

Business Talking



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Background to the Course Concept

The Business Talking course is designed to enable course participants to develop oral proficiency in English, specifically English used in business situations. The course offers students the chance to practice their oral English in an environment which allows real-time and authentic communication. The course focuses not only on English proficiency but also on communicative strategies and language pragmatics that enable effective oral communication. The course trials consisted of collaboration between different universities under the Avalon framework where non-native students worked with native English speakers as 'buddies'.

The course focuses on two aspects of oral business English:

1. Proficiency in oral business English
2. Developing communicative strategies and gaining an insight in to language pragmatics for successful oral communication in English

The course is now being run as a regular course at Linnaeus University, Sweden by David Richardson who was employed by Mid Sweden University during the course trial.

For more details and notes from the course see:

<http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/7682802/Business-Talking>

Overview of the Course

The course consists of six meetings where students engage in oral communication based on role-playing situations as well as giving oral presentations. Students are assessed on their oral performance: During the course students also respond to each other's performance and feedback is given continuously by the teacher. Non-native speakers are initially assigned a native speaking 'buddy' during an introductory meeting in order to orientate themselves in Second Life and this interaction forms part of the assigned work of the 'buddy'. The course consists of a number of phases:

1. Social initiation where non-native speaking students are introduced to the course and each other and introduced to Second Life by native English-speakers (buddy).
2. Introduction to aspects of oral proficiency and communicative strategies.
3. Practical oral presentations in the form of role-playing and other exercises.
4. Discussion of assignments, assessment and feedback is given to the student continually.

Requirements and Recommendations

Language Level: B1 and up

Prior knowledge of virtual worlds: Students require no prior knowledge of SL. The teacher should have intermediate skills (communication and movement, etc) but no building skills are needed.

Recommended size of group: 35 or smaller

Target audience: University students and professionals with an interest in developing and improving oral business communication skills in English

Number of lessons: 6 (including an introductory Course Launch)

SL environment requirements: An open environment with enough space to form groups out of hearing range of other groups is recommended for the initial stages of the course. An auditorium is needed when the whole student group gathers for seminars and presentations.

SL objects needed: An SL whiteboard where pictures and presentations can be uploaded.

SL tools used by students during the course: Basic movements, voice, chat, IM, friendship tools, teleport (initial introductory meeting)

Course management tools: Course information and material is collected on a web site.

Student in-word initiation: Students are given an introduction to the virtual world by native English-speaking students who are experienced SL users as part of the course introduction.

Learning Goals

Language:

To develop oral proficiency in English in order to carry out oral presentations in technical, administrative and formal contexts.

Be able to engage in informal discussions in English

Social:

To work gain an understanding of other students' English learning and to aid this process.

To collaborate with other students in developing and carrying out oral presentations

Be able to appraise and assess other students' oral presentations

To interact with native English-speakers in a virtual environment

Technical:

Learn to use the virtual environment of SL for learning, both as a tool for communication and a source of information.

Storyboard

Various role-play scenarios are introduced in the course. The aim of the role play scenarios is to introduce real life situations in order to stimulate a realistic element to the assignments.

Course Content and Structure

Below is a brief description of the course meetings. For more detailed descriptions of meetings, including lesson plans and visual aids used during lessons see the course wiki <http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/Business-Talking> and the Business Talking Repository <http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/Business-Talking-Repository>

Technical Initiation and Course Launch

Students are contacted with information about SL and asked to create a SL account and inform the teacher of the avatar name to be used in SL. The students are also given a link to the course web site, which includes a beginner's guide to SL (embedded videos explaining SL functions). Students are then given a choice of dates when they will meet up with a native English-speaker (a 'buddy') with SL experience for the course launch, which is the course introductory meeting. This introductory meeting is intended to introduce the student to SL and its functions as well as introduce the course and explain the structure and is also the basis of an assignment during the first meeting. Students explore SL and practice using basic SL functions with guidance from their assigned 'buddy' before meeting up at a designated place for a briefing about Lesson 1.

LESSON 1

Suggested virtual world environment:

Students should meet at an auditorium in order to receive information and instructions for the first lesson. When students are required to organize into groups the nearby welcome area of Kamimo Island is a suitably open area for students to prepare and practice the assigned tasks without being disturbed by voice levels from other groups.

3D objects used: None

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): Slide presentation of timetable for the lesson as well as slide presentation of various topics to be introduced during the lesson.

Course management tools: Course information and material is collected on the course web site. Information can also be sent out to students via e-mail.

Aims: The aim of the lesson is to:

- Introduce aspects of greetings and the level of formality in various situations
- Discuss and practice the principles of active listening through listening to various spoken presentations
- Discuss and practice breaking into and interrupting conversations
- Introduce the student to the construction and delivery of presentations

Summary of Activities:

- Gather in auditorium area
- Introduction and Instructions
- Introduction to various topics
- Exercises related to topics (practice in groups)
- Presentation based on experiences from Course Launch
- Feedback
- Information about lesson 2

LESSON 2

Suggested virtual world environment: Students should meet at an auditorium area in order to receive information and instructions for the second lesson. The lesson involves students splitting into groups in order to practice presentations and discuss the topics introduced in the lesson.

3D objects used: None

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): Slide presentation of timetable for the lesson as well as slide presentation of various topics to be introduced during the lesson.

Course management tools: Course information and material is collected on the course web site. Information can also be sent out to students via e-mail.

Aims: The aim of the lesson is to:

- Discuss and practice the principles of active listening through listening to various spoken presentations
- Introduce grading criteria and relevance for the first assessment to be presented during lesson 3
- Discuss the principles of role playing as well as introduce the scenario that will be acted upon during the lesson

Summary of Activities:

- Gather in auditorium area

- Introduction to lesson and instructions
- Active listening
- Practice presentations
- Information on how gradable presentations will be graded
- Presentations
- Role playing activity
- Peer and teacher feedback

LESSON 3

Suggested virtual world environment: Students should meet at an auditorium area in order to receive information and instructions for the third lesson. The lesson involves students splitting into groups in order to practice presentations, carry out role play scenarios and discuss the topics introduced in the lesson. The lesson also sees the first graded assessment introduced in the form of a student presentation which should take place in an auditorium area.

3D objects used: None

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): Slide presentation of timetable for the lesson as well as slide presentation of various topics to be introduced during the lesson.

Course management tools: Course information and material is collected on the course web site. Information can also be sent out to students via e-mail.

Aims: The aim of the lesson is to:

- Introduce and practice using language that enables agreement and disagreement
- Introduce a new role playing scenario that students enact in groups

This lesson also sees the students present their first gradable presentation. Following the presentation students give feedback to each other and receive feedback from the teacher.

Summary of activities:

- Gather in auditorium
- Introduction to lesson and instructions
- Warm up
- Assessment 1 and feedback
- Language of agreement and disagreement
- Role play practice
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LESSON 4

Suggested virtual world environment: Students should meet at an auditorium area in order to receive information and instructions for the fourth lesson. The lesson involves students splitting into groups in order to practice presentations, carry out role play scenarios and discuss the topics introduced in the lesson. The lesson also sees the second graded assessment introduced in the form of a role play presentation which should take place in an auditorium area.

3D objects used: None

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): Slide presentation of timetable for the lesson as well as slide presentation of various topics to be introduced during the lesson.

Course management tools: Course information and material is collected on the course web site. Information can also be sent out to students via e-mail.

Aims: The aim of the lesson is to:

- Introduce and practice using language that enables agreement and disagreement
- Introduce the concept of politeness and language and how it relates to agreement/disagreement
- Introduce the concept of changing subject and steering discussions

This lesson contains the second gradable assignment (Assessment 2) which is a role play scenario. Students work in groups of 3 or 4 where each student has an assigned role in the role play situation. Group as well as individual performance is appraised.

Summary of activities:

- Gather in auditorium
- Introduction to lesson and instructions
- The language of agreement/disagreement
- Changing the subject
- Introduce Assessment 2
- Group practice for Assessment 2
- Role play performance for Assessment 2
- Feedback
- Instructions for Assessment 3 (Lesson 5)

LESSON 5

Suggested virtual world environment: Students should meet at an auditorium area in order to receive information and instructions for the fifth lesson. The lesson

involves students presenting their group presentations for Assessment 3 so the auditorium can be used for the whole lesson.

3D objects used: None

2D materials used (slides, text, etc): Slide presentation of instructions for Assessment 3.

Course management tools: Course information and material is collected on the course web site. Information can also be sent out to students via e-mail.

Aims: The main aim of lesson 5 is to examine the students' presentations for Assessment 3.
The course is also evaluated at this lesson.

Summary of activities:

- Gather in auditorium
- Student presentations
- Feedback
- Evaluation of course

Evaluation of Students

Students are examined by three assessments during the course.

Assessment 1 (Lesson 3) is an individual presentation based on an SL-related topic of the student's choice.

Assessment 2 (Lesson 4) is a group exercise where groups of three or four students perform a role play. Students are assigned roles in the role play and given instructions and background information about the role play scenario. The role play is assessed and graded.

Assessment 3 (Lesson 5) is a presentation where three students decide on a topic and deliver a presentation based on the topic (in groups of three). The assessment is an individual and group assessment.

For grading see the course repository:

<http://avalonlearning.pbworks.com/w/page/31189433/Business-Talking-Repository>

Reflections

The Business Talking course was very carefully constructed before it was first launched to take into account both the requirements of the subject and the factors relating to the delivery of the course in an environment like the one on Kamimo Island. The subject matter was largely developed from existing 'real-life' courses, since there is plenty of expertise available in how to deliver courses in spoken English in a business context. The guided role-play concept, for example, is modelled on the old RSA CUEFL examination, and has been extensively used in real-life courses, particularly in ESP courses for the Swedish Army. The specific antecedent of the course is a course called 'Oral Production' which was offered by Mid-Sweden University in the late 1990s. This was the origin of the 'linked presentations' idea for Assessment 3.

The fact that the subject matter and teaching practices had been extensively trialed before the Business Talking course began helped the teacher to concentrate on those aspects of course design which were specific to the use of Second Life. One distinction made, for example, is between 'place of study' and 'object of study' courses in Second Life. The former are courses which use Second Life as a location for students to meet in order to study something else (in this case spoken business English); the latter are courses which are highly dependent on the specific scenery and content of the Second Life location (such as the courses run on the neighbouring islands of Virtual Montmartre and Virtual Harlem about African-American culture). Business Talking is a 'place of study' course, which means that the specific layout and scenery of Kamimo Island is of lesser importance, thus making the preparation of the teaching environment very straightforward.

As can be seen from the course evaluations (in the [Business Talking Repository](#)), the course has been very well received with a steadily increasing number of applicants and students taking the course.

Adaptations

The fact that the course is a 'place of study' makes it very adaptable to other situations, student groups, etc. It could actually be delivered in any space in Second Life (and even in one of the alternative virtual environments) quite easily, provided that that space had good audio facilities. The course is, at present, focussed on the business student, but it would be a relatively easy task to focus on different types of English for specific purposes, such as spoken technical English or English for sales and marketing. It would also be possible to extend or shorten the course to take into account more or less practice with negotiations, role play, etc. The fact that the student can study the course from any computer which is sufficiently powerful to run Second Life and is connected to a sufficient Internet connection also enables the geographical spread of the students to be very large, including people who live in various parts of the developing world, and students from all parts of the EU.