

How to Use e-Learning Activities to Connect with the Introvert Corporate Language Learner

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Abstract—The aim of this contribution is to show some best-practice examples about how to use e-learning activities to connect with introvert learners who must improve their foreign language skills for their jobs. After a short introduction, different possibilities to help the introvert employee to succeed at improving their foreign language skills using an online-learning platform will be presented.

Index Terms—ESL (English as a Second Language), introvert learners, e-learning activities.

I. INTRODUCTION

In international companies speaking and being able to communicate in a foreign language is essential for doing business. Very often language courses for companies focus on extrovert learners who volunteer to improve their skills; whereas introvert learners – very often experts in their fields – are too shy to sign up for an in-house-language course. Language instructors tend to focus on communicative activities and teamwork, which are great for extrovert learners. Introvert learners are usually left with two choices: they either pretend to be extroverts, and do things they do not enjoy, or they do not participate in these courses, and risk promotion or participation in international projects.

In her book “Quiet – The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking”, Susan Cain [1] writes about a development in classrooms where – as a lot of research has been done to focus on the success of the extrovert learner through group projects/presentations – the introvert learner has not only been neglected, but actually ignored. Shyness and quietness are often associated with a lack of interest, indifference, boredom or even laziness.

“According to a 2002 nationwide survey of more than 1,200 fourth – and eighth-grade teachers, 55 percent of fourth-grade teachers prefer cooperative learning, compared to only 26 percent who favor teacher-directed formats. ... Among younger teachers, small-group learning is even more popular, suggesting that the trend will continue for some time to come.” [1]

Introvert learners tend to have problems in large group settings. They tend to be quiet and to not talk in class in general. Most of these students, however, already have a very good command of English as a second language; they read a lot and think a lot about the topics that are dealt with in class. They write very mature essays and are very creative at storytelling when given enough time to prepare.

How can e-learning help introvert learners to succeed at improving their foreign language skills? It is very im-

portant for the introvert learner to have a safe learning environment where they feel appreciated, and are helped to discover their strengths. They also need time to think about the tasks and their answers. Examples and strategies of how to meet these needs by means of an online learning platform will be given in the following.

II. TEACHING & LEARNING

A. Learner Types

One of the differences between extrovert and introvert learners is how they think. Introvert learners need time to think, and think silently; whereas extrovert learners may blurt out answers (before thinking), and think while they talk. The fact that introvert learners very often have profound knowledge on certain topics because they read and think a lot is very often not appreciated by the instructor. How can a language instructor create classroom settings that help the introvert learner to succeed, and to be appreciated?

First, the instructor needs to know which learner types prevail in her or his classroom. This can be done through a basic multiple intelligence survey to find out about prevailing learner types or strengths (i.e. naturalist, musical, logical, existential, interpersonal, kinesthetic, verbal, intrapersonal, visual). An example for such a survey that may give the instructor a basic idea about prevailing strengths may be Walter McKenzie’s “Multiple Intelligences Inventory” [2] which can be found online.

This knowledge may help the instructor find ways of teaching that appeal to the main learner types in their sample. From the author’s experience of teaching in a technical program at the University of Applied Sciences, and of analyzing learner types at the beginning of the students’ first year for the past ten years, she knows about one third of students in this technical program are kinesthetic learners, another third are musical and visual or visual and kinesthetic learners, and about one in four students is a highly introvert learner. In the past two years the number of introvert learners who started to study at this degree program seems to have increased significantly, even as these figures cannot yet be seen as representative. In 2012 the program started its first semester with 41 students – 25 of them (61%) considered themselves to be highly introvert learners. In 2013 the program started its first semester with 48 students, out of which 30 students (62.5%) considered themselves to be highly introvert learners, after taking a multiple intelligence survey.

Arends and Kilcher [3] give some examples for learning activities to match various intelligences and strengths in order to facilitate the learning process. These examples,

which are aimed at younger students, can be adapted rather easily to meet the needs of adult learners.

B. The Introvert Learner

Paula Kezwer [4] compared major studies dealing with the influence of extroversion on second language learning, and the implications of extroversion and introversion for classroom teaching. One of her findings suggests that students should learn with a peer student in order to be encouraged to speak more freely. She also recommends providing as much variety in the classroom as possible to at least partially meet the needs of different learner types.

So, instructors always have to keep in mind that they need to prepare their material to ideally appeal to all learner types. It is easy to find tasks for the extrovert and interpersonal learner. These tasks are usually highly (and loudly) appreciated by these learners, and may give instructors the feeling that they succeeded at getting their messages across. For the introvert learner, having to be in class with all the other students can be exhausting in itself, and if they sometimes dare to raise their hands to contribute, there are usually some other students who want to take over and “help” the introvert student by giving the correct answer. Introvert learners need time to think, and instructors must give them time to contribute. In group work settings introvert learners should be given the possibility to opt out, and to work on their own. This will not only help them to do tasks at their own pace, but also to feel appreciated and valued in class for their contributions. If it is necessary to work in a group, a small group will be the better choice for the introvert learner. It may be helpful at the beginning of a semester or course to talk about learner types and the specific needs of different learner types in class, and to let the class as a whole try to find ways to meet different needs. If students understand why different tasks can be completed in a different way by different learners, it will be easier for them to accept and respect different reactions. An extrovert learner may learn to hold her-- or himself-- back and to give another learner the chance to make a contribution.

III. E-LEARNING

The University of Applied Sciences FH JOANNEUM has started to use “Moodle” as a central e-learning platform in 2010. Moodle is an open-source software that is used by schools and universities around the world to support teaching and learning. Instructors can upload material (hand-outs, presentations, audio/video files) for their students; they can give them online tasks to solve; and they may have their students take quizzes to assess their performance. In addition to the already mentioned functions, Moodle also offers forums where students can discuss ideas and glossaries for students to work on vocabulary about a specific topic.

An e-learning platform can be used to support a face-to-face course in order to meet different learners’ needs. However, it can also be used for a course that is conducted online only, where participants and the instructor either do not meet in person at all, or where they only meet for a few sessions (usually an initial session, one during the course and one to conclude the course). From the author’s experience students seem to improve their foreign language skills most in either a blended learning setting (where the e-learning platform is just another tool to accompany the course), or settings where participants and

instructor meet at least three times during a 12-week-course. This, again, only works with highly motivated learners as they would be in a company training course where improving their skills is a necessity.

Moodle is based on the “social-constructivist” approach in which every participant can have the role of an instructor, and in which learners learn from each other’s experiences.

Roche [5] suggests that foreign language instruction should use “instructional design” or “anchored instruction”, where the instructor prepares tasks and accompanies the learner through the learning process as to create new outcomes.

How can an e-learning platform like Moodle help to meet the needs of the introvert language learner?

A. Writing Tasks

Introvert learners can excel at writing activities, and they are usually the ones who complete written homework tasks earning very high grades. Using an e-learning platform or learning management system for classroom activities, where students have to write forum entries and to give each other feedback, will help introvert learners to express their thoughts more freely.

Students can also be given the option to keep a study journal on Moodle, where they can write down their thoughts about their weekly lessons, and ask questions if something remains unclear.

In the following the author shows a few study journal entries by a student who in the first four weeks of the semester never spoke in his weekly language class (English for Academic Skills) taught by the author:

Due date:	Montag, 22 Oktober 2012, 11:55
Last edited:	Samstag, 20 Oktober 2012, 3:03 (42 words)

In the second week I refreshed my knowledge about the present tense.

Nothing remained unclear 😊

To improve my English skills I listened to music, watched my favourite movie in English and talked to some friends online and in English of course.

Figure 1. Student study journal entry, week 2

Due date:	Sonntag, 28 Oktober 2012, 3:10
Last edited:	Samstag, 20 Oktober 2012, 3:05 (38 words)

This week I learned about the correct use of the past tense and how a paragraph is written “professionally” :D

Nothing remained unclear.

As always I listened to English music, sang along, watched movies and talked to friends.

Figure 2. Student study journal entry, week 3

Due date:	Dienstag, 20 November 2012, 12:45
Last edited:	Montag, 19 November 2012, 6:41 (66 words)

Last English lesson I learned about divorce, which was very interesting for me, because my parents are divorced too.

Nothing remained unclear.

People in Graz talked to me and asked me the way to the main square. I watched Cloud Atlas in english in the cinema, listened to music and talked to friends online.

Figure 3. Student study journal entry, week 6

As can be seen from these entries the student’s command of the language is good, even as he does not speak in class for the first four weeks, and he seems to “open up” a little in the course of time. After four weeks, and after a lot of encouragement via the study journal by the instructor, the learner starts to speak in class, answering questions asked to the group, and after another three weeks he starts to voluntarily participate in pair-work activities.

A journal is a great way for an introvert learner to connect with the instructor, who then needs to take the time to read these entries and to reply to them. Very often study journal entries give the instructor valuable insights on their teaching from comments by introvert learners. The instructor can use these journal conversations to build trust and confidence with, especially, the introvert learners, who prefer not to speak in class.

Moreover, these writing tasks are great for company trainings, as participants can complete the tasks at their own pace, and do not have to go to a “classroom” where they might feel obliged to talk and participate in collaborative learning activities.

Once learners have built trust and feel accepted in their group, an e-learning platform can be used for forum activities where learners in pairs have to complete a task, and then comment online on other entries. Sometimes introvert learners will need the option to do these tasks on their own. They usually perform just as well as students who do these activities in pairs or in small groups, and they usually give very profound feedback on their peers’ entries.

If the instructor wants to let students work individually on improving their vocabulary, learners can be asked to create a glossary where they repeat terms on a topic that was covered in the course by adding new words, their explanations, and example sentences.

This activity also helps introvert students as they can again work at their own pace. They can furthermore show that they understood the task and can perform just as well as students who normally prefer oral tasks. It practices different skills, helps learners to improve their vocabulary, and to learn from each other.

The following Figure (Figure 4) gives an example of such glossary entries via Moodle on the topic of “job applications”, where students had to go through their material, identify terms that may be useful for everyone to learn, explain these terms in the target language (in this case English), and write down an example sentence for each term. Introvert learners tend to do these tasks with precision, reliability, and a lot of commitment and therefore, prepare the material in a way that contributes to the learning experience of the whole group.

Figure 4. Student glossary entries (topic “job applications”)

This is an activity that can be done as a blended learning activity in the classroom, provided learners have access to computers; or as a homework task which, again, is more suitable for highly motivated learners. Instructors can see the number of entries per learner, and give feedback on these entries.

B. Oral Tasks

Teaching and/or learning a foreign language is not easy without oral tasks where learners can apply and practice their foreign language skills. Again, here it is very important for the introvert learner to have a safe learning environment, have the possibility to express their thoughts freely and at their own pace.

In an online learning platform it is possible to upload oral instructions and have students upload their tasks as audio files. An example for such a podcast homework could be to ask the students to find a native speaker to interview on a specific topic and then to explain something to that person in return. Learners have to upload their tasks as audio files and find two other participants in their course to comment on the interview and “rate” it.

Figure 5 shows an example for a podcast homework entry and peer feedback. Students had to find a native speaker of the target language (English) and ask them about culinary differences they noticed when they visited the other country. The learners then had to explain a typical dish from their culture to their interview partner. In the next step, they had to find peers to listen to their entries and to comment on them. This was done as a forum entry (again to make the task more appealing for introvert learners), but could also have been done orally. Last but not least, they had to listen to another entry, and also comment and rate that contribution.

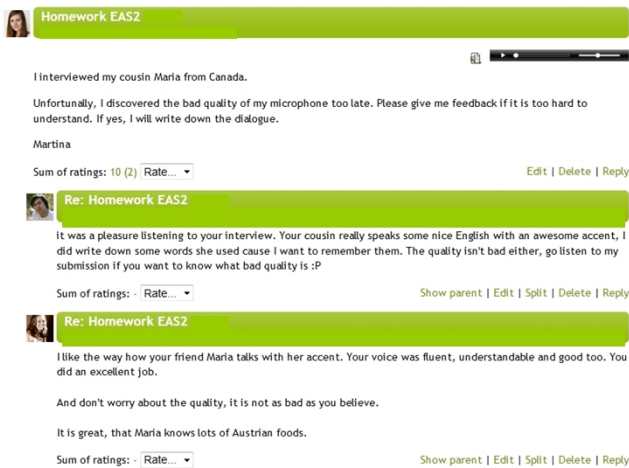


Figure 5. Peer-feedback, podcast homework

Again, this task may help introvert learners to gain confidence while avoiding a setting where they have to speak up in front of a group thereby risking unwanted exposure.

There are many similar tasks that can facilitate the learning process for introvert learners. The author would like to encourage instructors to leave their (very often extrovert) comfort zones and try out a few new tasks with special focus on the introvert learner when teaching in group settings.

III. CONCLUSION

Every company and HR department respectively should take a close look at the specific training needs of their employees with regard to learner types and discuss different possibilities to find the best solution for the individual person or learner. Sometimes a group setting may be the best and most efficient solution; sometimes it may be better to invest in one-to-one training, or in a combination of group work and online-tuition.

Every instructor should try to think about ways to meet the needs of all learners, and especially to appreciate introvert learners, for who they are and help them to discover their strengths.

Instructors should not try to make them “more extroverted” but make the classroom and course a diverse classroom or course by honoring and including the contributions introvert learners can and will make, and giving them enough time and possibilities to do so.

However, instructors and decision makers in companies need to be aware of the fact that blended learning and/or online tuition require not only a lot more preparation time than face-to-face courses in group settings but also more motivated learners. Any e-learning setting should ideally be supported by a few face-to-face meetings, telephone coaching/e-mail contact; most importantly, given enough time to prepare the course, and to give feedback for instructors; and also enough time to complete the course successfully for the learners.

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