Language education via audio/videoconferencing (LEVAC): A discursive investigation

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A B S T R A C T

The study seeks to identify discursive patterns of private online English lessons, perceived as satisfying by adult language learners from Russia. The analysis shows a stable discursive structure with asymmetrical role distribution between teachers and students. The study also shows that most language produced during the lessons was relatively simple and covered everyday topics. The dataset provides illustrations of two medium-specific characteristics of this learning environment: (i) the use of emoticons to complement speaking and (ii) interruptions from external users. The study raises questions regarding the use of teaching materials in private online teaching context, the learning outcomes of the identified curriculum genre and an apparent difference in pedagogic behaviour of native and non-native English tutors in relation to grammar error correction. The findings of this study will be of interest to a wide range of English-teaching stakeholders, including teachers, teacher-trainers and educational developers.

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Introduction

The growth of technology has given rise to a new way of language education – private online language tutoring, which tends to be conducted via popular video/audio-conferencing tools, such as Skype. As expected, there is a dearth of studies on this teaching and learning context. The existing studies have been mostly exploratory and focused on the providers and customers of private online English-teaching services in Russia (Kozar & Sweller, 2014; Kozar, 2012, 2014). These studies suggest that there are different types of providers, ranging from individual teachers to large private language schools, such as Kaplan and that 'English for Conversation' is the most commonly offered type of lessons (Kozar, 2012). The focus on speaking is not accidental; unlike other online tools, such as emails, blogs, wikis, discussion forums, designed primarily for asynchronous written communication, Skype and other similar VoiP (Voice over the Internet Protocol) tools are able to support real-time voice and video conversations and therefore create an opportunity for speaking practice. Prior studies also report that services of private online language tutors seem to be particularly popular among Russian adult learners (medium age 27), who study for work-related, travelling and personal reasons (Kozar & Sweller, 2014). It would appear that speaking is an attractive activity for adult learners from the countries of the 'Expanding Circle'[1] (Kachru, 2006), wherein English has no special administrative status and the opportunities to use English outside of the classroom are limited and that videoconferencing lessons provide a means to have regular conversational practice. While this study investigates what

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[1] Countries, where English is learnt as a foreign language, such as Russia or China.

constitutes conversational lessons in Russia and the pedagogy of such classes, the findings may be of relevance to other countries of the Expanding Circle.

This study seeks to investigate the structure and the discursive characteristics of several 'conversational' lessons conducted via Skype with Russian learners of English who reported being satisfied with their lessons. A central question of this paper is whether there may be a consistent genre of the 'conversational LEVAC[2] lesson'. This question is important since identifying and describing a genre is one way to understand and critically evaluate new social phenomena. This analytical power comes from genres being "staged, goal-oriented, social processes" (J.R. Martin, 1997, p. 13), which makes the knowledge of genres useful for teacher training and professional development.

The data for this study comes from six 'long-term' dyads of teachers and learners who have been having English lessons via Skype on a regular basis for at least 4 months. The 'long-term' nature of dyads is an important feature of this study, as it allows reducing the 'novelty effect'. Novelty effect refers to a short-lived increase in students' efforts or reported motivation following the introduction of a new treatment or a new tool. This effect is commonly found in educational technology research and has been widely cautioned against (Buckingham, 2013; Kern, Ware, & Warschauer, 2008; Selwyn, 2010). Another important characteristic of the dataset is that all the students expressed a high overall satisfaction with their lessons by ranking their classes as '10 out of 10' on the perceived usefulness and enjoyment scales in the regular feedback to the private school, which matched these students and their teachers. This dataset is therefore valuable as it provides a snapshot into established practices reported as useful and enjoyable by private online language learners. Similar to any discursive investigation, the aim of this study is to describe and explain what is happening in a particular context, rather than to necessarily generalize findings to other contexts.

Conversational lessons: unknown species?

Even a cursory look at the current English-teaching sector in Russia shows a considerable interest in 'conversational English' (Russian: *razgovornyi angliisky*). There are numerous books, multimedia courses and websites, featuring the phrase 'conversational English' in their title (e.g. Gasina, 2003; LinguaMatch, 2003; Tomalin, 2007) and an increasing number of private language schools foreground *razgovornyi angliisky* in their advertisements and promotional materials (Kozar, 2014). The salience of 'conversational English' in current English teaching discourse in Russia might be rooted in a common perception that Russian learners of English have a considerable gap between their grammatical knowledge and their communicative skills, usually attributed to a long tradition of the grammar-translation approach in Russia, wherein students get limited opportunities to practice speaking (Ter-Minasova, 2005).

Despite its widespread use, there is a degree of ambiguity about the meaning of the phrase *razgovornyi angliisky* (conversational English) in the Russian context. On the one hand, this concept can be understood as a type of class that focuses on improving speaking skills and has a high number of speaking activities; at the same time, this phrase can also be interpreted as 'informal, modern English' and can imply learning slang and the varieties of English, different from formal English. Moreover, some of the books, sold under the banner of 'conversational English' in Russia closely resemble phrasebooks for travellers and contain mostly formulaic phrases, such as buying tickets or ordering a meal (see for example Shiryaeva, 2012). It is, therefore, unclear what is construed as 'conversational English' in the Russian context and what pedagogy underpins lessons named this way.

The lack of clarity on the nature of 'conversational' lessons is not exclusive to Russia. Current literature suggests that there is a considerable vagueness about the nature of speaking or 'conversational' lessons worldwide. In a recent paper on conversation-driven ELT (English Language Teaching) pedagogy, Chappell (2014) asks "if we are privileging conversation, then what is it exactly that is being privileged?" (p. 2). This question is pertinent, as, despite the existence of several approaches to teaching conversational skills, ranging from a "carefully graded progression" of questions and answers, known as the Direct Method (J. Richards & Rogers, 1986, p. 10) to various forms of Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Learning (for overview see Thornbury & Slade, 2006), teaching speaking and conversation remains under-theorized in the field of English-language teaching even for the face-to-face context (Nunan, 1987; Spada, 2007; Thompson, 1996). When a new medium of delivery (videoconferencing) is added to the equation, the question of what pedagogy is being privileged during 'conversational' lessons conducted via tools like Skype and what goals are being achieved becomes even more relevant, as not only should teachers take into account the new 'materiality' of online environments (Hampel, 2006), but they also need to find appropriate teaching materials and learning activities for this context.

Theoretical background

The following section presents a brief overview of relevant research and theoretical considerations which informed the design of this study.

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[2] LEVAC = Language Education via Video/Audio Conferencing.