

TalkShop/2CG®

Language Learning on the Debate

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Abstract—TalkShop/2CG® stands for content- and context-based generic competence coaching and has been developed to prepare individuals and organizations for work and leadership in the knowledge-based economy. The integrated face-to-face and online coaching methodology provides tailor-made language and generic competence coaching ‘on the debate’, while facilitating peer exchange in communities of practice. Particular emphasis is placed on promoting collaborative and social learning processes in blended learning environments where learners can develop and improve their foreign language skills and other generic competencies that are required for effective communication in today’s international business environment.

Index Terms—Language Learning, Generic Competence Coaching, Peer Exchange, Communities of Practice, Blended Learning Environments, Social Learning, ICT, Cross-cultural Communication.

I. INTRODUCTION

As globalization increases, so does the volume of companies and organizations involved in international business. The knowledge-based economy (KBE) poses new challenges to an increasingly diverse and multilingual workforce. Professionals need to share knowledge across geographical, corporate, disciplinary, and language boundaries; collaborate in heterogeneous teams; and act as net-workers, mediators and catalysts more and more often. Yet many professionals lack what are called generic competencies to succeed in today’s global work environment. Key generic competencies include participative competence or the ability to productively engage in and contribute to subject-specific debates and teamwork even when using a second language (Holden, 2000); intercultural communication competence or the ability to manage communication processes across disciplines, cultures, and language boundaries; diversity competence or the ability to understand and benefit from diverse contextual realities in which domain skills are being applied; media competence or the ability to communicate effectively through different media and in social networks; e-skills or the ability to communicate and apply domain-specific knowledge most effectively by using modern information and communication technologies (ICT); and last but not least English language skills or proficiency in *global English*. What is more, busy professionals frequently lack the most important resource needed to acquire the above-mentioned competencies: time.

Building the expertise of professionals in the 21st century thus requires a fresh perspective and breakthrough thinking. In this context, particular attention should be

paid to the observation that learning ‘takes place at the time and place in which actual tasks are performed’ (Johnson, 2001). According to social learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991), people learn from each other as complex social beings, as practitioners of professional and social skills. This suggests that (implicit) knowledge can best be shared, acquired, and de-coded in collaborative and social work and learning environments (communities of practice).

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE SKILLS

In today’s international business environment knowledge is closely tied to language. Foreign language skills are essential when it comes to acquiring and decoding domain-specific knowledge in multilingual, multidisciplinary, and cross-cultural work environments. We can say that foreign language skills are pre-requisite to engaging in and fully benefiting from cross-border, cross-cultural peer exchange, both online and face-to-face.

Global English is the working language of the cross-border, multicultural business environment that has been brought about by economic integration and new technologies. Effective international communication, which supports the objectives of individuals and organizations, calls for proficiency in this global language. As experience has shown, however, professionals whose mother tongue is not English often hesitate to engage in and actively contribute to cross-cultural peer exchange in English as they do not feel confident enough to express their thoughts and ideas in the foreign language. Important knowledge gets lost, and innovation cannot take place as a result thereof.

III. LANGUAGE LEARNING ON THE DEBATE

The integrated TalkShop/2CG methodology has been specifically designed for professionals who need to collaborate in heterogeneous teams in multilingual work environments and exchange knowledge across language boundaries but frequently lack the time to attend traditional language classes. TS/2CG stands for content- and context-based generic competence coaching and is based on the assumption that professionals can best learn a foreign language (*global English*) and acquire other relevant generic competencies ‘on the debate’ – face to face and online –, while engaging in and contributing to domain-specific debates with peers of diverse background (communities of practice).

A. Definition of Community of Practice (CoP)

The integrated TS/2CG methodology draws in particular from Wenger’s conceptualization of CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2000; Wenger et

al., 2002). There, CoP are defined as ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (Wenger et al., 2002). ‘They are organizational forms that encourage individuals to create, refine, share and use knowledge effectively’ (Mc Dermott, 1999).

B. Content- and Context-based Coaching

Depending on the context and needs of learners, the TS/2CG coach supervises the communicative and participative behaviour, media competence, diversity competence, e-skills, and language skills of learners ‘on the debate’. Both oral and written language structures of learners are analyzed; continuous feedback (synchronous and asynchronous) and permanent reflection in one-to-one and/or group sessions stir the learning process and provide for a high and effective learning transfer. The learning is not an abstract process but part of daily work processes – it takes place ‘in context’.

C. CoP Facilitation

As TS/2CG is based on the assumption that innovation is more likely to take place in the framework of domain-specific debates in CoP, the blended TS/2CG learning environment aims at engaging participants in real-life peer exchange, face-to-face and online, which is not very likely to happen in a purely instructional or simulated teaching environment.

Mostly, the TS/2CG coach also takes the role of CoP facilitator, which involves providing for a positive learning atmosphere, asking questions, paraphrasing, and synthesizing the achieved insights. It has to be pointed out here that the TS/2CG coach requires facilitation skills rather than in-depth domain-specific knowledge – participants can be called upon to bring along the latter. Likewise, facilitation may be carried out by external facilitators or may be taken over by community members, which works well for small budgets.

Meanwhile, the integrated TS/2CG methodology addresses the programmatic features of real-life cross-cultural communication processes where a. professionals get plenty of opportunity to build foreign language skills and other generic competencies; b. trust can be built through ongoing peer exchange and identity building; c. people can learn from each other as complex social beings, as practitioners of professional and social skills; and last but not least d. diverse inputs and ideas can result in high-quality outputs.

D. Categories of TalkShop/2CG Language Coaching

What distinguishes TS/2CG from traditional language tuition is that it provides tailor-made language coaching in the framework of domain-specific debates in CoP, online and face-to-face. In addition to individual tutoring – four categories of tailor-made TS/2CG language coaching –, participants are part of face-to-face and online learning groups where they can interact while receiving tailor-made feedback from the coach.

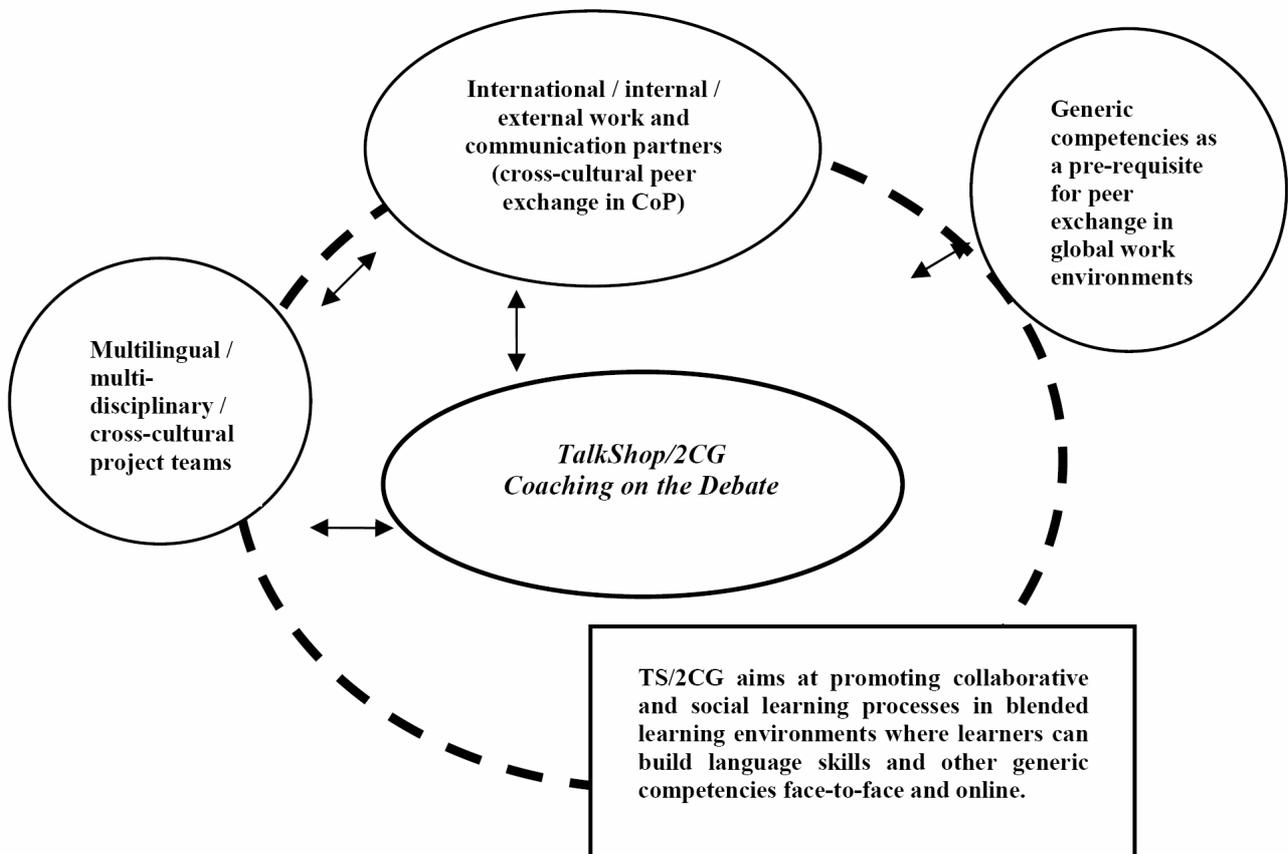


Figure 1. TalkShop/2CG Blended Learning Environment © C. Merl

Parallel to their foreign language skills, participants can build domain skills and other relevant generic competencies, mainly participative competence, diversity competence, media competence, cross-cultural communication competence, and e-skills.

1. *TS/2CG Translation (A1)* aims at basic level participants.
2. *TS/2CG Language Check (A2-B1)* aims at lower intermediate to intermediate level participants.
3. *TS/2CG Pointer (B2-C1)* aims at intermediate to upper intermediate level participants.
4. *TS/2CG Target (C2)* aims at advanced level participants.

IV. TALKSHOP/2CG CASE STUDIES

So far, the integrated TS/2CG methodology has been applied in the framework of three major scenarios. Despite their different contexts all three scenarios have one thing in common: the overall objective has been that learners, while improving their language skills and other generic competencies, advance in their profession or common interest (CoP).

A. Scenario A

Scenario A refers to a public sector organization with 70 departments and 62,000 employees in Austria (Europe). In this public sector organization, work routines and hierarchies as well as behavioural expectations in interactions with others are still heavily influenced by the old paradigms. Yet the pressure increases to move towards something more fluid: the organization faces a huge challenge due to demographic change. Services have to be offered to an increasing number of customers of diverse cultural background and mother tongues. As these new customers do not have a sufficient command of the German language, they need to be served in English or in their mother tongue, mostly Turkish, Bosnian, Serbo-Croatian, and French. Following this development, employees need to improve their foreign language skills, mostly their *global English* skills.

The TS/2CG methodology has been applied in the framework of English language tuition as offered by the organization's department for personnel training and personnel development since 2005. The objective has been to facilitate a cross-departmental community of English learners who exchange and construct new knowledge in domain-specific debates while receiving tailor-made feedback on their English language skills and other relevant generic competencies. 'TalkShop for Public Officials' is a legitimized face-to-face and online CoP that consists of members from different departments and external experts of diverse cultural background. TalkShop members meet face-to-face two or three times a month to discuss subject-specific topics of their interest in English. Guest speakers are invited at regular intervals and either show up in person or are available online. The communicative and language skills of learners are constantly analyzed by the TS/2CG coach and reflected upon in individual or group sessions, either face-to-face or online.

1) Challenges

'TalkShop for Public Officials' is aimed at employees with an intermediate to advanced level of English. Participants are ready to walk the 'extra mile' as they meet to

debate about work-specific topics and receive language coaching 'on the debate' after their official work hours, which is still somewhat unusual within the culture of this public sector organization. So far, 29 persons from 20 different departments have joined the TalkShop community. As participants work in different departments and professions, particular emphasis has had to be placed on the community and identity building process. Exploring topics that are of common interest has helped to stimulate knowledge sharing and knowledge construction processes within this very heterogeneous group. The focus has further been on creating artefacts or knowledge objects, including a glossary of relevant technical terms, video statements, mission statement, etc. These knowledge objects are used for language learning purposes and at the same time serve to attract new members – the community consists of a small core group, peripheral members change each term. After three winter terms in succession a first official 'social get-together' was organized by the department for personnel training and personnel development upon the request of participants. This social get-together clearly strengthened the identity of the TalkShop community.

The biggest challenge has been to protect and push community interests despite a mini budget; low-key platform solutions; strict security regulations; and rigid hierarchical structures.

B. Scenario B

Scenario B is a legitimized online CoP of agricultural experts and business people in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda) who need to build and improve their English skills and other generic competencies in order to be able to share knowledge and exchange information and thus advance in terms of their economic situation. In a five-month pilot project, 'TalkShop DDS', the integrated TS/2CG methodology was applied in the framework of an already existing online CoP in cooperation with an external facilitator. Participants needed to have at least a basic to lower intermediate level of English. The pilot project was successfully completed in August 2008. A follow-up initiative, 'TalkShop Kilosa', was started in January 2009 in cooperation with a local business in Tanzania.

1) Challenges

The overall goal in scenario B has been to enable participants to contribute to their domain-specific online debate in English by providing online tailor-made English language coaching (one-to-one coaching in the beginning, combined one-to-one and group coaching later on); to provide a collaborative learning environment by allaying general fears of individual participants to express themselves in English; and finally to bridge the communicative gap between multilingual, multi-cultural, and multi-disciplinary community members.

Compared to scenario A, participants in scenario B are much more driven by economic needs. Their motivation to improve their English language skills and other generic competencies is based on the need to advance economically. Participants have no chance to attend traditional language classes and they do not have much time for language learning either. Accordingly, the TS/2CG coaching needed to be tailor-made on a more specific level. The community building process proved somewhat difficult in the beginning, which, among other things, was due to lim-

ited and costly Internet access of learners. It took some effort to overcome the cultural difference of participants and the TS coach. Particular emphasis thus had to be placed on building trust and creating a collaborative learning environment. In doing so, backchannel communication and exchange with the external facilitator played a major role. The challenge was to find a rhythm of individual and collective tailor-made language coaching so as to enforce not only individual but also collective learning processes in the joint learning space.

‘TalkShop Kilosa’, a follow-up initiative for African youth in Tanzania, was launched in early 2009 in cooperation with a local business partner in East Africa. The coaching is provided online, a local TS/2CG coach runs the face-to-face meetings in Kilosa. The major challenge so far has been to provide affordable Internet access and to coach participants on how to use modern communication technologies effectively. In addition to e-mail and sms coaching, a Facebook group was set up where participants exchange about their professional goals and specific needs while receiving TS/2CG coaching. In addition to the language coaching, particular emphasis has to be placed on building e-skills and media competence of learners.

C. Scenario C

Scenario C describes a European-wide non-for-profit project that aims at celebrating European diversity and facilitating cross-cultural exchange among teachers and pupils in remote European areas. TalkShop members are teachers of diverse cultural background and mother tongues, who want to encourage their pupils to share their cultural traditions. The TS/2CG methodology has again been applied in the framework of English language tuition and cross-cultural exchange, both online and face-to-face.

1) Challenges

A major challenge in scenario C is that it is a non-for-profit project. The time and cost factor play an important role. Participants take part in this project voluntarily, in addition to their regular job. For teachers with a very basic level of English it is very time-consuming to prepare written statements and contributions in the foreign language. These teachers need online language coaching as well as language support during the face-to-face meetings. It should not be neglected here that teachers do not like to be treated as ‘students’ – the psychological aspect plays a role as well. Particular emphasis has thus been placed on community and identity building processes.

As opposed to scenarios A and B, there is no immediate organizational or economic need for participants to join the TalkShop community. The biggest challenge clearly is to provide a motivating and collaborative learning environment in the long run as well as the necessary language, communicative, and technological support.

V. ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

A. Scenario A

In scenario A (public sector organization), evaluation of TS/2CG is based on individual and anonymous feedback forms that concentrate on qualitative aspects of the coaching, such as ‘useful work-related topics being dealt with’, ‘effective use of ICT’, ‘clear formulation of content’, ‘learning atmosphere’, etc. As sponsoring of the TalkShop community mainly depends on the feedback and course

evaluation by members, satisfaction needs to be almost 100%. Otherwise, the class will not be continued. Evaluation of the winter term class 2008/2009 has shown that 100% of participants joined the course on their own initiative (‘TalkShop for Public Officials’ is not a compulsory class, like most other courses offered by the department for personnel training and development; and participants discuss work-related issues after their official working hours); 100% were satisfied with the possibility to actively participate; 92% were satisfied with the learning atmosphere; 92% were satisfied with the topics dealt with; only 68% were satisfied with the technology; and 58% found the duration of the course too short. According to the feedback forms, participants particularly enjoy the diverse mix of members from different departments and benefit from peer exchange with external experts both, online and face-to-face.

B. Scenario B

In scenario B (‘TalkShop Africa’), the measures and activities taken during the 5-month pilot project as well as the progress made by individual participants were analyzed and evaluated according to previously defined hypotheses. The overall project goal was to develop efficient measures for bridging the communicative gap between multilingual and multicultural project partners in East Africa.

The key finding of this pilot study was that active participants had improved their language skills and at the same time pushed the professional debate ahead thanks to TS/2CG coaching. As can be said on the basis of collected data, participants with the highest number of interactions and TS/2CG coaching inputs clearly improved their English skills and other generic competencies, including participative competence, e-skills, media competence, and interactive translation competence within 10 weeks. Regular participation, which was based on good Internet access, interest in the topics being explored, participative competence, and, above all, learners’ motivation to advance economically, clearly provided the best learning results. Participation to some extent was an indicator of participative competence and did not depend on language proficiency alone but on various factors such as Internet access and interest in the discussed topics.

According to participants’ feedback, they did not have to take a big effort to make progress. TS/2CG coaching is time-effective, efficient, and thus also cost-effective as participants get tailor-made language coaching ‘on the debate’. It has been pointed out that TS/2CG leverages the mutual motivation to participate in the professional debate while practicing and improving relevant generic competencies.

As collected data have shown, participants with low interest in the professional debate made fewer inputs but got back on the learning track fast when they were provided tailor-made TS/2CG coaching. This shows that the TS/2CG methodology is intrinsically linked to community facilitation and can easily be adapted to users’ needs.

C. Scenario C

In scenario C (European-wide non-for-profit project), assessment is based on the personal feedback and participation of participants. It is therefore of particular importance that TS/2CG coaching is tailor-made and helps participants to meet their specific project goals.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

The integrated TalkShop/2CG methodology aims at improving foreign language skills (*global English*) and other relevant generic competencies (participative competence, intercultural communication competence, diversity competence, media competence, and e-skills) for professional performance while facilitating peer exchange and building domain-specific knowledge. In contrast to traditional project teams, whose learning curve is linked to the timing and objectives of a particular project, the integrated TS/2CG methodology puts emphasis on acquiring and decoding (implicit) knowledge in CoP, also referred to as TS/2CG learning communities, by promoting social and collaborative learning processes. CoP members share a system of communication and they have a common interest and common goals which are linked to issues of personal identity as well as professional matters. From this perspective, the future challenge for TS/2CG will be to a. further define the nature and dynamics as well as needs of TS/2CG learning communities and b. further improve the ways of encouraging their existence and optimizing their means of self-management within organizations.

The TS/2CG methodology is intrinsically linked to community facilitation and can easily be adapted to users' needs. Currently, the TS/2CG coach mostly takes the role of community leader and facilitator or cooperates with an external facilitator. In future, TS members shall increasingly take the role of CoP leaders and facilitators. For this purpose, a specific TS/2CG train-the-trainer programme is being developed. Further research shall also be carried out into the type of training and preparation required for optimal use of community tools (social technologies).

In the long run, TS/2CG is concerned with providing a tailor-made social and methodological design that can

incite organizations to renovate their practices of continuing education, knowledge construction, and innovation in cross-cultural, multi-disciplinary, and multilingual settings. Expected positive effects of TS/2CG coaching include a qualitative improvement in knowledge sharing and collaboration processes in existing networks, which is expected to promote the development of individual and collective expertise of community members. Awareness shall be raised with regard to the potential of collaborative and social learning processes in CoP so as to strengthen the capacity of professionals to effect change within their organizations.

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