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The Interactive Oral Assessment (IOA) project

Using Talkback[®] for practice and assessment of listening and speaking skills in Languages

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Abstract— The Open University has always sought to exploit new technologies to deliver its language modules more effectively. Although students are offered regular tutorials (face-to-face and online) and work through a series of speaking activities on DVD-ROMs, oral practice is a crucial issue in distance learning. In collaboration with Learnosity, we offered a 6-week free pilot module aimed at two groups of students who had just completed French Beginners or level 1 English for Academic Purposes (EAP). We designed activities practising oral competency by using Talkback[®] (powered by Learnosity). Students accessed them on their mobile, landline, Skype or through an iPhone App. Recordings were instantly available on the Learnosity website to both students and tutors, who could mark and provide feedback. Both groups reported weekly via short online questionnaires recording their experiences. This paper discusses the findings of the project and their implications.

Key words: languages, oral, mobile learning, interactive, computer-aided

I. INTRODUCTION

Developing students' listening and speaking skills in a distance learning context has long presented a considerable challenge, particularly in language learning (Blake et al., 2008; Chand, 2007; Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). The Open University (OU) has always sought to exploit new technologies to deliver its language modules more effectively, and this has included the trialing and embedding of various online and offline tools to support speaking and listening practice and oral assessment.

OU languages students work independently using a blend of materials and media. To support their learning, they are assigned to a tutor who organises face to face or online tutorials, comments on and marks assignments, and offers general support. Peer support is available through online forums and self-help groups. Students practise their speaking skills via CDs, DVD-ROMs and online VLE tools and by attending optional face to face or online tutorials delivered via Elluminate[®], an audiographic synchronous tool. Speaking is assessed via Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) throughout the module and via an End of Module Assessment (EMA). Most students submit their assignments online and, for oral TMAs upload a recording onto the in-

house e-TMA system. Speaking EMAs are now conducted online via Elluminate[®]. Only the Speaking EMA generally offers the possibility to assess oral interaction (via role-plays, conversations or group discussions) as the Speaking TMA tasks consist of recorded presentations.

Unlike the present system, Learnosity's Voice Response tool makes it possible to assess oral interaction for every speaking task and uses a well established and simple technology: the telephone. In 2010, a project was initiated to trial the tool in an assessment context with two groups of students.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

A. Aims and objectives

The main objective of the Interactive Oral Assessment (IOA) project was to trial Learnosity's voice response system known as Talkback[®] for use in the formative and summative assessment of listening and speaking skills. The tool had already featured in a previous project, the L120 Mobile project (Spring 2009; reported in Demouy & Kukulska-Hulme, 2010) as part of an investigation of the potential of mobile devices to enhance speaking skills. The promising results invited investigation with a larger body of students. On the IOA project, we wanted to know what students thought of the functionality and ease of use of the tool and to investigate which type of activities were most effective.

B. Learnosity's Talkback[®]

Learnosity is a company which specialises in providing simple user-friendly ICT tools to educational institutions for the practice and assessment of languages. Talkback[®] is a tool which focuses on listening and speaking skills. It consists of a voice response system which operates through a simple telephone call. A series of audio questions, which together make up an activity, prompts students to respond orally. Answers to the questions for each activity are recorded and can be listened to straightaway on the phone via the phone review which plays back the series of questions, each followed by the student's answers, themselves followed by recorded sample answers where appropriate. Additionally, students can review their

activities online via a dedicated website (Fig. 1). Access to the activities and the website are password-protected.

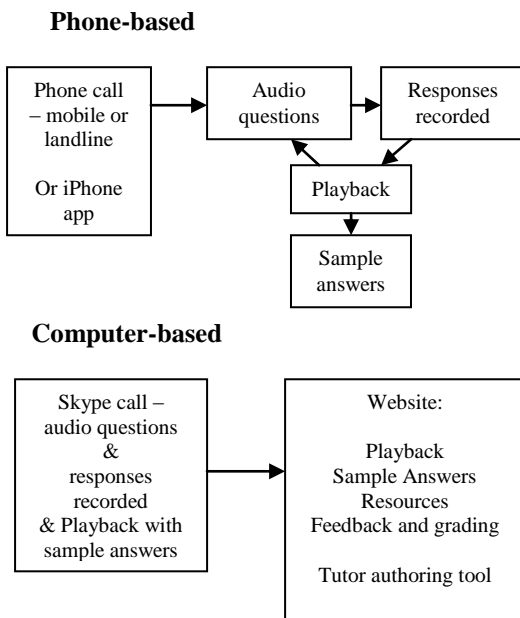


Figure 1. Using Talkback on the phone and/or computer

Talkback® is not just a practice tool. It allows teachers to comment on and grade their students' work through a dedicated website. Written and oral feedback is immediate and students can then access their results and teachers' comments via the same website. Additionally, Talkback® has a simple authoring tool which allows teachers to create questions and activities. Furthermore, following work done on the L120 Mobile project, Learnosity developed an iPhone Application, 'OU Voice', which enabled students who owned an iPhone, iPod Touch or iPad to work on the activities on their device free of charge.

On the IOA project, activities could be accessed in a variety of ways:

- via a landline or mobile phone through a lo-call (low cost) 0330 number
- via Skype VOIP (through a contact name and so free of charge)
- via 'OU Voice', the iPhone Application

C. Overview of the pilot

Around 60 students from French Beginners and 11 from EAP took part in the pilot and engaged in a 6 week free of charge pilot 'module' in the autumn of 2010. Each strand (French Beginners and English for Academic Purpose) followed its own syllabus and set of Talkback® activities (4 hours of workload per week over 5 weeks). Students were assessed by doing two TMAs on Talkback®, one half-way and the other at the end of the module. All activities and

TMAs were produced and uploaded via the Talkback® authoring tool by the project team. A VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) workspace was created hosting information, a link to the IOA Learnosity website (giving access to the activities online for teachers and students) and a forum.

D. Types of activities

French:

French activities were broadly divided into 5 types:

- pronunciation/intonation, generally consisting in repeating words or sentences containing a specific difficulty
- dialogues where students took part in a conversation, either prompted or open-ended
- presentations where students were invited to speak briefly about a topic or for instance leave a message on an answerphone
- grammar drills focusing on a grammar difficulty and requiring some manipulation of a language structure
- listening comprehensions providing short audio extracts followed by questions

English for Academic Purpose (EAP) :

All activities relied on audio-visual or written stimuli. They consisted of:

- responses to prompts
- short dialogues
- mini academic presentations
- summaries

For both French and EAP, the two TMAs were designed to match the format and the content of the practice activities.

E. Data collection

Feedback from students was gathered in 4 different ways for both French and EAP students:

- via a weekly online questionnaire for each phase/week of the pilot.
- via interviews with selected participants after the pilot
- via recorded feedback on Talkback® after each activity was completed.
- via the forum on the workspace as well as a dedicated email

III. FINDINGS

In this section we will focus on French unless findings for EAP proved different.

A. Overall experience with the tool

Participation was good with the majority of students engaging with the tool and the activities and responding to the online questionnaires. The vast majority of participants

rated the tool highly. Most worked from home and used Skype to do the activities but a fair number on EAP used a landline phone with only a few using a mobile phone and 'OU Voice'.

From a functional point of view, most participants reported favourably on the ease of access. Opinions were divided on whether it would have been useful to have a facility to pause in an activity. There was some reported frustration at the repetition of the instructions regarding the functionality whilst in call. Technical difficulties were few but generally focused on the variability of the sound quality, the reliability of the internet connection or the syncing issues with 'OU Voice' (the App was in development at the time of the project).

Participants nearly unanimously praised the possibility of attempting the activities more than once (only 3 attempts were allowed for TMA activities): 'you can see where you went wrong and rectify it' or you can 'have time to think about your mistakes'.

B. Doing TMAs with Talkback®

The majority of participants enjoyed doing their TMAs via Talkback®. They particularly appreciated the ease of access to their marks and tutor feedback. They also praised the way the marks and feedback were organised in terms of layout and readability. Some participants remarked positively on the fact that 'no faffing around with mp3 files' was required.

The audio feedback facility was very well received as it made it possible for tutors to be very specific in their comments and audio corrections.

C. Perceptions of overall impact of the pilot

At the end of the project, most participants reported that the pilot had boosted their confidence. The top aspects quoted for French were: 'improved listening skills', 'confidence', 'pronunciation and intonation' and, for EAP they were 'confidence', 'respond quickly orally', 'respond more appropriately orally' and 'academic presentation skills'.

IV. THE SPECIFICITY OF TALKBACK®

A. Better flexibility

The flexibility of the tool makes it available from almost anywhere and at any time for students, offering the potential to switch from one platform to another depending on circumstances or locations. For instance, it allows students to prioritise landline access at times of high internet traffic or when the only PC in the home is not available, or to choose the medium with the highest sound quality when it matters, e.g. for assignments. One participant remarked: 'Flexibility - phone option was useful as not always have

easy access to internet. Also in Elluminate® tutorials we go at the pace of the person with the least understanding of the technology whereas this was good to go at one's own pace'.

B. Easy to use

Talkback® proved easy to use for participants, requiring little explanation or support. Deliberately, no briefing or taster of the tool was offered in order to test ease of use. Most participants thought it was easy to get started. After the occasional initial difficulty, students quickly got used to how the tool worked and found it easy to use. Marks and feedback could be accessed with just a few clicks. This simplicity of access was reflected in the positive responses from participants on accessing marks and feedback for TMAs.

C. A different functionality

Unlike the other tools students are used to (CDs, DVD-ROMs etc), when using Talkback® students cannot rely on a transcription of the questions when doing the activities or pause to check a word in a dictionary for instance. Transcriptions of questions (except for TMAs) could only be accessed via the online review once students had attempted an activity. It is more akin to a 'real life' situation where you are expected to react on the spot. This is as challenging and potentially as stressful as a real-life situation where language learners have to communicate orally with native speakers, but is an essential part of learning nonetheless. Many students commented on the "realism" or "authenticity" of the tool.

D. Generic and personalised feedback

Quite uniquely, Talkback® records all responses whether an activity has been completed or not, making answers available immediately after having done the activity on the same platform or online. When a sample answer has been provided, students can compare their answer with this sample answer.

Immediate access to generic feedback can be paired with personalised and pinpointed feedback on each answered question by tutors. Feedback is more meaningful, thorough and helpful as it focuses on a particular point: 'it gives me the opportunity to self-improve, with very good recording/playing back ability, in particular on-line revision. Also it's excellent that the tutor on the other side just needs to log onto my account to monitor my improvement. In the 1st TMA the tutor immediately points out the problem, that I have never known when I said it.'

V. CONCLUSION

The trial showed that the adopted tool offered good flexibility, ease of use, a degree of realism and immediate generic and personalised feedback to students. Although it

could be argued that participants in a short fairly intensive listening and speaking practice project should improve those skills, results show that the tool played a key part in the participants' perceived improvement and confidence in listening and speaking. For instance, a student remarked that 'Talkback® is much more immediate and pushes a learner to remember more, rather than rely on referring back to dictionaries or verb tables'. Another pointed out that 'it made listening back a more realistic experience' and several insisted on the fact that it helps them to 'respond quicker and get confidence in speaking'.

It is undeniable that the students' sense of improving their listening and speaking skills via Talkback® is indeed linked to the functionality of the medium. The lack of visual support or transcription together with the limited navigation which does not allow students to go back to a question, repeat a question before answering it or pause, put participants 'on the spot'. This theme was identified during the L120 Mobile project and appears to be confirmed here. Students have to answer quickly. This is quite significantly different from working with other tools. This is most certainly the reason why many participants felt this approach was more 'authentic' and 'like real life' and yet offered enough support to boost confidence and motivation.

Quite a few participants were quick to see the potential of pairing this tool with existing tools and materials but also with tutor time and involvement: 'The lack of any real classroom work is a problem and I feel students need to be able to practise their speaking and listening skills in a way which is similar to conversing with another student or teacher in a classroom. I am not sure that this exactly fills that role but it does help.' Similarly, some participants felt that if the tool were used on French Beginners it would improve students' performance at their Speaking EMA at the end of the year (currently conducted via Elluminate® by an assessor). Overall, students' experience with the Talkback® tool and the learning activities was very positive and suggests that this type of technological support is a very worthwhile addition to the repertoire of materials and media available for study.

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