Chapter 6

An Exploration of Using Audio Recorded Speaking Tasks With VoiceThread for L2 Oral Proficiency Development

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ABSTRACT

The chapter explores how the use of voice recordings with VoiceThread facilitates and enhances the development of language learners’ oral proficiency. Data from voice recordings, post-surveys, reflective essays, and final interviews were collected and analyzed. The findings showed that students engaged in sharing and exchanging L2 knowledge with their peers in a virtual multimodal environment. Asynchronous discussions allowed them more time for critical reflection on the content. Most students became more confident in their speaking. In addition, linguistic feedback provided by the instructor helped students improve language accuracy. The study suggests that allocating sufficient time to reflect on the content, making personal commitment to online contributions, and increasing instructor intervention to facilitate student participation in online interaction are essential to maximize the potential of VoiceThread to build learners’ oral proficiency.

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INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of foreign language (L2) instruction is to develop learners’ communicative competence, which refers to the ability to use the target language effectively and appropriately in real-world contexts. Over the past decade, L2 educators have embraced communicative language teaching, which focuses on building learners’ oral proficiency through meaningful interactions. Nevertheless, speaking is often perceived as the most demanding of the four language skills to acquire because it requires L2 learners to use linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse knowledge to convey meaning. Different approaches (task-based instruction) and activities (e.g., role-play, storytelling, information gap) have been integrated into L2 instruction to boost learners’ speaking skills. Yet, given the limited time many students spend in the traditional classroom (three days a week for 50 minutes each day), the lack of opportunities they use the target language outside the classroom, and the speaking anxiety they experience during face-to-face interaction, how can we find an effective means of providing students with acquisition-rich environment for them to interact with others and build their oral skills?

Given the advent of Web 2.0 technology, language practitioners have embraced computer-mediated communication (CMC) to maximize use of L2 beyond the classroom walls (Guth & Helm, 2010; Kessler, 2013). Today’s learners can easily access a wide variety of online resources and connect with others anytime and anywhere. CMC affords the opportunity for students to work independently (e.g., content creation) and collaboratively (e.g., peer comments). The use of various types of asynchronous CMC has proved to enhance learners’ speaking skills. For example, Sun (2012) showed that the use of voice blogs enabled students to improve their speaking fluency through social networking. Researchers have explored the psychological benefits of CMC by creating a less-anxiety learning environment for all learners to participate in learning tasks at their own pace (Bradley & Lomicka, 2000; Lee, 2017). According to Hampel and Stickler (2012), CMC is increasingly multimodal, often combining text, images, audio and voice to afford a more interactive and inclusive learning environment. In addition, Sankey, Birch and Gardiner (2011) underscore that multimodal communication caters more easily to different learning styles and modal preferences.

Among other multimodal CMC tools, VoiceThread (VT) has been used in distinct educational settings, including language learning (Brunvand & Byrd, 2011; Coiro & Kajder, 2011; Kidd & Beaudry, 2013; Mango, 2017). Anecdotal evidence shows that VT has a positive effect on L2 instruction (Chen & Yildiz, 2010; Sun, Yu & Gao, 2013). For example, ESL students reported that their written skills have improved through the use of VT (Alameen, 2011), whereas VT helped English students improve their speaking skills through voice conferencing (Pallos & Pallos, 2011).
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