

Technology and the Teaching of Oral Skills

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Over my many years of language teaching, I've been exposed to and taken advantage of a wide range of technology in the classroom, both high-tech and low-tech. I teach at Mission College, Santa Clara, in the heart of Silicon Valley, and I've been fortunate to be in an environment supportive of instruction and experimentation using technology in the classroom.

My personal teaching style leads me to incorporate the use of technology in all classes I teach – English grammar, writing, reading, vocabulary, listening, speaking, and pronunciation. However, in this paper I will concentrate on the latter three areas. I will explore the ways in which technology has affected my teaching of oral communication skills.

Low-tech

First of all, I'll never give up low-tech items such as mirrors or wide rubber bands in the oral classroom. Using a simple mirror is the one of the best ways students can see how they pronounce sounds with their mouth. Nowadays, though, I've added a somewhat high-tech twist: you know all those AOL "700 hours free!" CD-ROMs that come in the mail? Well, instead of discarding them, I stockpile them. I take these shiny disks to class for the students who forget to bring their mirrors. As for rubber bands to demonstrate kinesthetically the lengthening of vowels in stressed syllables, I have no high-tech twist; I simply eat a lot of broccoli.

Okay, moving on up the tech scale...

Audiotape

The use of audiotape is essential in the oral skills class. For receptive skills development, the tape player is the easiest way for students to listen to a variety of speakers on a variety of topics in a variety of genres – dialogs, interviews, lectures, stories, songs, and poems. For productive skills, the audiotape recorder is currently the most accessible piece of voice recording equipment. In my earlier days of teaching, not all of my students had access to tape recorders at home, and sometimes I would have to lend them a recorder or arrange other ways for them to hear or record a tape. Nowadays, practically everybody has a tape-recording boom box, a car tape player, a personal tape recorder, or several of these pieces of equipment, and for far less money than they spend to buy a textbook for their business or chemistry class! Like other popularized electronic devices, the price of tape recorders has really come down over the years.

In my ESL speaking and pronunciation classes, students tape record interviews with native speakers and record their own voices on tape on a regular basis. Audiotape is still the most convenient means of capturing their voices for evaluation and analysis. For me, one of the outcomes of using this technology is that I collect baskets and baskets of tapes, and I spend a fair amount of time listening to them, analyzing students' spoken English, and recording and writing down my own comments and corrections. I also spend time recording new material for listening, speaking, and pronunciation practice and testing. The positive side for students is that they receive individualized instruction and guidance from someone who is a model speaker, so ideally both the message and the medium are valuable and promote their learning.

Videotape

Videotape is a step up from audiotape. First of all, playing prerecorded tapes provides the audiovisual information that helps students observe, understand, and imitate oral communication, from language expressions and sentence structure to lip shape, facial expressions, gestures and distance between speakers, not to mention other cultural, behavioral, and sociological aspects of language. Fortunately, a VCR is stationed in virtually every classroom at Mission College, so all I have to do is select, record, borrow or buy the appropriate material on videotape and insert it in the classroom player.

Using a video camera to record students' interactions and oral presentations requires more set-up – I have to reserve the camera, which is fixed on a rolling tripod, pick it up from the audiovisual department in another building, and return it after class – but it's worth doing because, if a picture speaks a thousand words, a moving picture speaks a million. Videotape provides speakers with a view of themselves that they don't otherwise have, and it gives them a stronger basis for evaluating their performance and setting goals for future learning.

Language Lab

Another technology that is invaluable for the promotion of listening and speaking skills is the interactive language lab. I have to reveal that the language lab at my college is falling apart – the tape recorders are failing one by one, the headsets are broken, the main console is no longer functional – it's an obsolete pre-DOS system that is beyond repair and that we have not been able to replace due to the high expense. BUT that does not stop me from using it, arranging technological workarounds for it, or proselytizing its use. Why? Because the language lab does many things that benefit oral skills development better than the regular non-tech classroom. For example, in choral repetition drills, students can concentrate on the model (teacher or tape) with far less interference from the voices of classmates, they can concentrate on the sound of their own voice, and they can record both the model and their own voice for later comparison and practice. They can't take home our voices from the non-tech classroom.

Another function, pairing and grouping students and assigning speaking tasks, greatly increases students' speaking and listening practice. Since they may be randomly grouped with students sitting in another part of the lab, they cannot rely on body language; the only way they can communicate is by really listening and speaking to

their partners. The teacher can join, monitor and help groups of students with a touch of a button on a screen, and faster than physically traveling around the classroom from group to group. Regrouping is done electronically from the teacher's console, so there's no lost time from students having to pick up their book bags and move to a new seat.

A third function of the language lab that is superior to a non-tech classroom is testing. In the language lab, you can have all students record oral responses simultaneously on tape to interview questions or scenarios or pictures – whatever kind of prompt is suitable for the proficiency level of the students and the specific skills you're trying to test. And of course, you can administer listening tests better; there's a lot less interference from ambient noises such as planes flying overhead or power lawnmowers cutting the grass outside the classroom. Clearly, being able to use these functions of the language lab require more investment of time and energy on the teacher's part than simply bringing a tape player to class or not using any technology at all. In my experience, this investment has great rewards in students' gain in accuracy and fluency.

Voicemail

You're probably wondering, what kind of technology is good for students but not so time-consuming for teachers? To get students to do oral assignments that I can hear and assess but don't respond to orally, I assign voicemail homework. Listening to instructions on a voice mail system and leaving messages are skills that help students in "real life". And, students can record a message, review the message, delete and record the message, and finally save it and exit the system. The benefit to students is they get listening and speaking practice and life skills practice. The benefit to me as the teacher is that the length of the message is limited to two minutes, I can access the voice mail box from any location on or off campus, there are no tapes to carry around, and I don't record an oral response. I listen to each message, jot down notes and a score on paper. So, compared to audiotape journals, voicemail assignments are less labor-intensive for the teacher. The corollary is that the students get less corrective feedback – but they have done speaking practice.

Software

There are other exciting changes in the digital realm. We – students and teachers – can play CD-ROMs and sound files on web pages. Repetition of sounds, words and sentences has never been easier. With a click of a button, the student can hear the target language again and again and the "speaker" never gets tired of saying the same thing in the same way. Another advantage is that digital retrieval is easier than analog retrieval; rewinding the tape and trying to get to the phrase you want to replay is a lot less efficient than pushing a button. I've created lots of sound files, embedded them into PowerPoint presentations and web pages, and students can play them and practice with them on computers in the learning center or at home with Internet access.

Voiced email

For the past several years, I've been using PureVoice technology to voice-enable software applications, especially email. It's an Internet player-recorder application for

voice messages that you can use with any email software. The audio files are ultra-compressed, but it sounds as clear as they sound on local telephone calls. This is the digital replacement of the audiotape. It's an improvement over audiotape in several ways. The students and I transfer sound file attachments in email, not tapes. It has the advantages of click to play, click to record, and click to stop. As the teacher, I can insert my comments and corrections in between the students' recording, whereas with audiotape, I have to record either simultaneously or at the end of a student's recording. In my private business, I teach students in distant locations using a medley of technology: audiotape and videotape at home (theirs), web pages with text and sound, telephone for individual coaching, and email with PureVoice sound files. For my students at Mission College, this technology allowed me to retain at least two students who otherwise would have dropped the pronunciation class. One had severe health problems that prevented her from coming to class, turning in and getting back assignments on time. Another got married, went back to her country for the wedding celebrations and missed the last month of class. I was able to keep both of these students involved and participating by using voice messages in email. I even created the final exam, which I normally administer in the language lab, made it available with sound on the web, and then had her send her voice recording from thousands of miles away.

Summary

I've presented numerous kinds of technology that I use in oral communication classes for both receptive and productive language learning, along with some specific ways that each technology has affected teaching and learning. I'd like to close by summarizing my responses to the questions raised in this colloquium.

How has technology affected my teaching?

I am always on the lookout for technology that has pedagogical applications. I accept the challenge of learning to use new technology, to create learning materials using new technology, and to use new technology to further student learning objectives.

What are the downsides of using technology?

For the teacher, it requires a commitment of time and psychic energy to learn new things. In some cases, the learning curve is steep. And technology changes often. Just when I become brave enough to try one new thing, and even learn to use it, another generation or product is released and I have to relearn! Also, during class, when the electrical equipment malfunctions, when the software has a glitch, when the computer crashes, a loss of valuable instructional time occurs. In these cases, the technology detracts from the learning goals. It can create stress and frustration.

How has technology improved the lives of my students?

Technology has provided richer resources, greater access to resources, greater interactivity, and greater opportunities for students to manipulate and use language. I think adding the sound of my voice to text, especially when students can access it

outside of my physical presence in, gives a personalized touch to the learning experience. Having students use technology also contributes to their overall technical literacy, which has obvious benefits in the workplace.

Although there are some occasions when a return to the simplicity of pencils, books, chalkboards and mirrors is attractive, that feeling is fleeting. I accept the challenges of turning technology into rewards for students.

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