A VIDEO COURSE IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS AT MGIMO-UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The technological era of innovations and communicational breakthroughs challenges both students and teaching staff at schools and universities. Students, digital natives, expect from the pedagogical staff breakthroughs in educational process on a par with those in technology. A teaching staff, on the other hand, has to keep pace with innovations and adjust their curricula correspondingly. Not always are these challenges met, neither do pedagogical methods of teaching live up to students’ expectations. And it is the biggest and most serious concern for educationalists, as they have to be always developing and improving their methods of teaching in order to enhance educational process and challenge students to creativity and innovative mindset.

As findings in pedagogy have showed, the study of English as a foreign language opens up new opportunities for a teaching staff to ignite students’ creativity, non-standard way of thinking and adjustability to any professional context when they are engaged in a globalized informative-communicational space. Video classes in this respect play a significant role in setting up a global context.

This paper focuses on the video course designed on the materials of TED TALKS and intended for MGIMO-University undergraduates studying English as a foreign language. The aim of the program is, firstly, to enliven and extend the curriculum in English (Cambridge English Proficiency Masterclass by Kathy Gude, et al) by providing students with video materials on the topics covered by the program (People & Places; Our Environment; Language & Culture; Family & Relationships; Safety & Danger; etc.). Secondly, introducing students to different mindsets and viewpoints on the topics, create a global informative-communicational space for students to learn how to adjust to a new milieu for a more efficient communication. Thirdly, the video course seeks to significantly broaden the scope of discussion thus allowing students to considerably enrich their knowledge of English. It is designed for two-semester class work (two hours a week); and though initially conceived as the extension and upgrade of Cambridge English Proficiency Masterclass book, synchronized with it, it can be used as a separate full-fledged course. Each of 12 Units of the video course consists of two – four (depending on the length) video talks and class/home assignments. On the topic People & Places, for example, students watch ‘Whitopia’ by Rich Benjamin, locate the places mentioned in the talk, explain the meaning of ‘Whitopia’, and discuss the issues raised by the speaker. Singling out adjectives and determining vocabulary on the topic, analysis of the phrases marked as informal preface a round-table discussion when using new vocabulary, all students describe the places etched in their memory. Students willingly initiate their own presentations on the topics.

The video course noticeably enhances students’ motivation and activity. It has encouraged students to hold LET’S TALK at the University level. Its novelty is also in updating the curriculum in the English language and imparting it a cutting edge character both in meaning and form.

Keywords: Technological innovations, a designed video course, MGIMO-University, TED TALKS, global communicational space.

1 INTRODUCTION

The process of learning should be challenging, and, on the other hand, inseparable from real life and societal development. Students at colleges and universities demonstrate a different level of academic performance when they are involved, challenged and compete with their group mates. Our age of innovations and communicational breakthroughs creates an auspicious atmosphere, or context, for taking educational process to a higher level, when both students and teaching staff are challenged. Students, digital natives, expect from the pedagogical staff breakthroughs in educational process on a
par with those in technology. A teaching staff, on the other hand, has to keep pace with innovations and adjust their curricula correspondingly. Not always are these challenges met, neither do pedagogical methods of teaching live up to students’ expectations. And it is the biggest and most serious concern for educationalists, as they have to be always developing and improving their methods of teaching in order to enhance educational process and challenge students to creativity and innovative mindset.

2 METHODOLOGY

As findings in pedagogy have showed, the study of English as a foreign language opens up new opportunities for a teaching staff to ignite students’ creativity, non-standard way of thinking and adjustability to any professional context when they are engaged in a globalized informative-communicational space. Video classes in this respect play a significant role in setting up a global context.

The use of video in class has been in the focus of scholars and educationalists for quite a long period of time [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7]. Its effectiveness in igniting and enhancing students’ interest is not questioned.

This paper focuses on the video course designed on the materials of TED TALKS and intended for MGIMO-University undergraduates studying English as a foreign language at a proficient level. Cambridge English Proficiency Masterclass by Kathy Gude et al. is the main course book with the format of the exams and tests well spelled out in the Introduction of the Students’ book. Listening in it is a constituent part of CPE exam alongside Reading and Use of English, Writing and Speaking.

MGIMO students in the forth year of study evidently lose interest in learning which is accounted for by their active search for a job or their employment. Requirements to the graduates these days are in sharp contrast to those 10-15 years ago, when students started working after graduation from college or university. Not any more, now they are expected to have years of experience by the time they graduate. To a certain extent it is a disappointing fact. On the other hand, our age has made them much faster in learning, getting and digesting information and it is due to technology and technological tools they are born with and playful with. Still, in order to change the state of things and infuse a fresh innovative trend in the process of learning, educators have to always ‘reinvent a wheel’ and keep pace with students’ abilities to grasp information and assimilate knowledge.

The idea to design a new video course for the undergraduates was born after watching different TV and video programs, informative sites and TED.com in particular. The latter filled the author of the article with inspiration and also with admiration of the speakers who share with the world their big victories over themselves and circumstances and who pave the way for achieving the goals and making people around happier. The length of TED TALKS also meets educators’ requirements and fits into the time span recommended for efficient learning in class.

The aim of the video program in question, as it was conceived, is, in the first place, to enliven and extend the curriculum in English by providing students with video materials on the topics covered by the program (People & Places; Our Environment; Language & Culture; Family & Relationships; Safety & Danger; Health & Lifestyle; Science & Technology; Law & Order; Psychology & Employment; Entertainment & Leisure; Money Matters; Travel & Tourism). This course was supposed to kill two birds with one stone – providing students with additional video material on the topics under study and also aiming at developing listening skills, which is part and parcel of the English language curriculum. TED speakers were selected with different accents and from different parts of the world on purpose as there are always students in English class who have insufficient listening skills and experience difficulty in understanding diverse accents or variants of the English language and therefore needing more training in listening assignments. This video course serves the purpose to improve and master these skills.

Secondly, introducing students to different mindsets and viewpoints on the topics, the video course creates a global informative-communicational space for students to learn how to adjust to a new milieu for a more efficient professional communication. Every TED speaker by his/her open and enthusiastic talk immediately evokes empathy in listeners and establishes a good rapport with them. Representing different cultures and countries, speakers put students in a different communicational context making them compare and contrast their own cultures and manners of behavior with those of the presenters, in this way finding cultural differences and learning from them. This video course draws students into
unfamiliar situations and conditions thus challenging them and making them solve a problem in a different milieu.

Thirdly, the designed video course, seeking to substantially broaden the scope of discussion, allows students to noticeably enlarge their vocabulary on the topics. It is intended for two-semester class work (two hours a week); and though initially conceived as the extension and upgrade of Cambridge English Proficiency Masterclass book, synchronized with it, it can be used as a separate full-fledged course. Consisting of two – four video talks (depending on the length), each of twelve units has its topic and class/home assignments, which are not connected with each other or dependent on other units. It should also be noted that this course is a separate class that is run in coordination with the professor of English teaching Proficiency Masterclass in a student group. What is more, it is open for updating, editing and improvement; video material can easily be revised and substituted by a recent and newer one.

STRUCTURE OF CLASS WORK

On topic People and Places (Unit 1), for example, there are two video talks planned for two classes, each with class and home assignments. It is ‘Whitopia’ presented by Rich Benjamin and Iwan Baan’s presentation “Ingenious Homes in Unexpected Places”.

The class opens with the questions to the students about their summer vacation and the impressions of the visited places.

Discussion is followed by watching ‘Whitopia’ and answering the following questions:

1) How is the topic People & Places unfolded in the movie?
2) What places does the speaker mention and where are they?
3) What information does the speaker glean about each of the places?
4) What does the word ‘Whitopia’, obviously coined by the speaker, mean?
5) What issues other than people and places are highlighted in the video and what do they testify to?

Students are given the assignment to enumerate the adjectives used by Rich Benjamin, and separately those given in descriptions of three different places, the assignment usually requiring watching the video for the second time. Learning adjectives continues with finding synonyms and translation into Russian of the adjectives ‘splendid vistas’, a ‘seductive place’, ‘ineffable charm’, ‘arid climate’, and ‘affable people’.

Coming across words of foreign origins, students have to carefully examine them, say, the words ‘gusto’ in ‘throw myself with gusto’, or ‘gung ho’ in ‘I am a gung ho entertainer’, etc. and comment on them.

Singling out adjectives and determining the vocabulary on the topic, analysis of the phrases marked as informal preface a round-table discussion when using new vocabulary, all students describe the places etched in their memory.

Students willingly initiate their own presentations on the topics. TED TALKS also teach students how to present a topic and make presentations eye-catching, rhetorically powerful, impressive, and unforgettable.

The second video “Ingenious Homes in Unexpected Places” by Iwan Baan, travelling as a photographer round the world, adds more vocabulary to the topic People & Places and allows students to immerse into the life and culture of distant countries where habitations of people are beyond human imagination. The vocabulary demonstrating ingenuity and adaptability of peoples to nature, circumstances and conditions is reflected in the following list of phrases: ‘a makeshift camp’; ‘rough-and-ready informal city’; ‘houses appropriated by people’; ‘to live out of a suitcase 365 days a year’; ‘slums reach every corner of the city’; ‘self-built wells’; ‘to follow my fascination with the built environment’; ‘the tower is like a 54-story walkup’; ‘leftover pulleys’; ‘cookie-cutter’; etc. Students analyze these phrases and comment on the meaning of each.

The work on the vocabulary brings about a discussion on the ingenuity of people and their ability to adapt to any circumstances. Students adduce their own examples, and for home assignment they are given the task to bring their own videos on the topic for class discussion and speak of the most
unusual places they have ever visited, using the vocabulary of two presentations. Class and home work stimulates students’ interest in new places, countries, acquaint them with ineffable conditions in which people live in different parts of the world, considerably improve students’ knowledge of geography as it makes them explore the map in order to locate each of the places mentioned. It is a multifaceted and multitask learning that requires a corresponding level of English with extended vocabulary.

TYPES OF CLASS ASSIGNMENTS

Types of class assignments elaborated for the course are determined by TED talks and the peculiarities of the information presented. Unit 10 Entertainment & Leisure, for example, dictates a different type of assignments directed at developing analytical and critical thinking, comparing and contrasting cultures and arousing aesthetic pleasure of the speaker’s presentation. There are two presentations included – “The Transformative Power of Classical Music” by Benjamin Zander and “A Virtual Choir 2,000 Voices Strong” by Eric Whitacre.

Watching the video is preceded by reflections on the questions: 1) Why are the two concepts “entertainment” and “leisure” binominal? How are they defined in the dictionaries? 2) Are entertainment and leisure culturally specific? 3) What is entertainment for you? What is leisure for you?

After watching video presentation by Benjamin Zander there are questions for students to answer:

1) Does classical music belong to high art? Why is it still believed not to be for every one?
2) What group of classical music listeners do you belong to?
3) What are Zander’s reflections on people’s tone-deafness? Do you support this point of view?
4) Comment on the following words of Mr. Zander – “Of course, if the piece is long and you’ve had a long day, you might actually drift off. Then your companion will dig you off in the ribs and say, ‘Wake up! It’s culture!’ And then you feel even worse.”
5) In what connection is the parallel between Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Chopin’s Prelude drawn?
6) What is the role of the allusion to Nelson Mandela in this talk?
7) What meaning does Mr. Zander put into the word ‘VISION’?
8) How entertaining is Mr. Zander’s presentation on classical music?
9) What role is assigned to classical music in our technologically advanced era?
10) Does Benjamin Zander break the stereotypes of the classical music being exclusively for the elite and selected? How transformative is the power of classical music?

Eric Whitacre’s presentation continues the in-depth analysis of the role of music in our life and manifests how our age of technology helps unite people and create a virtual choir of singers from different corners of the planet, in this way revealing absolutely unique possibilities of technological innovations when used with ingenuity and imagination. The speaker’s demonstration is followed by the following questions:

1) What facts of Eric’s biography do we learn and how significant are they for the audience?
2) How did the idea of forming a virtual choir spring up?
3) How was it technologically supported?
4) What is Eric’s idea of forming a virtual choir suggestive of?
5) How powerful and transformative can music be?

As is seen from the assignments to Unit 10, video material determines the types of assignments and class activity. This unit does not include minute work on the vocabulary as in previous units since it is based on familiar vocabulary and does not require additional comments. But it calls for a different level of learning coming from deciphering allusions, finding implications and drawing inferences from them. This unit has a different function – to ignite emotions, aesthetic pleasure from inspirational talks of the presenters, to arouse admiration of the unique ideas they originated and the way they put them into
practice. Such talks hold sway for a long period of time and cause discussions both among students and professors; it really makes a difference to our inner selves.

3 RESULTS

Class and home assignments of two units suffice to demonstrate the principle underlying the video course. Aiming at revitalizing English classes, making them challenging for students, at the same time immersing them into real life of real people, with genuine interests and concerns, the designed video course stimulates students’ motivation and considerably enhances their learning abilities. In this connection comes to mind the book by Terry Barret and Sarah Moore [8] who consider that at the core of success in teaching/learning lies problem-based learning which includes problem statement, learning with peers in groups [9], [10], and compatible assessment of students based on the learning outcomes, and development of learning capabilities.

The video course noticeably enhances students’ motivation and activity. It has encouraged students to hold LET’S TALK at the University level, which helps students to get out of comfort zone and overcome their complexes and phobias. The novelty of the course also consists in updating the curriculum in the English language and imparting it a cutting edge character both in meaning and form.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The era of technology provides new prospects for optimization of learning/teaching process. It is in the hands of educators to find the appropriate technological tools to make the process effective and the students open to embracing them so that they could realize their creative, intellectual, and learning potential. Since any academic program is strictly structured, any novelty in teaching/learning activities enlivens the process and gives students freedom in creativity, ingenuity and demonstration of collaborative abilities. The designed video course enables students to reveal their knowledge, life experience, erudition and their own views on different aspects of life. Put into globalized informative-communicational context, they project the outcomes in any situation and adapt to a new milieu thus manifesting their flexibility and adaptability to different professional and non-professional contexts. Video materials, being a visual means, have a doubled power of influence – they are easier to perceive and relate to and more memorable, that’s why they hold sway for a long time. They involve students instantaneously and always live up to their expectations by that making learning process more active and efficient.

REFERENCES


