

Using Skype in the Second and Foreign Language Classroom

Sarah Elaine Eaton, Ph.D.

Research Associate, University of Calgary

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Abstract

This presentation introduced Skype and how it can be used to: 1) connect teachers with other professionals - and save on long distance charges - even internationally 2) empower language teachers and tutors 3) give presentations and workshops 4) be a stepping stone to using more sophisticated technology in the classroom. It was noted that for those who are new to using technology in the language learning classroom, Skype is an effective way to experiment with technology, while minimizing the risk of things going wrong. Using Skype can help teachers improve their technology literacy and increase their confidence using technology in the language learning classroom. It provides an excellent stepping stone for those who are not entirely "fluent" with more sophisticated technologies.

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Background

The main purpose of this session was to discuss how to use Skype to teach second and foreign languages. The session was inspired by previous work done on using Skype for literacy and language learning (Eaton, 2009a, 2010c).

It is reported that in 2010 Skype had 124 million users who placed 95 billion calls in the first half of 2010, of which approximately 40% were video calls (Melanson, 2010). Educators have been incorporating Skype into their classrooms for a number of years now (Davis, 2006; Mirtschin, 2008; Smith, 2009a, 2009b; Stephenson, 2009; Waters, 2008a).

Pioneers of using Skype in the classroom immediately noted the potential for international connections between classrooms and students (Waters, 2008b). This is a natural fit for language educators interested in having cross-cultural exchanges with students using Skype.

One Australian educator discussed using Skype for inter-school debates (Smethurst, 2009). This may also be of interest to language teachers, as it is noted that activities such as debates and speech competitions in the target language are on the rise (Eaton, 2010a).

Introduction

To begin, an overview of Skype was presented. Skype was briefly compared to other technologies, and the benefits and disadvantages were reviewed. Then, the basics of how to obtain and set up a Skype account were discussed. This was followed by a more in-depth discussion of some of Skype's more advanced features, such as screen sharing, relating these features to language teaching.

Following the applied portion of the session, other ways Skype may be used for language programs, including the marketing and administration of language programs were discussed.

The session concluded with a Skype challenge. Participants were given a task that required them to reflect on how they might use Skype in their own language classrooms. They were encouraged to share the results of their project using Skype, thus deepening their own understanding of how to use this particular technology in the language teaching classroom.

This session was conducted via Elluminate, originating from Calgary, Canada.

Introduction

Skype is a communication tool that allows users to make audio and video calls over the Internet. These calls are free to other Skype users. Skype also offers a computer-to-land-line service for both local and international calls. The computer-to-land-line service is a fee-based service.

A Skype account is required in order to make and receive calls. It is similar to needing an e-mail account in order to send e-mails. Users choose a user name, just as with e-mail, or other technologies. That user name remains with the user for as long as the account is active.

It is necessary for users to have a mic and audio capabilities enabled on their computer. If the computer does not have these features built in, users must buy a Skype-enabled headset with earphones and a mic.

Once the user has the necessary equipment and an account set up, he or she can begin using Skype to make computer-to-computer calls. If both the account holder and the party on the other end have web cams, they can make a point-to-point video call. Users are able to see each other throughout the call. If the connection is slow or if users do not have web cams, they can still make audio calls.

It is important to remember that Skype works computer to computer, not necessarily person-to-person. One computer may be hooked up to a large screen and presenter slides may be projected onto that large screen to a group of people sitting in a theatre-style classroom. In this way, Skype may be used to teach groups of people.

In this way, we can see how Skype may be used to connect individuals, one individual to a group or one group to another group.

Skype versus other technologies

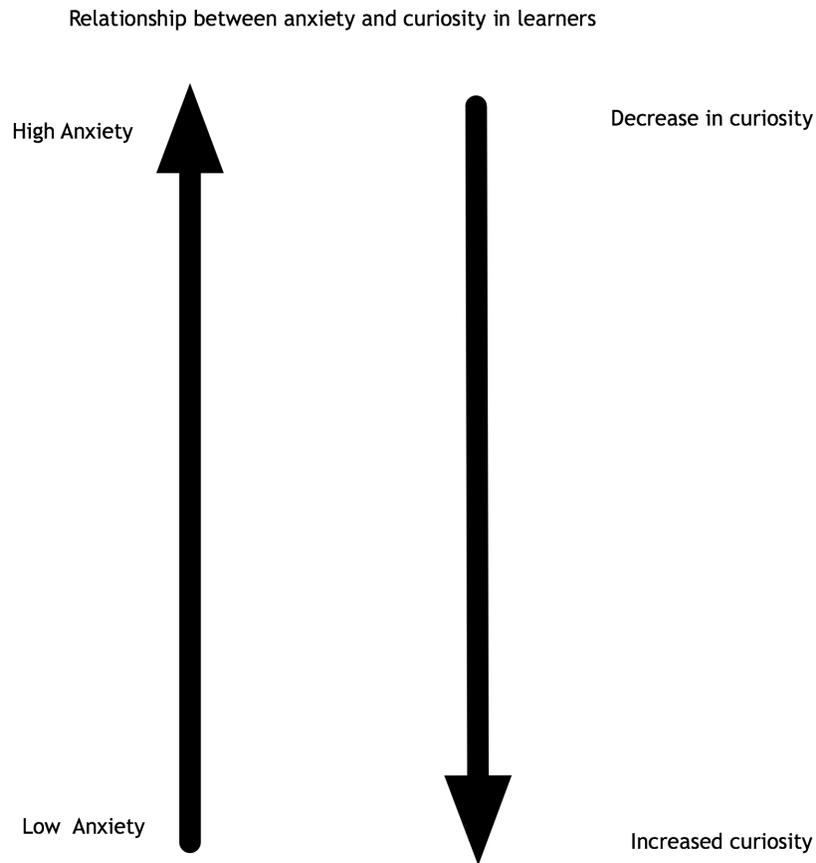
It could be argued that Skype is less powerful than other synchronous learning technologies such as Elluminate or other services offering webinar capabilities. This may be true. It offers interaction with only a very limited number of users at one time. It also does not include the same interactive features such as white boards, polls or other features found with more sophisticated technologies.

Skype's simplicity, on the other hand, makes it an accessible tool for those who are less comfortable using technology in the classroom.

Relationship between anxiety, curiosity and receptiveness to learning

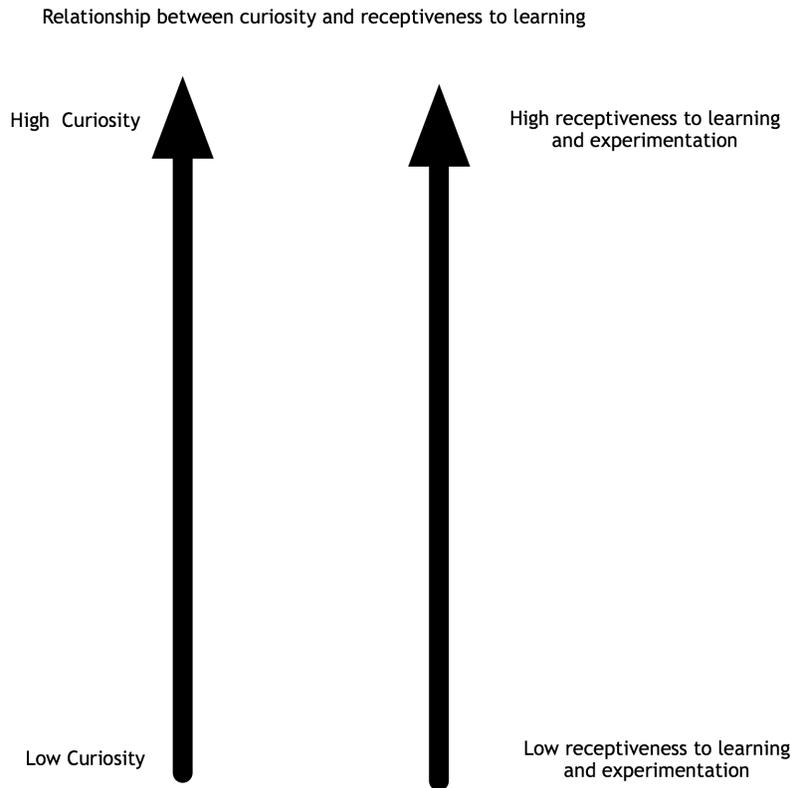
Using a progressive approach to incorporating technology into the classroom is an effective way for teachers to update their teaching techniques at their own pace, building confidence and skills as they progress.

For teachers who are reluctant to use technology due to lack of skills or confidence or high levels of anxiety, getting started with simpler tools may be a more appropriate way for them to explore and incorporate new technologies. Simpler technologies allow users to minimize their risk and “performance anxiety” as they learn. The reason for this is can be viewed this way:

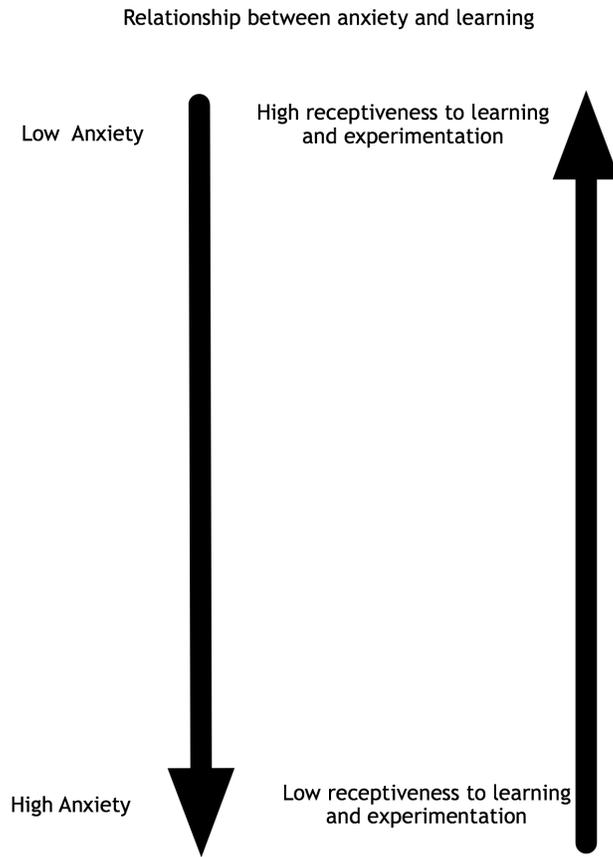


In this model, there is an inverse relationship between anxiety and curiosity. The higher the learner or user's levels of anxiety, the lower their levels of curiosity. The implications are that teachers with high levels of anxiety around incorporating technology into their teaching practice, are likely to be less curious about using it. The same could be said for any learner, of any subject. The higher the anxiety levels, the less curiosity or openness the learner may have to the new concept, skill, tool or technology.

The lower the individual's curiosity, the less receptive they are to trying new things. As curiosity increases, so does the receptiveness of the individual to adopt an experimental approach to testing or trying new things. One way to visualize this concept is like this:



And so, as we decrease anxiety, we increase an individual's willingness to try new technologies.



For users who may be anxious, tentative or unsure, using simpler technologies is an excellent way for them to build their skills. As they discover that they can indeed build their skills, their curiosity about the technology may increase. This, in turn, increases their receptiveness even further to the new technology.

As users become comfortable with more advanced features, they can engage in higher level uses of the technology. This may lead them to being open to trying even more sophisticated technologies in the future.

Skype is an excellent tool to help teachers build skills using technology. It also happens to be an effective tool to teach languages, as it incorporates high levels of verbal interaction between users, or in this case between teachers and students.

Advanced features

Although Skype could arguably be considered less sophisticated than other web or video conferencing tools, nevertheless it has some advanced features that make it useful for educational purposes. These advanced features include:

Conference calls

Skype may also be used to make conference calls with a number of users (Family Matters, n.d.). Using this feature, up to six users may be on the line at one time. At the time of this presentation, the conference calling feature included audio only. Video calls can only be made with two parties on the line.

Instant messaging or chat

Skype has a chat function which can be used for a variety of purposes. Users may chat while in a real-time audio or video call. This is useful if the connection breaks up. Users may indicate that they are unable to see or hear well using the chat function.

In addition, if another call comes in while a user is in a real-time call, he or she may send the other party a quick instant message to let them know that their can't be answered at that time.

The chat function helps to smooth out online communications, allowing users to briefly acknowledge one another or explain a situation, rather than simply terminating a call.

File sharing

Users can send files, which is much like adding an attachment to an e-mail, except that the sharing takes place in real time, during a call. Users can send someone an attachment such as a .pdf, a Word document or other types of files that they might normally send as an e-mail attachment. The the party on the other end can open it as soon as they've received it, allowing

users to discuss it during their call. Teachers can use this feature to share activities or resources with students during a lesson.

Screen sharing

This feature allows users to share a portion of their screen or their entire screen, with others on the call. This is particularly useful for giving presentation. One user may enable a presentation in full-screen mode, while sharing their screen with other users. Teachers can use the screen sharing option to give slide presentations to students during a lesson.

The screen sharing function is only activated once the user is in a call. So the downside is that one can only “learn by doing” for this feature.

To access this function, the user clicks on the “call” tab on the menu at the top of the screen. That will bring the user to a drop-down menu. From there the user must choose “share screen”. The user will be asked if he or she wants to share part or all of their screen.

One tip for educators: If I know I’m going to be sharing slides, I open my presentation before the call and then have it running in the background. I choose to share my entire screen and then I quickly flip to my slides and run my slides in full-screen mode.

There will be a moment where the party on the other end will see the user’s entire screen before the slides begin, so it is advisable for users to ensure that there is nothing else open on their desktop such as personal e-mails, etc. Screen sharing requires practice, and it is a powerful feature for learning.

Using Skype for Marketing Programs

Marketing is all about relationships, particularly in education (Drysdale, n.d.; Eaton, 2005, 2009b). Skype can be used to create and maintain relationships with prospective students. This may be of particular relevance for programs that recruit international students. There are a few different ways to do this. One is to have a Skype account that students can call to ask questions. These calls can be answered by your receptionist or clerical staff, just as the phone is.

Another way to use Skype for marketing is to conduct pre-arrival orientation tutorials with students. This can be done on a one-to-one basis, but also with groups. The orientation session can go over a variety of pre-arrival information: an introduction to the school, an introduction to some of the key staff the students will meet when they arrive (including a photo to make it more personal). It can include information about airport arrivals and pick up, a list of things to bring with them (such as a warm sweater or coat), the schedule for a typical day of classes and so forth.

Conclusion

Skype is an excellent tool for educators who are somewhat tentative about using more sophisticated learning technologies. Because Skype originally began as a voice-over-Internet-protocol (VOIP) service, as a cost-effective alternative to traditional phone calls, its application as a personal communication tool makes it more attractive to those who struggle to incorporate technology into their classrooms.

Skype's advanced features such as screen sharing, file transfer and instant messaging make this VOIP technology appropriate as a teaching tool, in addition to a personal communication tool.

In the second language classroom, Skype can be used to provide a variety of authentic learning experiences to students, including an interview with an author or other native speaker of the target language, or an international collaborative projects with other classrooms.

Skype Challenge for Participants

“Leaders learning from each other raises the bar for all” - Michael Fullan, Turnaround Leadership

Prepare and share your Top 10 Tips or Ideas for Using Skype in the Language Classroom Topics may include:

- Ideas on how to use Skype effectively.
- Ideas on how to use Skype for different grade levels.
- Ideas on how to reach beyond your physical classroom using Skype.
- Any other ideas you choose.

Ideally, projects will be presented using Skype so participants can “lead by example”.

Dr. Sarah Eaton

Educational Consultant, Speaker, Author

Research Associate, Language Research Centre, University of Calgary

[sarahelaineaton at gmail.com](mailto:sarahelaineaton@gmail.com)

<http://drsaraheaton.wordpress.com>

Slides for this presentation are archived at: <http://www.slideshare.net/saraheaton>

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