VIDEOCONFERENCING AND COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE INTERACTION
SEMANTIC, PRAGMATIC AND INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS OF STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES

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Abstract

This paper explores samples of community of practice communication in multicultural videoconferencing (VC) classes between English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students at Masaryk University and their counterparts at Aberystwyth University. It comments on a number of pragmatic and semantic issues that have arisen during the videoconferences in addition to situations caused by a lack of intercultural awareness. Examples of students' performances show how face-threatening acts are perceived to have been produced by non-native speakers of English. Differences in the reactions of native and non-native speakers of English are then exemplified. The paper further examines the difficulties in distinguishing levels of formality, directness and politeness and the misunderstandings which arise from the use of certain 'loaded' expressions or metaphors without knowledge of cultural differences and sensitivities. To conclude, the authors suggest the importance of teaching pragmatics and raising intercultural sensitivity in international professional communication, where English is used as the lingua franca.

Keywords

video-conferencing, intercultural communication, sources of misunderstanding

1   Introduction

The Language Centre at Masaryk University has been using videoconferencing technologies for teaching purposes since 2004. While this medium is particularly key in distance learning as a form of e-face-to-face tutoring, the Language centres at Masaryk University and Aberystwyth University also make use of this technology in the everyday classroom, namely in the teaching of academic writing to PhD students and English for Academic or Specific Purposes to undergraduate students.

The VC sessions basically take three forms. The first is through the creation of a virtual classroom where a group of Czech students meet another group of

international students or ELT trainee teachers thus participating in a common EAP or ESP course together. The second option is where lectures, seminars and consultations are provided by British academics and publishers through which PhD students (not majoring in English) are given the opportunity to engage with a British expert in real time in order to discuss aspects of their academic writing. The third option is called the 'critical audience group'. A group of British Business students receives peer reviews and feedback from Czech business or law students on their presentations and projects. They meet via a videoconference in order to brainstorm ideas for improvement, ask questions involving analysis or critique and negotiate better strategies.

Having pioneered this unique method of incorporating VC technology into the ELT classroom, the authors had no pre-tested methodology to rely on. This is one reason why a methodology for the effective use of VC in the classroom was developed within the international Leonardo da Vinci project, INVITE (2006-2008) (see Katrňáková et al. 2008, Morgan 2008). The theoretical background for videoconferencing is included in Section 2 of this paper. In addition to this, the methodology concentrates on the practical issues that should prepare students to experience the unusual communicative situation before they experience videoconferencing. The participants are reasonably trained not only in technical skills, but their organizational skills and socio-cultural awareness is also heightened. Needless to say, some useful phrasing concerning the organization of videoconferences and 'small talk' connected with the new communicative situation are also practised.

The specific communicative environment as well as the multinational nature of the ELT student groups has led us to realize the importance of implementing discussions over some more specific features of English communication into the preparatory sessions. The experience so far shows that formality, indirectness, hedging, politeness and pragmatic issues need to be addressed to make the communication more effective and fluent. In this paper, we share some linguistic examples which are typically illustrative of students' communication that can cause misunderstandings, vagueness in understanding or become some other threat to the specific communicative situation.

2   Information technologies and communication: Three parallel concepts

The theoretical methodological framework we developed is based on previous work in the wider field of information technologies and its ability to "extend and enhance understanding of the ways in which the use of new technologies

influences, shapes and even transforms, literacy practices" (Snyder 2003: 263). A meaningful technological learning environment should reflect "an 'authentic' context of situated social practice" (Lankshear, Snyder & Green 2000, as quoted in Snyder 2003: 270).

A Digital Rhetorics project (Lankshear, Snyder & Green 2000, as quoted in Snyder 2003) created a theoretical approach to literacy and technology that identified three technological dimensions (Snyder 2003: 269). This formed the foundation on which to base an analysis of comparative social factors that would generate motivation to participate in the sessions, and possibilities for creativity in organising and structuring communicative activities. The operational dimension looks at both language and technology; an understanding of how language and technology are used to participate in the creation and development of social practices is explored through the cultural dimension; and the critical dimension refers to the need to be able to evaluate available tools (adapted from Snyder 2003: 270).

What became apparent from the outset with novice participants was that the lack of videoconferencing experience accounted for an initial formality in behaviour. This may be reinforced by adherence to guidelines on good practice in videoconferencing, but a need for formality was also suggested by many participants as a response to questions on the effectiveness of initial videoconferences where numerous mistakes were made by students. Feedback on initial videoconferences carried out within the INVITE project <http://invite.lingua.muni.cz/> also suggests a level of anxiety and unease with the environment, which was as much due to the unfamiliarity with the equipment being used as it was with the social environment where participants were meeting people from different countries and cultures for the first time. The first parallel was drawn between social formality (Baron 1998) and the operational dimension (Snyder 2003).

As we started to observe interaction in the cultural dimension, where language and technology is used in "participating in 'authentic' forms of social practice and meaning" (ibid.: 270), it became possible to see how participants begin to experiment with the variable aspects of creating purposeful communication. With this experimentation, a greater sense of playfulness emerges that can be compared with research in other areas of literacy studies (cf. Coles & Hall 2001: 112). Playfulness in some cases bore its own cultural characteristics in that participants of some nationalities (mostly western European) were more spontaneously playful, whereas others were more traditionally formal (more common with East Asian participants) (see INVITE project, http://invite.lingua.muni.cz/). Despite these arguably generalised characteristics, feedback suggested

that those who started in a formal manner often saw the need for greater flexibility or playfulness, whereas those who started in a playful manner often saw the need for greater formality. Nevertheless, the relationship established the second parallel between social playfulness and the cultural dimension (Snyder 2003). What was beginning to emerge here was a complex cycle of interrelated characteristics that could not be separated or accounted for individually.

Both of the aforementioned parallels required a more analytical framework or focus to be viewed as a dynamic cycle and this was first represented through the inclusion of the critical dimension (ibid.). This stage in the process is very much related to an evaluation of the uses of technology, coupled with an analysis of language and the characteristics of social communication. What is needed for a clear, critical perspective is a framework for structuring communication, which is where the concept of design (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001) needs to be considered. In the transformation from monomodal cultures of the past, where considerations for the production or framing of language led to specific representations of either spoken or written discourse, the accession to multimodal cultures has seen a transition to wider considerations of which resources should be used for specific representations. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001: 50) refer to this process as design, in that the communicator takes on an "architectural" (ibid.) role in deciding which aspects of other modes of representation will be useful in the creation of a specific aspect of discourse. In a VC for example, discussion can be based on individual, collaborative or cooperative tasks where the degree of negotiation depends very much on aspects of how a group of people determine what type of design would best represent their aims for communication. This can be influenced to a greater or lesser extent by teachers or trainers and in this case the influence depends heavily on participant awareness of the operational and cultural dimensions of VC. At this stage, the addition of a third parallel between socially negotiated design (ibid.) and the critical dimension (Snyder 2003) provided a tangible framework through which it was possible to see the three dimensions of the Digital Rhetorics project. However, as the latter focused on technology-based literacies, it did not necessarily need to include a parallel social strand that would explain aspects of face-to-face communication in a remote VC environment. The social characteristics included in the framework for this study have provided a strong foundation for the planning stages among the project groups in remote locations.

In comparing these operational, cultural and critical dimensions with the notions of formality, playfulness and design as processes that have the potential to inform each other, it is possible to see how they can be recycled and reconsidered at any stage of the communication process. What is particularly

apparent, though, is how they can form a socially negotiated basis for participation in videoconferencing. In defining participation, it is necessary to consider the "participation framework" of Goffman (1981, as quoted in Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 86-87). Goffman has identified roles in participation that are particularly relevant in VC situations. Observation of the characteristics of the principal reveals that this is the person who establishes the position of the speakers; the author encodes the message within specific aspects of language; and the animator transmits the message to others – in some cases this role is transposed to a technological device (e.g. a sound system used for a specific effect) by the principal and/or author.

While these roles for participation may be assumed by a single person, they may also be shared by different members of a group at different stages of the discussion or presentation.
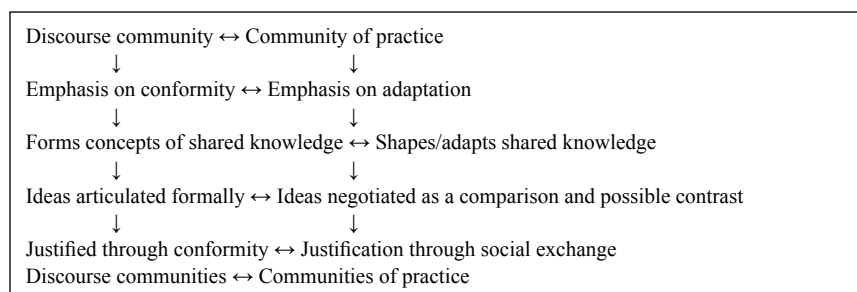
Despite the attractiveness and usefulness of Goffman's framework, there are often underpinning cultural aspects in social groups that determine the roles people play; these influences tend to be implicit/subtle and are therefore not always directly observable. Understanding Mercer's (2000: 106) notion of collective thinking in a community is particularly useful here, as we can see social groups emerging on the basis of shared history, collective identity, reciprocal obligations and as a result of the social forces at play in the aforementioned categories, a fourth category of discourse also emerges. The shaping and articulation of discourse is the point at which significant variations in patterns of speech, writing and their modality is represented by different social groups that emerge as individual communities of practice.

Communities can be further interpreted in different ways, according to who is initiating the reciprocal obligations. These can be very formal, or they can be much more loosely interpreted. What becomes evident through the literature is that the two main ways of describing discourse emerge through a comparison between discourse communities and communities of practice. A discourse community shapes a socio-academic and professional view of communication that uses established and agreed standards of appropriacy as its measure. It works in a top-down manner with specialists informing non-specialists. In an educational setting this is seen through the teacher-student hierarchy, where it is essential for the student to follow regulations and guidelines on how assignments must be completed. This level of working in accordance with systems is used as a measure of gaining access to the professional community, largely through conformity to standards (Johns 1997: 57).

On the other hand, communities of practice may evolve and exist within and across discourse communities (ibid.: 57). They can be viewed in formal academic

or professional and social or informal ways. These may be independent research or focus groups that set their own reciprocal obligations, but which are still very much based on formal patterns of communication and adherence to standards. In a social setting, communities can be based on family, friendship or mutual interest groups. Reciprocal obligations will vary significantly; in the more formal settings described above, they still adhere to some kind of rules for inclusion, rules that can be viewed as standards of appropriacy in communication and behaviour. The two concepts are interrelated, as can be seen in Figure 1 below.

The emergence of new communities is an indicator of a significant social bonding process, in that groups come together for the purpose of taking part in specific tasks of designing videoconferences with limited direction from a group facilitator (teacher or trainer). In doing this they develop reciprocal obligations within the groups and reinforce the bonds that identify communities of practice. Considerations of appropriacy within and across these groups are in a constant state of evolution, and as such the theoretical foundations of this project emerge as the observation of a cycle rather than a process with a beginning and an end.

Discourse community ↔ Community of practice
      ↓   ↓
Emphasis on conformity ↔ Emphasis on adaptation
      ↓   ↓
Forms concepts of shared knowledge ↔ Shapes/adapts shared knowledge
      ↓   ↓
Ideas articulated formally ↔ Ideas negotiated as a comparison and possible contrast
      ↓   ↓
Justified through conformity ↔ Justification through social exchange
Discourse communities ↔ Communities of practice

Figure 1: Discourse communities and communities of practice

Oral communication in videoconferencing is part of what is viewed in an educational setting as a literacy practice, which means that it forms part of an agreed pattern of communication between different users in which it is possible to recognise standards, patterns and styles for the exchange of ideas and information.

The virtual classroom atmosphere is usually very informal and this is reflected linguistically, although not necessarily from the very beginning. As Baron (1998) points out, when faced with any new means of communication, users will go through a period of adaptation in which their communicative behaviour is marked by high levels of formality before they will settle into socio-culturally determined

patterns of communication appropriate to the medium. As videoconferencing is effectively an integration of telephone, computer and video technologies, users tend to face a new and relatively unresearched multimodal social environment in which communication practices can open up to significant variability in what is considered appropriate among and between user groups. It is, therefore, possible that the formality pendulum can swing all the way to the other extreme.

3 Analysis

For more than six years, teachers at the Language Centre of Masaryk University have been running international videoconferencing classes with a number of different participants, nearly all of whom have been videoed; thus, a reasonably wide corpus of approximately 300 hours of spoken academic discourse has been created. What follows are examples of authentic, spontaneous speech.

The said corpus consists primarily of recorded videoconferencing sessions between Masaryk University undergraduate students and undergraduate international students of Aberystwyth University in Wales.

In the majority of examples discussed herein the students at Masaryk University were a monolingual homogeneous class who used English as a foreign language, while the students at Aberystwyth University were mainly a heterogeneous group of international students.

Speakers in videoconferencing sessions may be asked to engage in a variety of ways; these include: giving presentations which are then discussed orally by the audience; participating in discussion sessions; or interacting with an authority or peers so as to obtain feedback on their writing. The role of the teacher is significantly transformed from their role in a traditional classroom; they act as facilitators and intervene only in cases where noticeable misunderstandings may occur. There is a high tendency of cooperation and negotiation between speakers of heterogeneous communities, whereby communication in general is polite, with prevailing short narratives and expressive opinions. On the other hand, when students are deeply immersed in a discussion, problems with turn-taking, interruption, false starts and overlapping may appear, which are in turn augmented by the use of videoconferencing technology, for example microphones, delayed delivery of sound. Thus, it is obvious that, very often, the intended meaning of messages has to be negotiated in order to secure a meaningful exchange.

In essence, the unintended misunderstandings in students' communication can be attributed to various factors as we will show below. Students are often unaware of the multicultural nuances of their interaction; consequently, teachers have to draw upon a diversity of worldviews and different insights and understandings

of cultural differences in order to facilitate comprehension (Schmidt et al. 2007) and maintain discussion free from face-threatening acts. This is why we provide a necessary context for each of the examples.

Example 3.1

In a session which focused on the use of electronic devices in our lives, while explaining her strong antipathy towards the use of electronic dictionaries in class, the English teacher presented a number of sound arguments which supported her opinion. This was followed by a question by an Iraqi student: '*Why don't you prohibit them?*' The English teacher responded: '*I can't prohibit them. That would be a bit fascist. You can't do that.*'

Czech students in the Masaryk University Language Centre were confused as for them the word fascist equates to Nazi, and is understood only as an adjective historically referring to "an authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing system of government and social organization" (OED). Students at Aberystwyth University appeared to be unphased by the use of this word, and consequently they were able to understand its correct meaning in the given context, i.e. the word fascist is often used in its general meaning relating to any "authoritarian, or intolerant views or practices" (OED) in an English speaking environment.

The Czech teacher stepped in with the explanation of the difference between the historical and general uses of the word because he was aware of the fact that videoconference virtual classes do not offer the same type of shared environment as physical classes do, where it is possible to interpret a literal meaning of a word and its associations with history more easily. Videoconference classes can produce an imbalance in the access to the general use of English and can be often characterised by their multinational and multicultural nature. The lack of understanding of the given term by the Czech end students was caused by their homogenous, historically and culturally well-established understanding of the term, which could be considered a 'false friend' in that context. In contrast, the UK group was able to accurately process the term in light of their everyday exposure to general English and their access to a diverse background of students, who may have limited or no historical or cultural experience with the word.

The Czech teacher's interruption of the discussion between the opposite VC end interlocutors (the English teacher and the Iraqi student) was justifiable in the community-of-practice communication style, which lacks a clear top down hierarchy while preferring a more informal exchange of information within the learning environment.

Example 3.2

In a session of Czech PhD students who were advanced speakers of English, a sentence 'This is an actual problem' was being discussed with a British text analysis expert. The British expert giving feedback on academic writing (the sentence was a part of an abstract) considered the quoted sentence as very informal, non-academic and therefore redundant while the PhD student insisted on its relevance. An explanation of the difference between the word 'aktuální' in Czech (meaning current or topical) versus the word 'actual' followed.

This situation was caused by the videoconference setting which often brings new modes of interaction. The expert having reviewed students' texts may meet them for the first time; moreover, they may not know each other's cultural-linguistic background (the Czech Republic and the UK in this case) or share any relevant experience. Experts who know the students or who share some common background with them could be acquainted with the typical or frequent 'false friends' encountered by the students. Here, the lack of understanding was due to the absence of such a shared environment, therefore the intervention of the Czech teacher, who was the only one comprehending the causes of the disagreement, became necessary.

As the community-of-practice communication depends on the will of all participants to shape and adapt the shared knowledge within a rather flexible pattern of formally set roles, the Czech teacher could, in this case, interrupt the interaction between a British expert and a Czech PhD student and provide an explanation in order to improve learning processes in class.

Example 3.3

As it is possible to partake in interactive tasks, move and use non-verbal expressions in a virtual classroom, when doing so, one of the difficulties that may arise is how to distinguish between left and right; for instance, a problem can occur while operating the remote control. In our example situation each of the participants was asked to introduce themselves and we wanted to start with the person sitting on the right. The situation in the videoconference environment is very real and videoconference participants get absorbed by the virtual reality. The problem is that what is perceived as 'right' on the screen is actually 'left' in reality. It is, therefore, important to keep only to the virtual situation and ignore the real setting to avoid potential confusion which usually results in students moving the focus of the camera to someone other than the intended person or side. Having noticed this common confusion, we developed exercises where, during the playfulness stage of learning, students practise aiming the focus of the

camera before they experience the real VC session. This way, students usually negotiate what is right and left within their community of practice and it is rarely necessary for the teacher to intervene.

Example 3.4

In a session which focused on smoking regulations, the following dialogue ensued:

– *If we are talking about public places, what exactly we mean? Like pubs and bars or everywhere in and out except homes*?
– *Yes. Thank you and anyone else and their opinion*?

In videoconference communication, turn-taking between the connected ends is essential. Holding ground for a long time may cause a growing lack of interest or understanding at the opposite end. In order to make the discussion flow, the Czech student wanted to obtain information from her Thai counterparts. She rephrased her question (correcting her syntax) and asked again: '*I have already asked you if we are talking about public places – What do we mean? Do we mean streets and bus stops and everywhere out? Or just pubs and hospitals and schools? What exactly do we mean?*' To make sure the other end understood she added: '*And it's a question.*'

Generally speaking, this solution could in fact be perceived as being too direct, perhaps sarcastic, and therefore rude; the Czech student was aware of breaching politeness rules. Nevertheless, she finally decided to use this strategy in order to communicate the message (as maintaining communication was perceived to be more important than politeness) and it served its purpose.

Moreover, the student felt that she needed to have her question adequately addressed as she was in the focus of the camera at that point. This meant that not only was she in the role of a 'spokesperson' of that end but also that nobody else from her Czech peers could help her effectively as they were not visible for the UK end.

Example 3.5

In an informal discussion after a presentation, a Czech student asked his Thai counterpart: '*Does the King have any kids?*' The Czech students did not realize that the Thai monarch is perceived to be of divine nature. When Thai students were asked this question, they were shocked by the informality of the vocabulary

used and therefore reluctant to answer or react in any way. To solve the cultural misunderstanding, the Czech teacher suggested muting the microphones on both ends for a while to discuss the matter. The problem was explained to the Czech students and after re-connecting they apologised and asked whether the Thai royal couple had any 'children', or if there were any 'princes and princesses'.

The effective use of muting the microphones shows an example of technological solutions which VC facilitators have at hand when they feel a situation is appropriate for a partial division of the groups. This disconnection of sound offers a place for separate discussions and can be enhanced by the flexible nature of the community-of-practice communication style.

After the explanation, the Czech students were not instructed on what to do or say, as would be the case in discourse communities' communication style. On the contrary, it was up to them to negotiate their strategies in order to maintain the conversation. The result was an apology and a change in their register.

Example 3.6

In a discussion concerning smoking regulations with a group of Thai students, a Czech student uttered: '*Each cigarette is like a nail in your coffin.*' This Czech proverb was directly translated into English. The Czech student lacked any cultural awareness of Thai culture and did not realize that Thais usually burn dead bodies – if there is a coffin, it is made of concrete.

Students from both ends began to negotiate the meaning of the saying. First, both ends concentrated on the semantic aspects of the utterance. Only when the Czech students realized that the Thai end students were interpreting the meaning of each word in the utterance literally, did they realize the necessity to explain what a coffin is in Western cultures and then how people are usually buried in Europe. A wider discussion on different styles of burying people followed. The students applied effective negotiating strategies based on an informal exchange of information, and therefore no intervention from the teacher was necessary.

This example of an intercultural misunderstanding due to a lack of knowledge of different cultures shows that the speaker made incorrect assumptions about the listener's contextual resources, which is often the case in videoconference communication. Videoconference interlocutors do not meet physically in a common environment; their only shared setting is the videoconference virtual class. Informal discussions which normally take place after 'physical' classes and which generate an enormous source of information about various cultures in a multicultural class are non-existent in videoconference courses and therefore, students lack the knowledge about the background of their peers.

Example 3.7

Communities of practice do not set any rigid communication styles, as these must be negotiated. A typical example of such a negotiation may include the way in which teachers are addressed in videoconference classes. Czech students became accustomed to calling their teacher Libor (first name) during videoconference sessions, while the more formal term of address, Dr. Štěpánek, would be used in traditional lessons. Most students adapt to the more informal way of addressing their teacher while in an international classroom where the tradition to address the teacher by their first name prevails. This shows how the socio-cultural environment dominates the choice surrounding the level of formality to be exercised. The students have not been invited to address their teacher in a different way; nevertheless, as they change the frame of the communicative situation, they easily switch from one level to the other, while keeping to addressing their teacher according to the Czech traditions outside videoconference sessions.

According to Schnieders and Kuipers (2008), this formality shift is typical in multicultural videoconference classes where different attitudes in communicating, especially with teachers, are present. In their conference paper they described how, their US and Dutch students addressed their teachers as Lori and Hans-Jan, while for German students they "all of a sudden turn into professor Schnieders and professor Kuipers" (ibid.). In order to ensure that differences in communicating styles among videoconference participants are swiftly and smoothly overcome, new roles for each of them must be negotiated, defined and learned, while the setting must be flexible with low focus on the traditions of the academic discourse community.

Example 3.8

Flexibility is also necessary in the case of written communication. The students need to distinguish between the informal style used in their everyday communication with their peers (e.g. Facebook, e-mail, discussion forums) and the formal academic style of their written assignments in the same electronic setting. This may bring certain difficulties to some of them. Moreover, the fact that they can practise informal English appeals to Czech students as it is perceived by many students demonstrative as being more advanced in language competence. This may, however, lead to its abuse in written assignments whereby the teacher then needs to comment on the inappropriate use of shorthand, slang and trendy expressions. The students are generally proud of their knowledge of informal

expressions, yet it is important that they can decipher the appropriateness of their use. An example of such an inappropriate, yet very common and polite, phrase used by a student was ending an e-mail to the teacher with '*lots of love*'.

Example 3.9

When giving feedback on their project summaries to native English business students, a Czech law student introduced his feedback with the following utterance: '*We have a problem with your piece of writing. There is no information in it.*'

This feedback, of course, annoyed the native speakers and they were reluctant to continue in any discussion; in fact, they were deliberately rude in their response claiming they could not understand what the Czechs were saying. Both Czech and English students had failed to use politeness strategies and threatened the communicative situation. Luckily, a Chinese student who could see the point being made by the Czech students decided to intervene so as to facilitate a continuation of the discussion.

When the Czech teacher later discussed this with the students and explained that the utterance was considered rude in the target culture, the Czech student responded that he felt he was being quite polite, saying: '*I did not say it was rubbish.*' This illustrates the lack of awareness of politeness strategies on the part of Czech students in evaluation (Hunston & Thompson 2000). It can be argued that Czech students often tend to be somewhat direct while giving feedback to each other and that such utterance might cause few problems in an ordinary face-to-face situation. Nevertheless, we argue that the specific communicative situation in a VC environment encourages flaws in communication (e.g. the short time delay in transmission, possibility to claim problems with sound and understanding, not being in the camera focus) so the motivation and willingness to communicate is more important. Therefore, even such minor politeness faux pas as described above can cause major disruptions in communication. Moreover, through not meeting the higher standards of politeness expected in English as compared to Czech (especially indirectness and hedging), they lost a valuable interlocutor in the conversation: the conversation continued between the Czech and Chinese students only while the native speaker sat silent. This is one of the cases where teachers on both sides intervened only after the VC session was over, during a feedback session as the immediate situation was solved by the community of practice. It was, however, important, that the students understood what a face-threatening act is, and that one had taken place near the start of the videoconference.

A similar case of unexpected directness was discussed by Schnieders and Kuipers (2008) while comparing the strategies used by her American students with their European counterparts: "The communication was a big piece of it. My students also noticed and said: that was refreshing. How honest they were when we did the feedback session. And I said: I'm OK with you guys telling me what doesn't work, giving me feedback. She said yeah, but we ... we came to the conclusion that Americans are very polite when it comes to something like this we don't wanna hurt anybod's feelings. And that was something they noticed particularly with the Norwegian and the Dutch students...".

4   Conclusions

This paper illustrates and comments on some of the typical features which emerged via situations specific to the videoconferencing community of practice in spontaneous virtual classroom interaction and in rich intercultural environments (multinational, multiethnic and multicultural). It highlights some typical and frequent sources of misunderstanding and the emergence of face threatening situations. It also looks at ways in which meaning is negotiated in spontaneous speech in the videoconference setting.

Some semantic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic features have been presented in addition to intercultural awareness issues, which are of significant importance in contemporary global communication where English is used as a lingua franca, both for work purposes (Koester 2004) and for global communication in general.

Areas where students need to be better prepared for new communicative situations were identified, namely formality, hedging, indirectness and politeness. Although it is not possible to prepare students to anticipate and prevent every face-threatening situation and misunderstanding, the need to raise awareness that such situations can occur, and practise strategies to prevent, overcome and solve them so that the teacher does not have to intervene in the community of practice set patterns of communication was identified.

As studies describing the specifics of videoconferencing communication as a genre have yet to be published, the authors of this paper have attempted to share their observations and suggest further research in the area of linguistics and the implementation of relevant findings into methodology of ELT via videoconferencing. The present paper is intended to be the first step towards describing VC communication in association with the community of practice concept in the ELT environment as a fairly new phenomenon.

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