

# languages ICT



## What is web-based video conferencing?

Web-based video conferencing is a real-time communication device, which can be used to allow pupils to communicate with learners in a different geographical location. Through the use of web-based video conferencing, teachers can encourage spontaneous conversation between language learners in pairs or small groups. It can also be used to introduce cultural materials, by displaying items to the camera for pupils to see and discuss. Activities can be adapted for whole class use, whereby one-to-one communication is shared via projection onto a screen.

Web-based video conferencing has only recently become advanced enough to appeal to mainstream classrooms. Falling into the category of synchronous communication devices, web cams are very affordable, and many free software programs for their use are now available via the Internet (see 'Software needs' below). Although inferior to dedicated video conferencing systems (via ISDN links, etc.), the visual quality and resolution of web cams has improved much in recent years. In MFL classrooms, video conferencing literally opens a window to a different culture, allowing pupils to experience another country both visually and orally.

### Hardware needs

Web-based video conferencing has both hardware and software requirements. On the hardware side, computers need to be equipped with a web cam, Internet connection, sound card, microphone and speakers or headphones. If several computers are to be used simultaneously, headphones with a built-in microphone are probably the best option. If your computer does not support sound, the camera can be used purely for visual input to complement a written discussion, in a text-based chat room, for example.

### Software needs

As for software, many text-based communication tools already offer visual output in addition, making it unnecessary to purchase or access additional software. For example, messaging tools and chat rooms such as [Microsoft MSN](http://www.msn.com) (www.msn.com) and [Yahoo Messenger](http://messenger.yahoo.com) (messenger.yahoo.com). Be aware that the number of web cams used at any one time may influence picture quality and speed of transmission, due to the demands placed on the school's Internet connection. Be aware also that your school firewall may automatically block all online communication programs - speak to your network manager about your plans.

### Security issues

It should be noted that, as with all communication via the Internet, care should be taken wherever possible to ensure chat rooms are private and open to pupils only, to avoid intruders. Using first names only and taking care not to divulge any personal information (address, telephone number etc) are the usual precautions which apply here as in any other online communication context. Please see the [Becta Schools section on Internet safety](http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=is&catcode=ss_to_es_pp_aup_03&rid=11087) ([http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=is&catcode=ss\\_to\\_es\\_pp\\_aup\\_03&rid=11087](http://schools.becta.org.uk/index.php?section=is&catcode=ss_to_es_pp_aup_03&rid=11087)) for further information.

### The power of the visual

Video conferencing offers the most varied contact with other learners online, in that it combines the visual with the oral. It is often additionally supported by a text-based communication facility, such as a chat room, allowing teachers to set up activities across all four skills. The visual element is particularly powerful. It can open up discussions on school uniform (modelled by the partner school), the view out of the window, items brought into the classroom, such as toys or photos. Younger learners can prepare short presentations on their family or hobbies, for example, using visual prompts that will help them remember what they want to say. This will also help learners at the receiving end to understand what they hear.

### **Different approaches for different learners**

When planning for younger learners, there are a number of ways to introduce pupils gently to spontaneous communication. Teachers may, for example, ask pupils to prepare a question each in advance ('Qu'est-ce que tu aimes faire?' 'Comment est ta maison?', etc.). At one end, each pupil in turn sits in front of the camera to ask the question. At the other end, where responses will need to be more spontaneous, the class could work as a whole or in small groups. A representative then presents the answer to camera. Time in front of the camera can also be limited initially, to avoid undue pressure on some pupils. These approaches can also help to counter any technical issues, such as low school bandwidth, which prevents too many cameras from running simultaneously.

Older learners may choose to exchange questions in advance ('Was hast du in den letzten Ferien gemacht?' 'Welche englische/deutsche Musikgruppen kennst du?' etc.) and give each other time to prepare answers. If there is also a typed chat facility within the program, this can be used to spell out place names or difficult vocabulary. Learners thus feel comfortable that they know how to answer their partner's questions, so can concentrate on the information they themselves receive.

Yet more advanced pupils can be set activities which practise even more spontaneous communication. For example, they may prepare a very broad topic, such as holidays or the world of work, to be ready to talk about their own experiences and answer any questions asked.

Web-based video conferencing usually needs careful preparation, to ensure that all learners gain the most from their experience. You may find it useful to have a class practise using the technology amongst themselves first, so they can find out about lighting and sound issues before contacting any partner classes or groups. Once pupils are used to web-based video conferencing, they can then concentrate fully on target language communication.

### **Opportunities for collaboration**

Due to the highly interactive level of video conference-based communication, it lends itself exceptionally well to project work across geographical boundaries. Working in small groups, learners can collaborate with partner groups on a topic of their choice, to produce a presentation, for example. Email and other forms of text-based online communication can be a useful support to video conferencing.

Most web cams today offer a digital video recording facility, so short clips could be emailed or saved onto CD for sending by post. These can then be cut together into a video sequence or inserted into a PowerPoint presentation to create a 'joint' project outcome.

Collaborative project work is also possible where there is no native speaker partner class available and may be a way to introduce languages into other subjects. For example, a class could plan a sports tournament with another British school in a foreign language, designing posters, writing chants, etc.

Collaborative projects can be planned and facilitated using a communication hub such as Yahoo! Groups [<http://groups.yahoo.com>]. These can often be password protected and offer a one-stop shop for most online communication and collaboration needs. At the time of writing, however, web-based video conferencing is most frequently integrated into messaging programs. In due course, virtual and managed learning environments offered at school, LEA or Regional Broadband Consortium level may well become the starting point for the whole range of web-based communication.

*To read about tried and tested ideas for using web-based video conferencing, try searching the Useful ICT ideas, effective language lessons database on the Languages ICT website.*

*Note: Information in this booklet has been collated by a number of practising teachers and advisers and is accurate to the best of our knowledge at the time of writing. CILT and ALL do not take any responsibility for inaccuracies contained within. The inclusion of any software products and/or companies within Languages ICT guidance does not imply endorsement by CILT or ALL in any way.*