E-learning without e-content?
New approaches in language teaching

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Abstract:

The issue of e-learning and teaching in computer notebook classes has long been dominated by discussions about e-learning content and appropriate platforms. Recently, however, questions about appropriate didactic scenarios have become more relevant. The following approach is going to challenge this point of view. It claims that together with a microphone and free audio recording software, the notebook can be a meaningful tool in improving students' oral skills. Students are required to record themselves when doing oral assignments such as discussing topics in small groups, conducting interviews, producing features etc. Their oral contributions are then uploaded on the LMS (learn management system) platform and receiving feedback from the teacher as well as their classmates.

1 E-learning without e-content?

Experience in the area of teacher training has shown that teachers attending courses about e-learning, computer notebook-classes, or teaching with new media expect demanding interactive content or multimedia applications. Apparently, teachers widely believe that in order to implement e-learning in the classroom they have to learn how to use Flash or other programmes first. It is not easy to convince teachers who are often enthusiastic about and eager to work with the new media, that e-learning is actually about learning and teaching and thus requires didactics above all. In particular in computer notebook-classes, the development from teacher-centred to student-centred learning often results in content-centred learning, which reduces the students' activities to mouse clicks in an interactive, content-based environment. This development is far from the concept of the construction of knowledge through free action in realistic situations[1]. Teachers in notebook classes have a universal tool at their disposal, which – combined with a bit of imagination – can help them to find new ways of learning. In this context, Eva Gröstenberger has developed a new method of language teaching, which relegates technology and content to the background and focuses on the individual student's language work as a cognitive activity.

2 Technology in language teaching – speaking

The introduction of student computer notebooks in the language classroom has long been a subject of high controversy in Austrian schools. Whereas the notebook's function in improving students' writing, reading and listening skills has been widely accepted, it is still generally believed that in order to practise speaking, the notebook has to remain closed. The following method is going to challenge this point of view. Based on Wolfgang Scharl's discussion of sound editing in the classroom [2], it claims that together with a microphone and free audio recording software, the notebook can make a significant contribution to improving

students' oral skills – while not making use of any pre-fabricated e-learning content. Roughly speaking, in this teaching scenario the students are required to record themselves when doing communicative language tasks such as conducting interviews, telephoning or discussing topics in small groups and to upload their contributions on the LMS (Learn Management System) platform.

Obviously, the general idea of having students actively speak a language in face of a machine is not new. In fact, using machines to allow students to work with the target language in its spoken form is one of the oldest applications of technology to language learning. In Austrian schools, the introduction of analogue language learning labs about thirty years ago has allowed generations of learners to listen to examples of native speech and to imitate and compare their own utterances. Nowadays these labs are rarely used or have been removed altogether. Only in a few academic institutions have they been replaced by expensive modern computer-assisted labs, which would arguably offer a larger scope of activities, though not necessarily in the area of speaking. At any rate, the simple transition from analogue towards digital formats does not account for the innovation of the method outlined in this paper. It goes beyond the practices of the conventional language lab and is different in its overall approach.

3   Teaching speaking: the new method vs. conventional language labs

Conventional analogue language learning labs as they are – or rather were – used in school as well as university tend to rely on the audio-lingual method of language learning. One of the key principles of this method is that the language teacher should provide students with a native-speaker-like model in the tape-based lab. By listening to a dialogue, students are expected to be able to mimic the model. Based upon contrastive analyses, students are drilled in pronunciation of words that are most dissimilar between the target language and the first language[3]. In this context, the notebook has of course been recognized as an alternative to the lab. Audio recording software such as Audacity or iTunes are already used to practice learning to speak words correctly and grant students more responsibility[4]. However, as in traditional language labs, the focus of training is still on teaching native-like pronunciation and intonation, often disregarding content and meaning[5].

Furthermore, the above described methods do not usually allow for students to interact with each other. Interaction with the machine is equally confined to repeating utterances and getting feedback from the teacher. One may, of course, argue that modern computer-assisted language labs provide for more sophisticated oral interaction with the computer. Admittedly, the increasing interest in making the World Wide Web voice-accessible has led to promising developments in the areas of speech recognition and speech synthesis with a great potential benefit to language learners. However, we are not yet at the point where a beginning English student can have a free-ranging conversation with a computer, and the practice of spoken language is mostly limited to pronunciation exercises[6].

The approach to speaking outlined here has to be understood in the context of blended learning in a computer notebook class environment, in this case in the third and fourth form of a secondary business college. The focus is not on students practicing spoken language individually, as is usually the case in a language lab, but on interaction with each other. Anchored in communicative language teaching, this approach makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication in meaningful ways about meaningful topics. In other words,

the teacher sets up a scenario that students, who take on different roles, are likely to encounter in real life. Below you can find part of a typical assignment:

PLACING ORDERS ON THE PHONE

Role A

You work in the Purchase Department of Drinnen&Draußen and your boss asks you to order goods from Britain.

- You call the company and ask for Mr/Ms Thornton in the Sales Department.
- You have got the website http://www.robertdyas.co.uk/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/TopCategoriesDisplay?langId=-1&storeId=10001&catalogId=10051 in front of you and want further information on
  - Hardwood garden furniture
  - Gardening tools
  - Garden games

Your company is considering placing a substantial order for these items. This is your first contact with the British company.

- Introduce yourself and your company
- Ask for details of the products (descriptions, discounts, colours etc.)
- Try to negotiate the best terms for your company (discount, terms of payment, terms of delivery)
- Mr/Ms Thornton asks you to fill in the order form on the phone with him/her.

Robert Dyas
KITCHEN · HOME · DIY · GARDEN **ORDER FORM**

Amount	Order Number	Price	Total
Our standard delivery charge is £4. Deliveries are normally made within 7 working days.			
		TOTAL	

Company Data

Name of company:		Address:	
Telephone:		ZIP	
Fax:		Town:	
eMail:		Country	

Method of payment

O Invoice	O Credit Card		
	Credit card:		
	Credit card number:		
	Expiry date:		

Generally, in communicative language teaching, teachers will find themselves talking less and listening more. They must step back and observe, acting as a facilitator[7]. Therefore, a classroom during a communicative activity is far from quiet, and monitoring and giving feedback to possibly up to twenty-four students, who are supposed to be doing the required task, is a difficult undertaking. This is where technology comes in, technology as the means to a didactic goal, and not an end in itself.

4   Benefits of the new method

As already mentioned, the approach in consideration takes advantage of the students' personal notebooks; free audio recording software; and ideally microphones, which can be more conveniently replaced by headsets for obvious financial reasons. Having this equipment at

their disposal, the students are faced with an assignment which requires them to record a conversation in pair or group work and to upload it on the LMS platform. Insisting on strict time limits has proved to be a necessity in order to prevent students from writing down the requested dialogues or conversations and then assigning roles to read them out in front of the microphone, which is evidently a different type of exercise. Students are encouraged to leave the classroom and find themselves a quiet spot to carry out their task, calling the teacher for help when necessary. This situation ensures the participation of all the students at the same time. In contrast, a typically teacher-centred in-class conversation usually only involves a few, mostly high-performing students, which may make teachers feel good, but makes the rest of the students sleepy or inattentive. In this context, a survey conducted by Isabel Landsiedler amongst learners aged between 18 and 25 who had recently completed secondary school offers an interesting insight into the learners' perception of language learning. According to the report, speaking, which learners perceived as the most important skill, was felt as not having been allocated enough time in class. Among the changes learners would have wished for in their language education, more emphasis on speaking and use of new media were among the areas most frequently mentioned.

Another area where results in Landsiedler's report are unsatisfactory is the students' level of motivation. In this case, Landsiedler suggests "to improve the efficiency of foreign language teaching and learning, Austrian schools need to offer a greater variety of methods, become more learner-centred and support creativity in the classroom[8]." In fact, experience has shown that the student-centred teaching scenario outlined here is highly motivating. This can be accounted for by a number of factors. Firstly, the role that computers play in motivating students cannot be overstated. In the language classroom, this great potential has certainly been recognised in the areas of writing, reading and listening, but has not yet been sufficiently exploited in the area of speaking, where many language teachers still see the notebook as inhibiting rather than encouraging oral communication. Secondly, the fact of having the recording equipment for each student or group of students, with the students in control, forces the teacher from the role of conductor, which is otherwise quite hard to relinquish. Therefore, students become more responsible managers of their own learning, the teacher ensuring that they are on the right path. Thirdly, with a powerful production tool in front of them – a computer –, the suggested activities leave students in suspense as to the outcome of an exercise, which will vary according to their reactions and responses. When students are interested, they are conscious, focused and thinking about and in English. Students' motivation to learn then comes from their desire to communicate, to convey meaning – the goal of modern language teaching[9].

Having uploaded their oral contributions on the LMS platform, the students are encouraged to analyse and improve them in terms of accuracy and fluency. Typical activities would include correcting grammatical mistakes, changing passages by finding more appropriate vocabulary or verifying the pronunciation of words. Not surprisingly, students' first recordings are usually cluttered with mistakes made in the heat of the moment when their main aim was to get meaning across. Interestingly, in team work most students can easily identify these mistakes and improve their recordings. Evaluating another team's work has also proved to be an efficient means of raising learners' linguistic awareness. The same strategies have also proved to be efficient in the preparation for the speaking part of the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE), which also requires students to interact. Recording sample exams spontaneously renders the situation more exam-like and allows students to evaluate themselves afterwards. In a nutshell, analysing language - a technique which has so far mostly been confined to written language in traditional language teaching - now becomes possible with spoken language. However, unlike in a conventional language lab, students are not asked

to work with pre-fabricated material, but with material that they have generated themselves, material that is meaningful to them and therefore easier to engage with. At this stage, students obviously need some guidance from the teacher, who can easily access all the contributions from the platform and report back to the students either in person or electronically.

Furthermore, the importance of evaluating and describing one's language proficiency as outlined above is endorsed by the European Language Portfolio as one of its main aims. In order to set personal language goals and plan further learning, students have to learn to reflect on their language – and this includes written as well as spoken language, the latter of which is often neglected in this respect. In the teaching scenario under discussion, the LMS platform offers teachers and learners a means of keeping a record of the students' oral performance; documenting their progress in the course of the academic year, thereby providing data for the students' electronic portfolios. It therefore supports teachers when assessing students' oral linguistic competence and facilitates self-assessment. Speaking gains in importance in the language classroom; it becomes something the teacher can actually claim from his or her students in the same way as a written piece of homework. In fact, oral tasks are no longer confined to the classroom only. Speaking as homework becomes compulsory as it has to be handed-in in digital form in the same way as any other written assignment. Admittedly, the assignments for practice at home have to be changed to allow for individual work. Students may, for example, be presented with a situation which requires them to leave a message on an imaginary answering machine.

As the following comments from the LMS platform show, students do not only enjoy working with the recording software (in this case Audacity), but are also learning to evaluate their performance, analysing their language proficiency:

> "I think it's a good idea to use audacity in class. You can find mistakes, talk about the conversation and of course it brings change into the lesson. It also helps to present and talk freely. I think that nowadays speaking English is more important than writing. I didn't find any bigger mistakes, only some smaller pronunciation mistakes."

> "I liked the work with the audacity, because we heard our conversation after the recording. So we noticed the mistakes and heard how we do in a conversation."

> "I made some third person mistakes and one time I made a person mistake, I used the plural instead of the singular. I generally like lessons with group work or something like group work."

> "There were a few tiny mistakes. In an IT-class such audio recording programmes like AUDACITY are very useful. We can hear ourselves talking and detect our own mistakes. One of the best ways for learning a foreign language is if you listen to it. In my opinion, I think it is a good idea recording conversations like this one because you can hear your mistakes yourself. But it is strange if you hear your own voice. And it is also a good idea because you learn to talk freely."

> "I like working with Audacity if we can work in small groups. If I have to speak in front of the class I get nervous and make unnecessary mistakes. I like to work with Audacity. I like it because it is easy to use and it is fun."

> "I liked about the recoding that we practised situations, which could happen every day."

> "It was a very good conversation. We make a few mistakes but all in all it was acceptable. It's a good idea to work with audacity because you learn how to place orders on the phone and how you communicate with other people. It's helpful to solve problems if there is a

misunderstanding in the conversation but you have to know a lot of phrase to solve those problems. But all in all it's good to work with Audacity in class and we both think it will be helpful in business."

5 Conclusion

As students tend to put the emphasis on completing a set task rather than on learning something from it, encouraging students to reflect on their work has probably been the most difficult part of this method, but also the most valuable. Generally, the implementation of the method takes a considerable amount of time, because the students and the teacher have to get used to the new teaching scenario as well as the technology involved. Furthermore, the method, stimulating as it may be for students, is generally time-consuming for the teacher, both in the preparation and feedback stage. In return, in all of the four classes where computer-assisted speaking has been applied, students' oral performance has improved. Interestingly, in a majority of cases, students' overall oral performance exceeds their written performance. This seems to be supported by the results from the Cambridge Examination taken by my FCE class in June 2005. The chart below compares the candidate's performance in the areas of writing and speaking:

Exceptional 1

Good 2

Borderline 3

Weak 4

Candidates	Writing skill	Speaking skill
A	2	2
B	3	2
C	3	1,5
D	3	1,5
E	2	2
F	3	2
G	3	2
H	2	1
I	1	2
J	4	3
K	2	3
L	3	2,5
M	1,5	2
N	1	1
0	3	2
Average grade	**2,43**	**1,96**

These results can, of course, only be taken as an indication of the method's success, which will have to be confirmed by the collection of further data in the near future. For example, it still remains unclear whether writing has actually suffered due to an increased emphasis on speaking. Notwithstanding, it is indisputable that it has given students increased responsibility to participate in their linguistic development and helped them to gain confidence in speaking the target language: _ isn't this the greatest part of the struggle of language teaching?

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