – Miles, 2001, p. 8). Other authors such as Delano, Riley, Crookes emphasize the fact that innovation needs to be perceived as a dynamic process and dynamic processes are needed in teaching and learning foreign languages. Delano, Riley and Crookes' definition considers the impact on how learning and teaching are perceived: "An innovation in a second language teaching program is an informed change in an underlying philosophy of language teaching/learning, brought about by direct experience, research findings, or other means, resulting in an adaptation of pedagogic practices such that instruction is better able to promote language learning as it has come to be understood" (*Delano, L., Riley, L. and G. Crookes, G. p. 489)*.

Our paper investigates the impact of innovation in English language teaching (ELT) especially impact of simulated environment on students' motivation and their performance in a classroom.

1   Innovation

The term "innovation" means to do something in a more attractive and new way. According to Delano, L., Riley, L. and Crookes, G. it is:

- an improvement or a change;

- something new;
- something that did not exist before;
- something that is new in a specific context;
- all of the above combined;
- any of the above, but only when successfully implemented.

Innovation and motivation in foreign language teaching and learning has become a very appealing topic. At the beginning, the method of a computer aided/assisted language learning (CALL) offered materials available on the computer such as electronic versions of activities from books and teachers used them. New technologies have begun to change the way that English is learned in the classroom as a lot of materials are available on the computer such as electronic versions of various book activities. Times have changed and overhead projectors, interactive whiteboard, laptop computers and wireless Internet have opened up the classroom to the outside world. A mock event or simulated environment of an actual professional conference can create a motivating atmosphere and improve students' performance in classes. Excursions, power point presentations, participating in conference can break the traditional routine of classroom teaching and are of a great educational value as in the university courses students are offered a chance to prove and practice their communication skills and to prove what they learn in their language classes. Excursions as motivating elements in teaching and learning foreign languages can improve students' performance and creativity. Creating simulated environment, organizing excursions and field trips can result in better language competence, enhancing knowledge and gaining new impressions and experience based on observing subjects, situations that cannot be observed at school, university. They all – simulated environment, excursions and field trips – are a different methodology altogether but can encourage and motivate students in the process of learning a language. For my experiment I have opted for the term excursion into something as a short involvement in a new activity (Cambridge Advanced Lerner's Dictionary, 2013). Students' participation in a students' conference is considered to be an excursion. Except for a didactic value excursions always improve cognitive properties of students and represent a great educational value through respecting values and standards. They improve tolerance and understanding the other people's behaviour and improve human relations.

1.1 Excursion into a conference

According to Petlak (2004) excursions are employed in teaching and learning processes and enhance students' knowledge. Before I decided to find a match between theory and practice, between learning, drilling grammatical forms and the use of authentic language, one main problem in class was to motivate students to talk. Except for this fact, one must admit, that most Slovak university students

have never been asked to express their own opinion on some events or affairs. Participation in a conference gives students opportunity to become aware of importance of knowledge of foreign languages. Very often students do not realise that the level of language skills which they reached, including fluency, correctness of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation is not sufficient and does not meet criteria seen in the world of today. Before taking part in the conference students studied and learned how to prepare a good presentation. During the conference they had opportunity to see and hear real conference presentations. Then they discussed presentations including the language proficiency and body language of the presenters. When preparing and rehearsing their own presentations, students were encouraged to utilize new findings. They were advised to focus on the topic, on factual information, on correctness of the vocabulary and grammar and on the correct body language.

The objectives, set for the educational process in the classroom, were to motivate students to be active, to try to present the topic as a real presenter, to improve the knowledge of the language, and to obtain higher degree of communication competence.

As pointed out by many authors, students' participation in a conference shall improve the key competences. I decided to take my students to a conference, to a simulated environment of an actual professional conference, so that they could see their peers' presentations on some specialised topics. Before the conference was held, my group of students was instructed how to prepare a good presentation, what phrases are recommended to be used, how to control the presenter's body language. PowerPoint presentations and presentation skills are a good example how to prepare students to communicate out of their educational environment. When any excursions are completed, students can exchange their opinions on presentations and can assess the other students' performances, they can assess their peers' presentation skills including correct use of English, ease of using technology, body language, etc. Before the conference started, I had instructed my students to focus their attention on the presentations as a whole, on the topic, on the correctness of the vocabulary and on the implementation of the rules of English grammar. Practising presentation skills can improve language levels. By using current technology the presentations can achieve or aspire to a professional level thereby also affecting students' competencies in a positive manner as well as preparing them for skills required in their respective professions or careers. Students are often not aware of the importance of speaking a foreign language and being viewers in a students' conference is a good chance to prove their proficiency level. An actual atmosphere in the conference should help students as the audience, to recognise good and poor performance, to recognise the correctness of the language, the correctness of the language morphology and syntax. Students reaching a certain level of communication competence are often content with the

knowledge they have gained and with their language skills, so it is difficult for teachers to push them forward.

I have set up the objective to motivate students to be more active in their English classes. I had my students attend an actual event to see how PowerPoint presentations work in a real environment. After that I and my students created a mock experience. We held a mock conference in our English classes. Students presented the topics that are enlisted in the faculty curriculum for their degree programme. In reality, my educational activity is not a conference at all but rather just simulation. So we simulated a conference in which following key competences were expected to be improved:

- Information competence: Students learn how to find the right information they need, can assess the information, they can communicate the information to the others by means of information technology.
- Cognitive competence: Students can compare similarities and differences between two or more phenomena, aspects, they are open to new ideas, they learn how to analyse, synthesise, induce, deduce, compare and generalise.
- Communication competence: Students learn how to communicate in a foreign language, they can select and opt for the effective way of communication.
- Interpersonal competence: Students learn how to express their own opinion, describe their attitudes and experience. They are trained for a teamwork, they learn how to offer and accept advice, how to assist the others. They also learn how to be tolerant and respectful towards the others (Bajtoš 2003, Petlák 2004, Turek 2010).

In the course of my career as a university teacher I have gained experience with teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). ESP requires the acquisition of highly specialised terminology and the ability to explain formal processes as students prepare for the high-level competence they will have to demonstrate in their chosen careers. These facts encouraged me to execute the experiment with an actual and a mock conference. I started the experiment with a group of first year university students with mixed abilities who signed up for the programme "Public Administration", at the Faculty of Social Sciences, St. Cyril and Methodius University in Trnava. The group consists of twenty students and firstly the students participated in a conference held by another faculty in the same city. When the conference and also the mock conference concluded, they were presented with a questionnaire. The results gained in the experiment have proved that taking part in a real conference although as an audience provides a good platform for being active in presenting specific purposes topics and being active in communication in English. I must be careful drawing conclusions from only the data from twenty students. Perhaps if I did this mock exercise twenty times with twenty student each time, then I can make conclusions on data. My professional assessment from

having taught at a university for fourteen years and through the advent of technology in the classroom students can improve their language level competencies. I am encouraged by the results of the questionnaire to infer that students can or will improve with this type of activity in their language courses.

2 Innovation in English for Specific Purposes

The aim of my paper is sharing my experience with other teachers of English and illustrating how useful and motivating for students can be when they are taken out of their educational environment. Preparation of presentations is not a new topic, innovative may be the way of introducing the students to presentations – an excursion into a real conference. As mentioned above, for our experiment we have appointed a group of first-year students who have signed up for the university bachelor programme of Public Administration. Teaching and learning English for Specific Purpose aims at creativity, activity, presenting topics in PowerPoint presentations. According to Chmelikova "presentation skills are an inevitable part of speaking skills. Presentation skills are particularly trained to support the scientific paper or poster presented at the domestic or international forums" (Chmelikova, 2015, p. 30). Students in Public Administration Programme follow and discuss curriculum-based topics in English in the bachelor course. The content of topics cover the study programme and in the first semester English classes include general topics such as Slovak Educational System, University Education, Interview, Jobs and Unemployment, European Union, European Educational Programmes, Presentations, etc. "How to make a good presentation" is usually the first topic students and the teacher in the group deal with. In the academic year 2015/2016 there was an opportunity to participate as the audience in a students' conference held at a faculty and only then after the students had viewed the students' presentations in the conference, they prepared their own presentations on the topics they opted for. The students' performance in English classes, who took part in a conference seemed to be improved if compared to the previous groups of students who did not have an opportunity to participate in any conferences. Students worked on their presentations and prepared them without the assistance of their teacher. Only some students ask for some advice about the contents and the organisation of their presentations.

Although the study group was only twenty students, the results of the evaluation imply that by providing good examples of correct communication through such an activity as a mock conference presentation can prove valuable and affect a student's competency level. Students are good at PowerPoint presentations; they are technically very skillful what helps them build up their language proficiency and confidence. It has been proven that technology plays an increasing role in the area of ELT and in academic life in general.

The next part of the paper is concerned with the assessment of my experiment. Interviews with students and a questionnaire are employed as the methodology.

3 The Experiment

We started with theoretical instructions. Students learned phrases on how to begin and complete a PowerPoint presentation, what phrases are used to initiate questions asked by the audience, how to avoid answering questions at the end of the presentation, how to agree and disagree, interrupt, ask for repetition and clarification, change the subject or to emphasise it, etc. At this stage students also learn some basics of the effect of body language. Working on the presentation, students had to set up goals and define means to achieve the goals. After having viewed their peers' presentations in a conference, after presenting a topic in a simulated environment of an actual professional conference, my students were presented with a questionnaire. The questions focused on the impact of actual and mock conferences. The answers to the questions are processed in Fig. 1 below. I am encouraged by the results of the questionnaire to infer that students can improve with this type of activity in their language courses. Preparing own presentations can be inspirational for some teachers

Some of the questions in the questionnaire and the answers to them:

- Am I prepared for watching and preparing presentations?
- Participation in the conference has changed my attitude towards the English language (language learning).
- The effectiveness of my presentation has been improved.
- Every presenter (in a pair of presenters) shall be assessed, evaluated

It is necessary to say that technology is another area having a direct impact on language learning and teaching. Except for PowerPoint presentations also YouTube, website, Moodle, blog, e-mail, and virtual conferencing can be employed in English learning and teaching processes. Students can be positively motivated by employing the technology they are familiar with.

Conclusion

Deploying presentations in ESP classes has really helped encourage my students to communicate in English and made my lessons livelier. Participating in a conference is a match between theory and practice and it seemed to be very attractive for my students.

Information communication technology was effectively employed in the conference and in the mock event I created with my students. Students were motivated
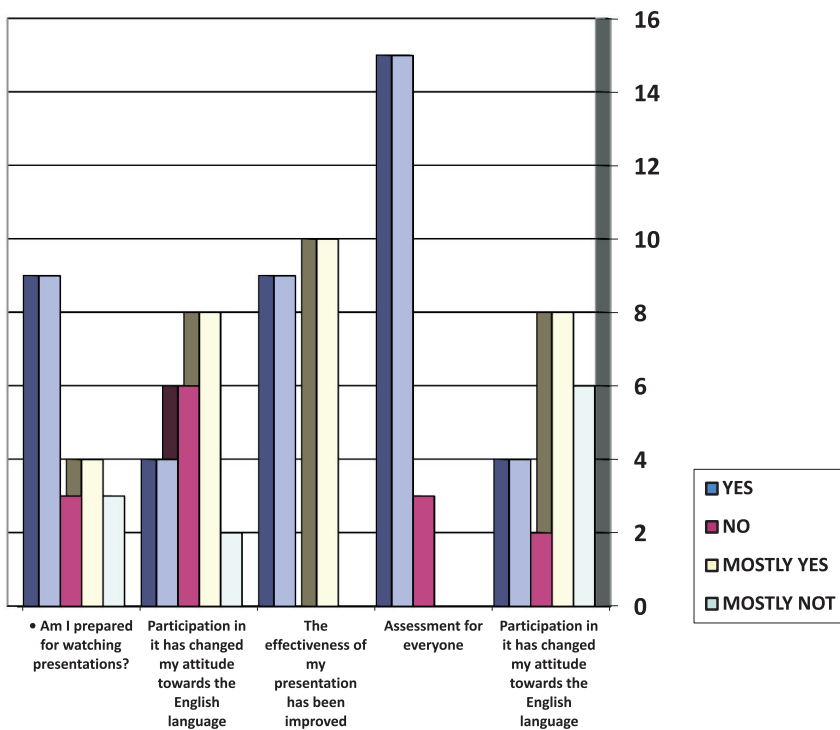
Fig. 1: *Students' opinions*
      The source: author's evaluation

to make good presentations in their own language lessons when we simulated environment of an actual conference.

Prior to the actual conference my students were not motivated to speak and they did not have any expectations. The presentations students could view and hear in a real conference were a good inspiration for them. In our mock conference they put all their effort to prepare similarly good presentations like they watched in the conference.

Also students with weak communication competence can participate, as they can also play their part in presentations.

Students learn how to evaluate their peers' performance.

In the process of preparing presentations students are sometimes overwhelmed by a lot of information due to an easy access to all the information. They sometime feel lost in the sea of information and cannot select the relevant information. On

the other hand some students are very brilliant in processing the topic they opt for and they really process the topic in an interesting way, applying their own point of view.

PowerPoint presentations included in the lessons plan can be considered useful and motivating. Taking students out of the education environment and let their communication competence live can support English teaching and learning.

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