

Online Language Reinforcement and Assessment: Adding a Computer-Based Oral Language Component

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Introduction

Although online course delivery can be used in any discipline, it has been difficult for instructors whose course content is not, for the most part, text-based to envisage ways of migrating course content to an online delivery format. This is particularly true for foreign language teachers who recognize the importance of including in their course activities that reinforce all four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek (2003) state that distance education must “permit equivalent learning experiences for distant and local students” (pp. 22-23). So, for the learning experiences to be equivalent, teachers would have to be able to provide students with opportunities to improve not only their reading and writing skills but also their listening and speaking skills.

Some instructors include an oral component in their online courses by requiring students to submit cassette recordings related to course assignments. Others require students to engage in telephone communication with the instructor. Today’s innovative language teachers are using Java Applets and Shockwave movies to create exercises that reinforce vocabulary and grammar skills. Streaming audio and video are being used to enhance listening skills. However, access to these technologies and the technical expertise needed to build appropriate resources still represent a significant obstacle to most language teachers. Furthermore, the licensing cost of technologies that allow for the effective integration of oral communication is also a major barrier.

Integrating Technology Into Foreign Language Programs

For the past 5 years, the authors have been working with foreign language teachers interested in integrating technology into their teaching program. In the absence of commercial software for effective language reinforcement and assessment that they considered to be pedagogically sound, they set out to develop an Internet-based software application that would meet the needs of teachers and students. The software allows teachers to create exercises designed to reinforce skills taught in class and which also allows them to assess their students’ oral skills online. The

software has been used by foreign language teachers in face-to-face situations and more recently by the authors in a blended delivery format.

The software is an easy-to-use authoring tool which teachers use to input questions that relate directly to what they are teaching. They can also include a picture and/or text with each recorded question thus providing a context for the questions. Research shows that students learn best when they use language in context (Claybourne, 1999; Halliday, 1986; Johnson, 2003). Others indicate that visuals and audio enhance student motivation and result in more effective learning (Brown, 1987; Johnson, 2003; Kearsley, 2002; Northrup and Tracy, 1998). Jones (2002) reported that in situations where students engaged in listening activities without the support of graphics, students complained that the lack of adequate visual information was unfair. As one student said, “Some people are visual learners and I feel you are cheating people that learn that way by not providing that” (p. 33). And Jones Vogely (as cited in Jones 2002) explains that “visual support not only makes the topic more accessible to listeners who are more visual or spatial learners but also helps all listeners to relate personally with the topic, thus reducing the anxiety that can occur when they think they don’t know what’s being talked about” (p. 39).

The original authoring software has evolved over the past five years in response to findings from research studies that have been conducted with language teachers and their students. The software is now comprised of a suite of five tools: two testing instruments, a practice tool and two tools that operate as oral discussion forums. Teachers may elect to use any or all of the tools in their teaching program. All are equally well suited to either face-to-face or online environments.

Online Oral Language Assessment

Research indicates that in online education, it is important to regularly provide students with information related to their progress in the course. “Distance education students...in particular derive great benefit from the use of ongoing assessment” (Simonson, et al., 2003, p. 277). The American Federation of Teachers (2000) comments that “distance education students should be able to regularly assess their own learning as well as get feedback from others” (p. 5).

There are two testing tools in the software suite that offer teachers a way of assessing their students’ oral skills online as well as a means of providing online oral feedback for their students. In the competency test, the instructor controls the pace of the test. The questions are presented in a timed fashion and the time for answer preparation and answer recording are pre-set by the teacher. In the flex test, the students control the pace of the test. Students may record their answers as many times as the instructor configures the software to allow, and they only submit their answers when they are satisfied with their performance. The flex test reflects the mastery learning approach as opposed to a competency-based approach.

When teachers access student recordings, they are able to listen to the original questions, hear student responses and then they are able to record comments and feedback related to the students’ answers. Students may then access their evaluated test and may listen to their responses and their teacher’s feedback. Linking feedback so intimately with student responses makes the assessment more meaningful for students (Hall, 2000). The potential to offer students almost

immediate feedback is especially important in an online framework since students can feel more isolated from the instructor and their classmates than they do in traditional teaching programs (American Federation of Teachers, 2000). In fact, the Distance Education Report (2003) cites abundant and rapid feedback the most important of its five characteristics of exemplary online courses. Because students can access their recorded answers and teacher feedback, they are in a position to assess their own competency. Crawford (1996) suggests that by reviewing their work, students will realize that the more they practice speaking, the more proficient they will become.

The Value of Practice And Self-Assessment in an Online Environment

In addition to allowing instructors to offer online oral tests to students, they may also create practice activities that will encourage students to practice what has been taught. After a question is presented, students may record an oral response, listen to their recording, and then compare their response to a sample answer provided by the teacher. The sample answer allows teachers to provide an example for students, thus clarifying performance expectations and encouraging learning (Heide & Henderson, 2001). It also allows students to self-assess, something that is particularly important in online education. "Distance education students should be able to regularly assess their own learning as well as get feedback from others" (Southeastern Louisiana University, 1998, p.5). Rendall's (2003) research suggests that students like being able to replay questions and self-assess as frequently as they wish. She found that students "are motivated by the improvement in their own speed and accuracy of recall which they are able to monitor for themselves" as they work through computerized exercises and activities.

In practice mode, work is self-paced, students can access exercises as frequently as they wish and student recordings are not made available to the teacher for marking.

Providing an Opportunity for Extended Speech and Building A Sense of Community Online

In traditional foreign language classes, teachers provide students with an opportunity to engage in extended speech and to discuss issues raised in class. It is important to provide these opportunities to online students as well. The use of online journals and discussion forums encourages students to reflectively interact with various course topics and they "promote growth beyond what regular instructor-and-student interactions provide" (Johnson, 2003, p. 41). And as Chester and Gwynne (as cited in Schulte, 2004) comment, "anecdotal evidence of student performance in asynchronous courses suggests that [they] promote participation in discussions by students who rarely, if ever, participate in discussions in face-to-face classes" (p. 7).

Discussion forums found in online courses tend to be text-based, but in foreign language programs it is important for students to be able to communicate with each other orally as well as in writing. In order to support this need, the authors therefore developed two versions of an online oral discussion forum.

Both function like a text-based threaded discussion forum except that students, instead of typing their comments, record oral responses. One version of the oral discussion forum is public in that all students in the class are able to hear the comments posted by all of their classmates and they

can post reactions to anyone in their class. The student journal is private: only the student who recorded the comments and the instructor are able to hear what the student has posted. This tool is particularly useful when teachers want students to post answers to an assignment and they don't want other students to be able to hear possible answers prior to making their posting. It also allows teachers to post private feedback for individual students.

By providing students in online courses with a means of communicating amongst each other, instructors help students to build a sense of community with their classmates. By adding an oral component to discussion forums, instructors also provide students with an opportunity to improve their oral skills.

Research Findings

Findings from face-to-face pilots provide information that is equally valid for instructors teaching foreign language courses online. Prior to their use of the software, 80% of the teachers indicated that they wished that they could assess their students' oral skills more frequently than they were but that barriers such as lack of time for one-on-one interviews prevented teachers from doing so. Teachers reported that with the software, they were able to do more frequent oral language assessments. All of the teachers indicated that they strongly believed that the practice exercises they created with the practice tool helped their students to prepare for oral tests and that they were more motivated to practice their oral language skills than in the past. 96% of the piloting instructors indicated that they wanted to continue to use the software to assess the oral skills of their students.

Students involved in the piloting of the software have indicated that the skills they most want to acquire and improve are listening and speaking. Their experience, however, has been that most of their courses have emphasized the development of the reading and writing skills. In surveys conducted at the end of courses in which the software was used to reinforce and assess oral language skills, 86% of students indicated that they thought that the practice exercises helped them to prepare for oral language tests. 96% believed that their listening skills improved and 88% thought that their speaking skills improved as a result of using the software. 96% valued the feedback feature of the software and 98% recommended the software for use in future courses.

The authors are eager to have the software piloted in online learning environments and they invite interested instructors to contact them so that online pilot sites can be established.

Conclusion

Online education is increasingly becoming an attractive option for both students and educational institutions. Rather than limiting online offerings to a text-based format, educators are encouraged to explore ways of adding not only a listening but also a speaking component to their courses. In the case of language teachers, this goal should be paramount but it has the potential of enhancing any online course in meaningful ways.

Our experience and that of our students in using the software developed for this research has been extremely positive but there are other possibilities available to teachers who wish to add a speaking component to their online course. An Internet search focusing on oral language testing via computer will suggest various options that can be considered. As in any teaching situation, educators have a responsibility to make their courses as meaningful, relevant and pedagogically sound as possible. Including an oral component that includes listening and speaking in online language courses is a step towards meeting these goals.

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