

It Takes Two to Tango: How to get IR students engaged in Their Learning

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Introduction

One of the biggest challenges in teaching in higher education is the motivation of students to be more focused and active in the class. The problem is entrenched in a low level of students' engagement. This paper describes the results of a teaching innovation that took place at Masaryk University in the 2017-2018 academic year. The teaching innovation started out from the observation that students do not seem to be interested in classes that put them into a position of passive observers, which then substantially influence their grade. Relying on Nilson (2014) and Bonwell & Eison (1991) works, the innovation replaced traditional 90-minute frontal lectures with several shorter interactive tasks (Skype interview, pair/group work, and interactive mini-lecture).

The paper asks the question if students indeed find these tasks as engaging as it was expected and if engagement led them to improve their learning. Overall, the innovation proved to have a positive impact on students' learning. Students have confirmed, that with their increasing engagement in class activities, their internal motivation was growing and hence their interest towards the topic increased. Paper argues that although the pair/group work is expected to be the most interactive task as its nature suggests, if contrasted with two other more interactive tasks, the pair/group work will be evaluated as the least engaging for students.

The paper is set up as follows. First, it discusses theoretical background that motivated the study and explains how the course was designed. Second, it describes expectations that should be met if the innovation was successful, and the data used to evaluate expectations. The third section

presents the results. The fourth section concludes by reflecting back on the innovation and suggesting future changes that could improve these tasks and/or student engagement in general.

Aims of the Innovation and the Background of the Course

The research problem I am focusing on is the lack of students' engagement. In collecting data for the analysis, I have been investigating three aspects – student's participation, motivation/interest and knowledge. Student's participation is directly linked to their motivation. There are two main types of motivation – external and internal. The idea behind the external motivation is to create different activities, which will awake the interest of students towards the given topic. At the beginning of the semester, we usually start with the external motivation, which might be in a form of breaking activities as mentioned above. However, as Ladislav Kvasz points out, even though external motivation can be important at the beginning, after some time it is necessary to turn to motivation which is internal to the topic itself. This means explaining students the content and knowledge about the given topic in a broader context (Kvasz 2005).

In my innovation, I focus on the combination of both. We can enhance students' interest in the given topic by their participation in engaging classroom activities. By implementing this approach, we create the initial interest of students towards the given topic – external motivation. If the external motivation is interesting and intriguing enough, students feel more willingness to get engaged. Students then follow up on that with further assignments and gaining more knowledge with every class throughout the rest of the semester – internal motivation.

In order to get students engaged in the class, it is necessary to motivate them by preparation of interactive sessions, which would support students' engagement. Interactive session is composed of several break activities which directly incorporate students in their learning. Break activities need to be designed in a way that support learning of specific concepts. Breaking down the traditional 90-minutes class into several mini-sessions is a great pedagogical tool,

which helps students to stay focused and re-activates their attention span every 15-20 minutes. As Linda B. Nilson points out, a well-chosen student-active breaks, aptly coined “brain breaks”, comprise the heart of the interactive lecture transforming the traditional lecture into a series of mini-lectures (Nilson 2010).

I divided my classes into three main mini-sessions (Skype call with experts, pair/group work, mini-lecture), during which students were actively engaged. Each mini-session has its own structure and settled time. Additionally, depending on time limits, several other “supporting” breaking activities were included in class – for example a mini-quiz – which allows students to recap the most relevant content of the previous class. The first mini-session is centered around the short video Skype-call with experts on a specific issue related to the Arctic. Using digital instruments in class can improve the interactive aspect of the class. As several academics argue (Selcher 2005; Felten 2008; Sealey 2008; Swimelar 2013) getting students engaged in IR by getting them online not only exposes them to current international developments, but also provides them the opportunities to develop the kind of communication skills and visual literacy they will need (Glazier 2015). Second mini-session is composed of a students’ pair/group work. Students discuss assigned task first in their pair/group and later on there is a moderated, whole-class discussion, which evokes another level of learning and confronts students with opinions of their peers. They are able to practice creating and defending their arguments, performing and at the same time applying the class content (Nilson 2010). The third mini-session is the teacher’s interactive mini-lecture, when students are encouraged to engage by asking questions and giving comments.

I have implemented the innovation in my course *Arctic Geopolitics*, which was open for the first time in the Autumn semester 2017 at the Department of International Relations and European Studies, at the Faculty of Social Sciences, at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. The course is optional and open for bachelor students of the new English program “International Relations and European Politics”. The “Arctic Geopolitics” is a whole-semester

pass/fail course with 13 weeks of sessions. Each session is 90-minute long. Since I am the main teacher of this course I have a relative freedom from the department's leadership regarding the course design and assessment. The group of 19 students enrolled in this course was very diverse. The vast majority of students were international students from different countries from all around the world. The aspect of diversity and different backgrounds (knowledge, educational experience) were factors that I needed to take into consideration when planning the innovation sessions.

Research Design

The main goal of the research is to measure student's motivation and engagement. More specifically, my aim is to explore whether students find selected class tasks as engaging as it was expected and if engagement led them to improve their learning. I set up three working hypotheses – **H1**: *tasks and teaching style were indeed as interactive as intended*; **H2**: *the more interactive a task is, the more engaging student find it*; **H3**: *the more interactive tasks were, the more students learned from them*.

The research is based on two key data collection instruments – peer observations and student surveys – to investigate students' engagement in the class. In addition to these two instruments, I also analyzed the students' *course evaluation*, which is an online and anonymous questionnaire, provided by the Information System of the Masaryk University. The *course evaluations* are open for students at the end of the semester, after the completion of the course. To analyze the collected data, I used qualitative (textual) analysis of what was written in peer observations sheets. Additionally, I used simple means test for the quantitative data.

In order to validate the **H1** I used the peer observations. In ideal case, the data would be collected and analyzed based on classroom observation by one person three times. However, due to the tight schedules and workload of my colleagues, each of the class was observed by a different person. I am aware of the potential inconsistency in the observations, but I also believe

that the diversity of their responses is a considerable contribution to the collected data and research itself. Observers were asked to keep count of five different interactions (teacher-student, student-teacher, student-to-student, passive student without interactions, students voluntarily answered questions), evaluate student enthusiasm on a scale ranging from 1 to 3 (where 1 means “not enthusiastic at all”, and 3 means “very enthusiastic”), and describe in a few words how students behaved. Furthermore, observers were asked to monitor the interactivity of the whole class and give written comments.

For validation of the **H2** I used mainly student surveys. The student surveys were distributed among students at the end of all three classes. Students had about eight minutes to fill in the survey. To check if the preference ordering reflects the hypothesized order, I asked students to rank each task on a scale ranging from 1 (“not interesting/engaging at all”) to 10 (“very interesting/engaging”). Students were also asked to provide verbal explanation of their ranking. This enabled me to check, whether their verbal comments fell into the engaging/motivation dimension. The student surveys were the only measure I could rely on, since this course was taught for the first time, there are no data for comparison from the previous semesters/years. Also, I could not compare “innovation” classes with “old-style” classes (90-minutes frontal lecture), because I have implemented innovation to all 13 classes in the whole course. Additionally, this course is pass-fail course, therefore I could not use grades for the evaluation and impact of my innovation. Another possible way how to evaluate the positive impact of the innovation on students’ learning would be comparison of my optional course, with some compulsory courses. However, due to the sensitivity of this method, I have decided to omit it. The **H3** was checked by using student surveys (second part of the surveys that I used for validation of the H2). In this part of the survey, students were asked to name three pieces of information they remembered most vividly from given class and identification in which task they learned it. For the analysis of students’ responses, I used textual analysis, which enabled me to identify the most vivid learning moments for students. Despite all the limitation regarding

data collection mentioned above, I am convinced that the collected data provided me a solid foundation for the research.

Findings

The research shows that interactive class supports students' learning in a positive way. At the same time, with students' increasing engagement in class activities, their internal motivation was growing and hence their interest towards the topic increased. This general conclusion was also confirmed by the online students' *course evaluations*. All the research data supporting the research findings were collected in three selected classes (15 November 2017; 22 November 2017; and 29 November 2017), based on student surveys and peer observations. Research findings stemming from the student surveys are based on the feedback from more than 81 percent of the enrolled students in the course. There were 16 students enrolled in the autumn semester, while not all of them attended all selected three classes for data collection. In the first selected class 14 students were present, in the second class 11 students, and in the third one 13 students. It is important to mention that each student who attended the selected class volunteered to fill out the survey. There are 38 student surveys collected in all three classes altogether.

Peer observations confirmed the *HI*. As illustrated in the Table 1 and Figure 5 below, students were engaged and active in the class activities. The most frequent was teacher-student interaction (composing 48 percent of all interactions). During all three classes, I asked students 40 times some direct questions. Student-teacher interaction (initiated by the student), was on the other hand rather limited (7 percent). Students asked me directly questions in all three classes only 6 times. However, considering the fact that they are first year bachelor students, this finding is rather not surprising as they are generally more hesitant. Similarly, the student-to-student interaction during in-class discussion (excluding pair/group work), was also relatively low (7 percent). Certainly, positive outcome of the observation is shown by the

interaction between me and students, where students voluntarily answered my 32 questions. Another positive aspect of the observation is that during the pair/group work, each student was willingly (sometimes very passionately) discussing with other students in the given pair or group.

Additionally, observers were asked to describe how I involved and motivated students in tasks and how successful these methods appeared to them. All three observers agreed that my innovative methods are interactive and engaging for students. Observers positively evaluated that I was frequently asking students interesting and well-formulated questions. Observers also suggested to modify the Skype-call activity, as it might can be a potential source of stress for both the lecturer and students, due to its high risk of technical problems.

Based on the research finding, the *H2* was not confirmed, while proving rather opposite. In general, students found the tasks quite motivating (higher scores than midpoint). However, when I compared the absolute scores, that students gave for each task, the results showed that the most interesting/engaging class activity was the Skype call with 8,53 average score (Figure 1), followed by the interactive mini-lecture with 8,5 average score (Figure 3) and surprisingly the last one – pair/group work evaluated as the least interesting/engaging in contrast to two other tasks with 7,97 average score (Figure 2). The high score for mini-lecture was also confirmed by students' verbal explanations, where majority of them commented that the lecture was very interactive, thus engaging for them and they would even appreciate more interactive lecturing during the class. The Figure 4 illustrates the comparison of students' evaluation of all three tasks in average scores.

Table 2 shows students' preferences regarding the class tasks. Only 23,68 percent of total supports the hypothesis (*H2A*: students prefer pair/group work to Skype call), hence confirming the contrary. Similarly, the tailed paired t test proves the contrary direction than expected – i.e. both Skype call and mini-lecture are preferred over the pair/group work. Additionally, the Skype call is slightly (almost insignificantly) preferred over mini-lecture.

Based on the analysis of students' answer, the **H3** was partially confirmed. The Figure 6 and Table 3 illustrate the frequency of the most vivid learning moments and task/exercise in which students learned it. According to their answers, students learned the most from the Skype calls (49 percent), followed by the mini-lecture at the second place (37 percent) and the pair/group work at the third place, being the least useful source (14 percent). These results are in a line with the findings in H2. Assuming, that students found the Skype call the most engaging, they learned the most from this task. The mini-lecture was ranked on the second place in the task preferences, therefore also here it appears at the second place. Since the pair/group work was ranked as the least engaging in contrast to other two activities, students found it also as the least vivid task to learn from.

Lessons Learned and Suggestions for Future Improvement

Although students found the classes engaging and interactive, the results were not as expected. Several interpretations come into consideration. Firstly, the low level of engagement of the pair/group work could be influenced by the fact, that students were asked to rank all three tasks separately and not in comparison with each other. Secondly, students were ranking the pair/group work in the context of other two interactive tasks within the class. Therefore, if the pair/group work would be included in the non-interactive class (traditional 90-minutes frontal lecture) the results might have been different. Thirdly, the fact that all students were supposed to read the same text as homework and discuss it then in the class was not probably very engaging for them. In the future I might give the pairs/groups different texts to read at home and exchange the knowledge at class with each other (while improving other skills not only gaining knowledge). In this way, the task would be more engaging for them, and at the same time more vivid learning moments might occur as well.

Additionally, as observers correctly pointed out, the Skype call activity could have been worked out better. When the Skype call is placed in the beginning of the class, other tasks can smoothly

follow-up on the expert's presentation. However, in case some technical problem occurs, the beginning of the lecture is negatively disturbed. If the Skype call would be then moved from the beginning to the end of the class, the potential distraction is limited as the Skype call might be substituted with continuous interactive mini-lecture.

Conclusion

In this paper, I focused on interactive teaching of International Relations in my course *Arctic Geopolitics*. Based on the research findings, my innovation approach proved to increase students' interest/engagement, thus having a positive impact on students' learning. Despite the fact, that some class tasks were evaluated very positively, as highly interesting/engaging, while other activities less interesting/engaging, the overall positive evaluations of students show, that this method has its place in teaching IR. Although, there is a room for improvement regarding the organization of pair/group work – which was ranked by students as the least engaging (compared with the Skype call and mini-lecture) – I am convinced that the pair/group work is a valuable interactive task to be incorporated into class activities. This task is beneficial for students as they gain both knowledge (content) and comprehension. They are encouraged to think critically and apply learned concepts. Therefore, I believe that with some slight modifications regarding the instructions, the pair/group work might be ranked by students higher than the findings of this research show.

References

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Appendix

Figure 1. Evaluation of Skype call in all three sessions.

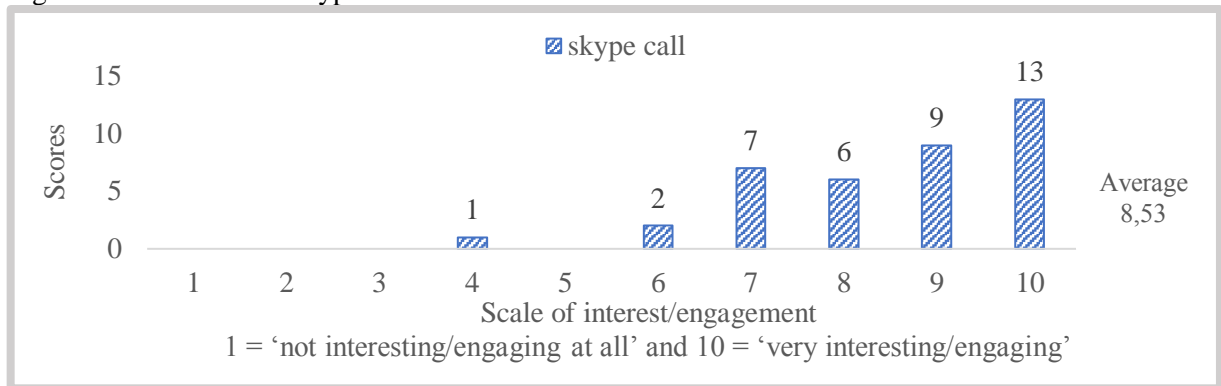


Figure 2. Evaluation of pair work in all three sessions.

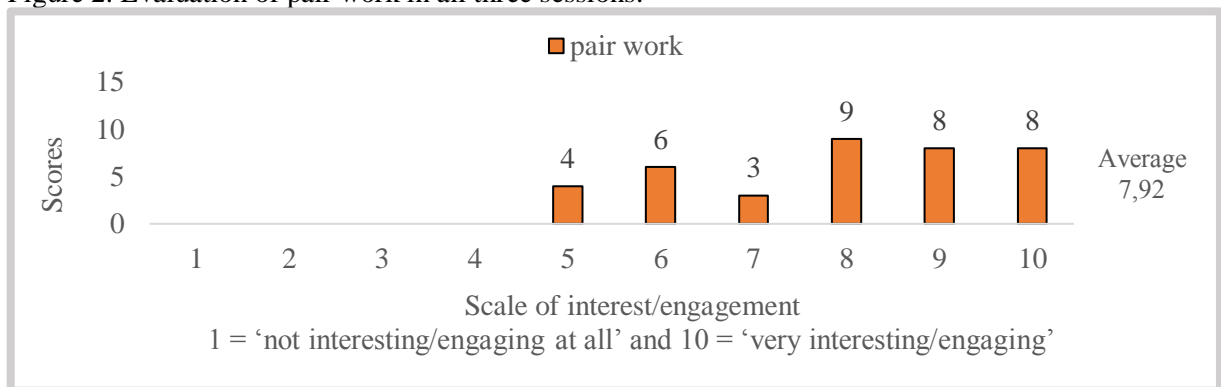


Figure 3. Evaluation of mini-lecture in all three sessions.

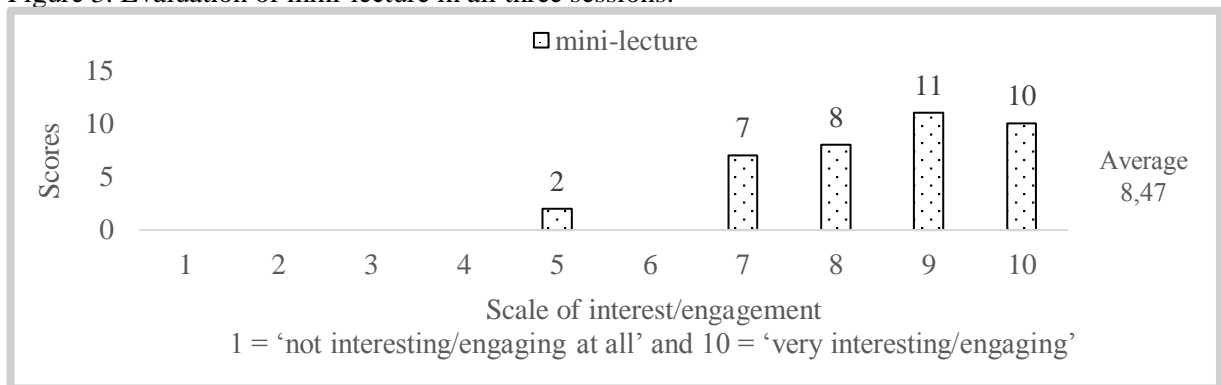


Figure 4. Comparison of students' evaluation of all three exercise types in average score.

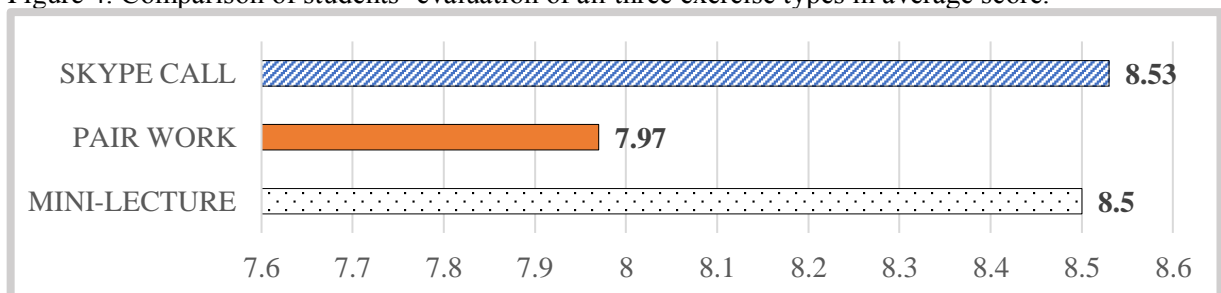


Figure 5. Graphic illustration of class interactions by observers' reflections.

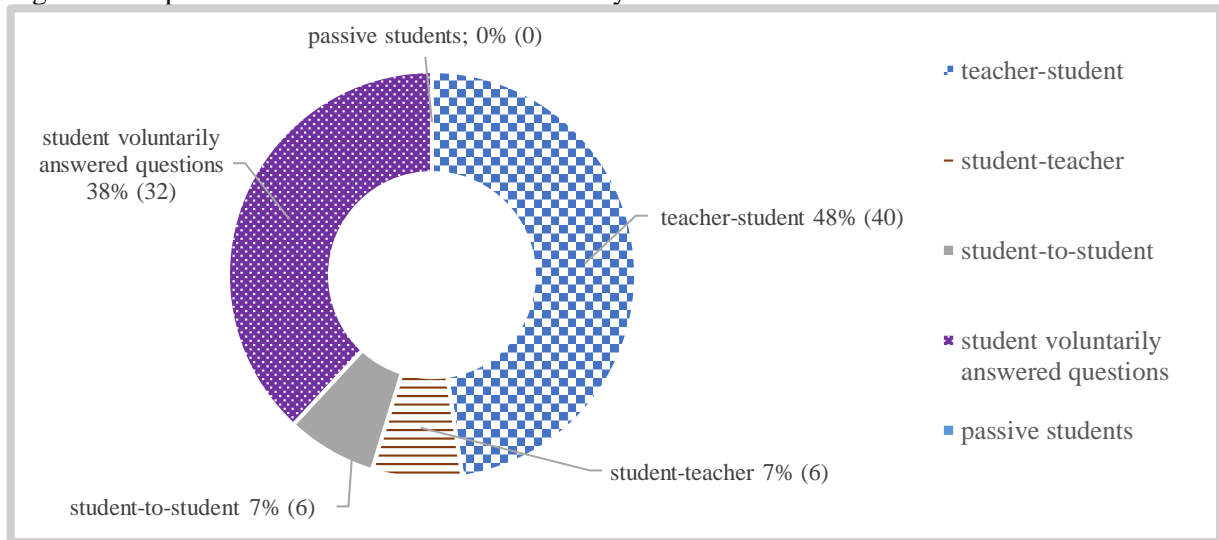


Figure 6. Graphic illustration of the most vivid learning moments for students in all three classes.

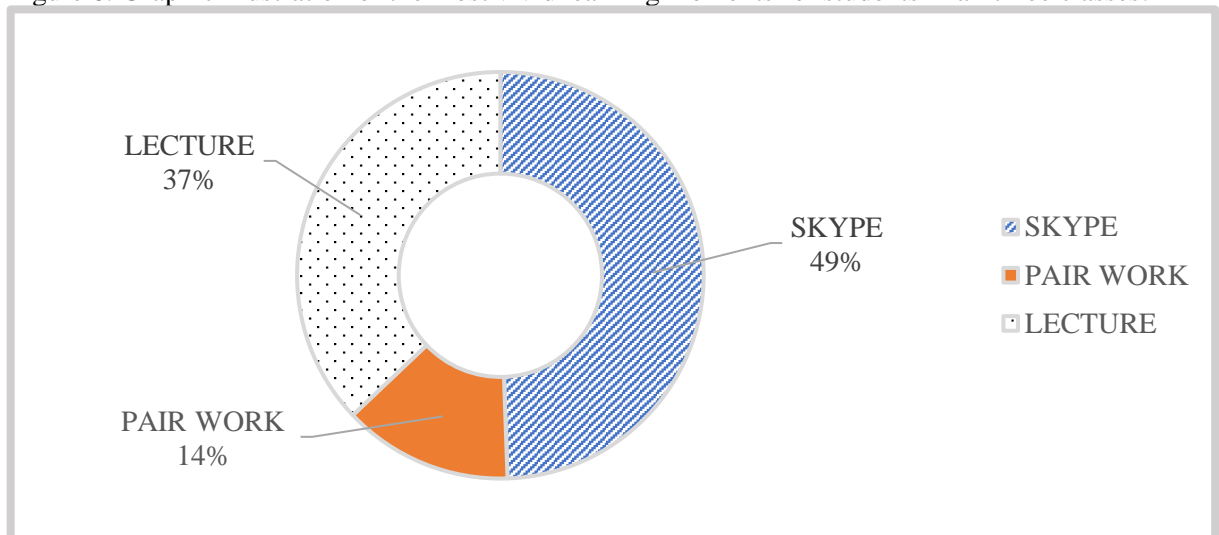


Table 1. Peer observation reflections.

Types of interaction	Observer 1 (Nov 15)			Observer 2 (Nov 22)			Observer 3 (Nov 29)		
	Frequency	Student engagement score	Word describing	Frequency	Student engagement score	Word describing	Frequency	Student engagement score	Word describing
Teacher-student interaction	14	3	Sometimes students were hesitant, most of the time they were confidently interacting. Sometimes they were reluctant to answer questions, but at least 50% of the time there was a moderate level of enthusiasm.	14	2	Sometimes students seemed interested, but overall, they preferred to mind their own business. They were mostly reacting to instructor's questions, albeit after some hesitation. Although students were making contribution only when asked by instructor, there was no need to ask them personally/ directly, someone always pitched in.	12	3	Most of the time students were active, sometimes they seemed to be nervous and hesitant. Generally, they seemed to be interested and active.
Student-teacher interaction initiated by the student	2	2		2	1		2	3	
Times students voluntarily answered questions	13	2		8	2		11	2	
Student-to-student interaction during in-class discussion (excluding pair work)	2	3		2	2		2	3	
Passive students who do not interact with pair during pairwork	0	-		0	-		0	-	

Table 2. Students' preferences regarding the class tasks.

Statement	True	False*	Total	% of total supporting hypothesis	tailed paired t-tests
H2A: students prefer pair/group work to Skype call	9	29	38	23,68 %	The value of t is 1.651708. The value of p is 0.053529. Close to significant, but proves the contrary direction than expected (i.e. Skype is preferred over mini-lecture)
H2B: students prefer pair/group work to interactive mini-lecture	11	27	38	28,95 %	The value of t is 1.683175. The value of p is 0.050381. Close to significant, but proves the contrary direction than expected (i.e. mini-lecture is preferred over pair/group work)
H2C: students prefer Skype call to interactive mini-lecture	11	27	38	28,95 %	The value of t is -0.104611. The value of p is 0.458625. The result is not significant at $p \leq 0.05$. There is no difference.

*students with no clear preference (=) or reverse preference orderings.

Table 3. The frequency of the most vivid learning moments and task/exercise in which students learned it as relevant by student surveys.

Task	Frequency of related learning moments				
	<i>Nov 15</i>	<i>Nov 22</i>	<i>Nov 29</i>	<i>sum</i>	<i>sum %</i>
Pair/group work	5	3	4	12	14 %
Skype call	18	11	15	44	49 %
Interactive mini-lecture	12	8	13	33	37 %