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POSSIBILITIES FOR ONLINE SPEAKING PRACTICE IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION : A REVIEW OF POSSIBILITIES

The paper explores the use of the interactive tools for practicing oral production and interaction in a foreign language created as part of the SpeakApps project, funded by the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning Programme. Its primary goal was to provide holistic ICT-based services and pedagogies for practicing oral competencies online. The paper describes two tools designed to develop oral interaction skills in a foreign language: Tandem and Videochat, as well as a tool for practising oral production (Langblog). The Tandem tool is a content management system that facilitates the distribution of different materials to students engaged in tasks carried out synchronously. Videochat is a videoconferencing and recording tool devised for small-group work. Langblog is a spoken blog with the possibility of recording audio, video or written contributions. The main purpose of the article is to describe the technical potential of these tools from the pedagogical perspective. As a background for the presentation of the products generated by the SpeakApps project it includes a review of the tools and applications available for oral communication (and those most commonly used by language teachers) and an analysis of the data obtained from a survey study involving 640 students of foreign languages. These data provided the starting point for the design of action-oriented activities.

Key words: speaking, oral production, interaction, ICT tools, language education

Introduction

When we think of foreign language learning and teaching, we mean mastering communicative language skills combined with a sustainable development of grammar and lexical competencies. One of the areas that pose a challenge in language education (both in face-to-face and distance modes) is the development of speaking skills.

Speaking is one of the hardest skills to put into practice for a number of reasons. First of all, formal second or foreign language learning settings do not provide enough time for everyone to practice during the lessons. Secondly, the ephemeral nature of speaking makes it difficult for learners to obtain proper feedback on their performance from the teachers, which prevents them from properly revising and improving their oral skills. Although trained teachers have some efficient methods to assess students' utterances, sometimes it is hard to control both group discussions as a whole and individual learners' productions.

Another important factor is time constraints. When the class has many students and the time for practising language is limited by the formal frames (length of the course, syllabus etc.), it seems to be difficult to provide each student with a sufficient amount of time for speaking. Usually, when the group is large, other students can become bored with listening to others' production for a long time.

All these challenges were the inspi-

ration for developing the SpeakApps project,¹ aiming to create ICT-based applications that would help the language education community to teach and learn speaking in a foreign language. During the first phase of the project, the main focus was to research the user requirements (of the teachers and learners of six languages: English, Catalan, Dutch, Irish, Swedish, and Polish). The collected data served as input for designing and developing three tools for practising oral production and interaction. The SpeakApps and other tools that may be suitable for developing oral skills in a foreign language will be described in a more detailed way in the following two sections.

2. Review of tools and related literature

2.1 Review of tools for speaking online

During the last decade, computer-mediated communication has played a very important role in language education, primarily by offering learners opportunities to engage in real-time synchronous and asynchronous communication. Nowadays, Web 2.0 tools give language teachers new possibilities for creating speaking activities outside the classroom. Applications used for the practice of spo-

1 The SpeakApps project was conducted in two phases in six European universities: Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Dublin City University, the University of Groningen, University Jyväskylä, and the Centre for Polish Language and Culture in the World at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. More information about the project can be found at: www.speakapps.eu.

ken skills can be divided into three categories according to the type of practice they can promote:

- Production
- Asynchronous interaction
- Synchronous interaction

There are many tools that enable students to record their speech and send the file to their teacher, such as voice or video recording systems (e.g. Windows Voice Recorder), which can be easily installed on any device. The audio or video files can then be uploaded to LMS platforms, websites, or blogs. There are also applications that enable audio recording and automatically send the file to a teacher without installing any software (e.g. MailVo, Vocaroo). For asynchronous communication students can use voiceboards (e.g. Wimba Voice), which are oral versions of email or forums. Instead of written comments or messages, students can record voice messages and send them to a person or a group. Another system that can be used for language learning purposes is Intervue, which allows the user to create interview questions and gather video responses from other participants. These responses can be designated as either private or public and downloadable. For synchronous communication, audio chats or videoconferencing tools can be used for real-time dialogues, presentations, role-play activities or debates. Some of the audio and videoconferencing tools available to the general public can also be useful to the language education community, e.g. Skype, Google Talk, Google+, Adobe Connect, Elluminate, or Webex.

As we can see from this short description, there are many tools that can be used for educational purposes by those teachers who are likely to seek new solutions. With such a large range of possibilities, teachers and students need to decide which of the available options best suit

their educational needs. All of the tools can be adopted in language education but when we choose the tool we should take into consideration such technological aspects as:

- the kind of equipment needed;
- the technical requirements;
- the ease in application/tool use;
- the number of applications needed; and
- whether the recordings are to be placed within the public or private space.

Nowadays, there are a large number of ICT applications that can be used for education purposes and help teachers extend the time devoted to practising oral skills; however, before the final decision to incorporate a tool into the educational process is made, all the issues identified above should be taken into consideration by the teacher.

2.2 *Technology vs. methodology*

The tools and applications mentioned in the previous section were originally developed with a view to enabling distance communication as well as the creation of audio or video materials with the aim of making them public. Creative teachers acquainted with ICT have for a long time incorporated these tools in language education. Each of them has a list of those applications which, according to them, best lend themselves to educational goals. Often, however, such a list of tools is created on the basis of a teacher's personal preferences, the degree to which they have mastered the use of these applications, their availability and capacity (something especially significant when using a video option), as well as whether they can be used free of charge. Teachers also need to take into consideration the learners' preferences with regard to consent or its absence in making the materials prepared by them public on the Internet (some of those

tools mentioned previously have limited options in terms of establishing privacy or creating a closed group). For the reasons indicated above, the methodological potential of the means applied often becomes secondary. It is worth at this point to recall the words of Kozma, who argues that “in good designs, a medium’s capabilities enable methods and the methods that are used take advantage of these capabilities. If media are going to influence learning, method must be confounded with the medium. Media must be designed to give us powerful new methods, and our methods must take appropriate advantage of a medium’s capabilities” (Kozma, 1994, p. 16).

Having in mind the technical constraints, teachers should consider the following questions relative to the potential of using the tools from the didactic point of view:

- What kind of activities can we design with this tool?
- What kind of input can we provide?
- Is it easy to find the students’ recording and provide the feedback?
- Is it possible to be informed every time when a new recording is uploaded?
- What type of oral competencies can be developed with the use of a selected tool: production or interaction?

Selected tools should serve as a medium for the deployment of an action-oriented approach to language teaching, as encouraged by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. In this document we read that “[t]asks are a feature of everyday life in the personal, public, educational or occupational domains. Task accomplishment by an individual involves the strategic activation of specific competences in order to carry out a set of purposeful actions in a particular domain with a clearly defined goal and

specific outcome” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 157). Based on the task definitions, we can point to the most important aspects of pedagogical design:

- tasks should involve learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing and interacting in the target language (Nunan, 1989);
- the target language is used for communicative purposes in order to achieve a specific outcome (Willis, 1996);
- there should be a connection with comparable real world activities; and
- task completion has some sort of priority (Skehan, 1998).

It is important to remember that every technique, method and means incorporated into the teaching process ought to be subordinated to didactic considerations. It should not merely constitute in itself an additional attraction or embellishment to the lesson. One should not lose sight of the pedagogical dimension in the use of new didactic means that are interesting to and meet the expectations of the learners. Educational success is dependent in equal measure on linguistic abilities and knowledge as well as the attitude towards the language, motivation, the level of language anxiety, and other of student variables.

In developing speaking competence in a foreign language, the learning process needs to be differentiated from the creation of additional possibilities for language practice. The element differentiating teaching and learning from the exercising of oral communication skills is the ability to obtain support or feedback from the teacher or from one’s interaction partners (peer feedback). The ability to self-assess one’s own language skills is also of key importance.

Students should be aware of what aspects they need to take into account. The

criteria (such as: pronunciation, grammatical correctness, speech rate, accent, intonation or using silence-fillers etc.) should be provided by the teachers. A solution that works well in practice is to conduct internal (but also, possibly, online) training sessions for learners on how to assess their speaking in a foreign language. During such training sessions, students can listen to sample recordings and evaluate them according to the set criteria. This gives them practice that can be used for self-correction and self-evaluation, or for providing peer feedback.

The self-evaluation process is very important because the ability to self-assess increases the efficiency of foreign language learning. "Self-assessment produces learners who are more active and focused, and better placed to assess their own progress in terms of communication" (Harris, 2005). That is why teachers should encourage students to record and listen to their own oral production (if possible, students should also record their conversations in a foreign language because there is a significant difference between the conventions of oral production and those of oral interaction).

All the above-mentioned aspects, together with the results of the survey research conducted during the initial phase of the SpeakApps project, constitute the grounding for the tools designed and created to improve the skills of production and interaction in a foreign language.

3. The study: method, data presentation and discussion

The first step in the project was the identification of students' and teachers' requirements. Teachers shared their grievances and expectations in short video statements posted on YouTube (SpeakApps group: Teachers Voices). The research involved teachers of the following languages: Catalan, Irish Gaelic,

Dutch, and Polish as a foreign language. The most commonly repeated complaints included time limitations, difficulties in remembering or writing down the most frequent mistakes made by learners and in providing them with relevant support for further language development.

The questions that the learners were asked focused on the following aspects: personal data, domains intended for the use of the foreign language learnt, difficulties with oral communication in the language, and their ways of overcoming this through the use of existing ICT applications for educational purposes. Given the extensive scope of the research, only the information of primary relevance to the present exposition will be cited, concerning the fine-tuning of the newly-created SpeakApps applications to the needs and preferences of the students surveyed.

3.1 Data presentation and analysis

The survey polled 640 respondents – individuals learning one of the four languages: Catalan (76), Irish Gaelic (240), Dutch (180) and Polish (142) as a foreign or second language. Women dominated among the respondents.

Individuals of various ages took part in the research, the largest group being respondents aged between 18 and 34, mostly university students or working adults. Detailed information on the age categories is provided in Table 2.

When asked which language skill was the most important for them, the respondents unanimously pointed to oral communication, placing speaking and listening in the first positions.

The next question concerned the difficulty in mastering these skills while learning the said languages. Here the proportions break down into two different patterns. Those learning

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by sex

	Female	Male
PL	73%	27%
CAT	75%	25%
NL	62%	38%
GA	75%	25%

Table 2. Distribution of respondents by age

Age	Under 18	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-64	Over 65
PL	0%	67%	25%	4%	4%	1%
CAT	0%	8%	25%	28%	37%	3%
NL	0%	21%	51%	22%	7%	0%
GA	1%	85%	8%	4%	2%	0%

Table 3. The most important foreign language skills indicated by respondents

	Speaking	Listening
PL	85% stated “extremely important”	70% stated “extremely important”
CAT	78% stated “extremely important”	83% stated “extremely important”
NL	84% stated “extremely important”	78% stated “extremely important”
GA	90% stated “extremely important”	74% stated “extremely important”

Table 4. The most often used social domains indicated by respondents

	Facebook	Google+	LinkedIn	Twitter	MSN
PL	93	32	13	15	14
CAT	85	62	9	10	37
NL	87	36	34	11	16
GA	96	26	8	29	17

Polish and Dutch indicated that for them mastering the art of speaking was difficult or very difficult (62% replied "difficult" or "very difficult" in the group learning Polish while 79% replied that speaking was "difficult" or "very difficult" among those learning Dutch). Lower indicators of difficulty were noted in the case of Catalan (only 34% replied that it was "difficult" or "very difficult") and Irish Gaelic (44% of replies being "difficult" or "very difficult"). This state of affairs results from the status of these languages. The majority of those questioned about Irish Gaelic or

Catalan were inhabitants, respectively, of Ireland or Spain, who were learning these languages as second and had opportunities to use them in everyday communication situations, while Dutch and Polish were foreign languages for the respondents.

The next step is an analysis of the gathered data relating to language functioning in the social media as well as the attitude towards the use of the Internet in learning the respective languages.

The most willingly and most often used social domains were Facebook,

Table 5. Uses of a foreign language in social domains

	Reading posts	Writing posts	Watching video material	Written communication with acquaintances	Oral communication with acquaintances
PL	85	69	64	73	32
CAT	54	30	46	44	8
NL	88	72	63	70	37
GA	72	64	23	64	34

Google+, LinkedIn and Twitter. Detailed data on the numbers of respondents using these tools are presented in the following table.

A subsequent question concerned the use of foreign languages in the social media. The overwhelming majority of respondents replied that, beside their native language, they used English or other languages which they had learnt or continued to learn. Respondents were asked to define their goals for using a foreign language on social portals. The answers have been collated in the following table.

As the above data indicate, social media can be an effective tool in improving language skills. Respondents gladly follow their acquaintances' entries and share their own opinions and experiences on forums. It is worthwhile therefore to incorporate the social aspect in didactic planning and choose tools and applications which allow for communication among learners, in the form of writing posts, sharing interesting materials available online as well as oral and written interaction.

When asked whether social media and communication tools, such as Skype, IM Chat, IM Voice or Google Talk could be effectively used in foreign language teaching, the respondents answered in the affirmative – with 56% answering “definitely yes” and 41% answering “possibly”.

The selected data quoted above (for formal reasons, not all the survey questions have been covered here) provided the groundwork for the creation of the SpeakApps tools. Three applications were devised within the project: Langblog, serving to develop oral production abilities, the Tandem tool for pair work, and the Videochat system which facilitates synchronous discussion in small groups.

3.2 Development of Speakapps tools

3.2.1 Langblog

Langblog is an application that enables the creation of short audio or video utterances (there also exists the option to add a comment with a photograph or a written post). The learners can also listen to their fellow students' utterances as well as add comments to specific utterances made by the teacher or other learners. The feature distinguishing this tool from other available applications is the ability to apply an option in which a specific entry must be cleared by the teacher prior to publication. This creates the possibility to correct an utterance before it is heard by other learners. Secondly, this tool, as with all SpeakApps tools, being linked with the education platform used in the teaching process (e.g., Moodle or Blackboard), does not require any additional logging in to another site – all the tools are directly available after logging onto the platform. Teachers are able to create exercises just using the SpeakApps tool as one of the platform functions. Langblog is an application aiding the ability to create individual utterances (oral production) as well as asynchronous communication amongst learners. It is important to remember that the task proposed by the teacher should motivate students to make their own recordings and also to listen to those of other students. This is a good way for the teacher to post a joint comment (feedback) on all utterances with regard to the most commonly made mistakes.

3.2.2 Tandem

Tandem is a tool designed for pair work. It is a content management system for synchronous oral tasks. It administers complementary contents to students working on a task together. Tandem retrieves the user information from the environment (e.g. a Moodle classroom) and connects a pair of students to carry

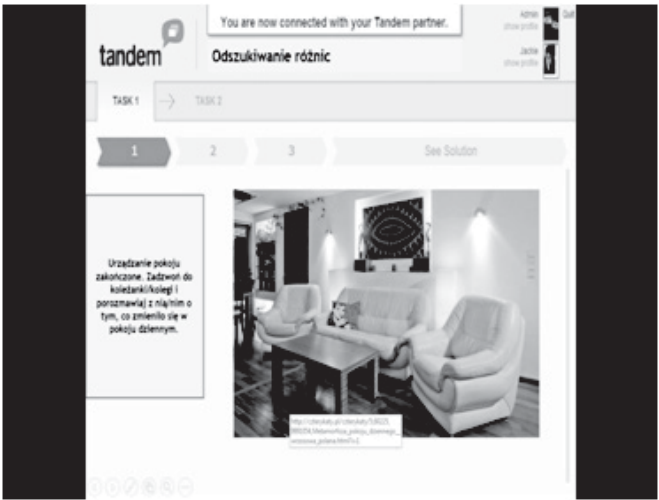


Figure 1. Student's A screen view

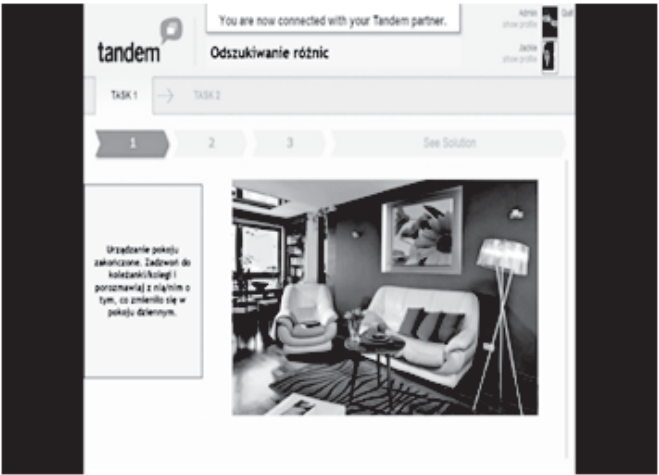


Figure 2. Student's A screen view

out a task. It assigns each student a role (i.e. Student A, Student B) and hands out to each student different contents belonging to the same task in order to prompt authentic goal-oriented communication characteristic of fill-in-the-gap tasks. There are many task types that can be planned with the use of the Tandem tool, such as: decision making, problem solving, ranking tasks, spotting differences, giving directions, role

playing, and object description.

The following is an example of a spot-the-difference task. Participants see the same image but with a number of differences. They need to describe their pictures to the task partner and identify the differences.

Instructions for Student A:

You have changed the decoration of your living room. Talk to your friend and tell her/him about what has changed.

Instruction for Student B:

Your friend has redecorated her/his living room. Talk to your friend and find out what has changed.

3.2.3 Videoconferencing tool

This tool allows for videoconference sessions with up to six people, using audio or video. The main idea is to make it easy for students to set up a session without the teacher's intervention and to record and archive the recording without the need to install additional software. There are two interfaces: the recorder and the player. The recorder stands out from the existing videoconferencing systems by its ease of use. The player's most distinctive functionality is the solo/mute buttons which allow teachers to listen to the group or to a specific learner in isolation. There are no moderator or administrator roles; all participants have the same profile as the tool is designed specifically for language students carrying out synchronous tasks in pairs or small groups. At present, the tool incorporates these two main features: a videoconferencing and recording tool and a player of archived files with a search facility and a separate channel for each participant.

4. Conclusion

A question may arise as to the purposefulness of creating new tools, given that the existing applications mentioned in this article can be used quite effectively for educational purposes.

What makes the new tools unique?

First and foremost, these tools can be integrated, in a straightforward way (by means of plug-ins), into any type of LMS (e.g. Moodle, Blackboard), becoming as a result one of their components (resources). Together with the LMS functions, which enable the creation of tasks developing lexical and grammatical competencies as well as abilities to understand written and spoken texts, and the creation of texts in the foreign language, the SpeakApps tool constitutes a holistic solution for developing the speaking abilities of oral production and interaction. With the use of SpeakApps tools we are able to create tasks requiring the recording of individual utterances as well as interaction in pairs and in small discussion groups. Secondly, the integration of the tool with LMS eliminates the necessity to log on to other sites or use other applications: all student activities may be contained within a single domain, which significantly makes the work easier for both teachers and learners.

Apart from the tools, the SpeakApps project develops user guides, video tutorials and pedagogies to practice oral competencies online. The activities and tools are designed to be used both as part of face-to-face and blended courses and as the main speaking activities for online courses.

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