

E-Training of Conversational Skills in Language Learning

Niki Van Mechelen, Jona De Beuckeleer

CVO Antwerpen-Zuid (Belgium)
niki.vanmechelen@cvoantwerpen.be

Abstract

When teachers are developing e-learning exercises for a language course they often provide the student with drill-exercises on grammar and vocabulary skills. Unfortunately this kind of exercise does not present the best time value for the student. Efficiency and also usability can be improved.

When learning a new language, one needs opportunities to practice the acquired grammar and vocabulary: one needs to speak. In order to do so, a virtual environment in which you can talk about any subject and get useful feedback, is called for. In this paper we want to point at how social media tools like Audioboo and Posterous can be used to that effect in language learning .

Audioboo is a free, easy-to-use online audio-recording tool. Posterous, on the other hand, is a free online blogging tool where users can send anything in an e-mail and the appliance posts it automatically to the blog. By combining these two tools, language students can practice conversational skills on a regular basis. Conversations can be about specific topics provided by the teacher or about any other subject. They record their monologue with Audioboo and e-mail it to their blog. Using these asynchronous tools the teacher doesn't need to be online 24/7 but can listen to his or her students at any time and give them individual feedback using the same tools.

1. Implementing blended learning

CVO-Antwerpen Zuid is an educational institution for adult students. Languages are taught as part of their training in second chance education. Another group of students learns Dutch as a second language. Our institution has broad experience in teaching language courses and since quite some time now a number of courses are offered in a blended learning system. Here the classes consist partly of contact moments, with the students and the teacher in a classroom, and on the other side exercises and assignments for the students to complete at home, via a learning platform.

Before blended learning was introduced in our language courses, most of the teachers understood that for a good educational session certain ingredients were required. Intuitively it was understood that students need time and possibilities to practice acquired vocabulary and grammar rules. Normally a class would consist of the four basic skills: reading, listening, writing and, with a big emphasis on this productive skill, speaking. Students have plenty of time during the contact classes to train their speaking skills, either in dialogues/conversations with other students and the teacher or during small presentations. Feedback given by both fellow students and the teacher are essential learning moments.

Grammar and vocabulary was always seen as supportive knowledge. Knowledge that needed to be immersed in speaking and writing skills and was not to be taught separately. Teachers understood that the best way to learn grammar rules was to apply these during a conversation rather than to let the student go through a dozen fill-in-the-blank drill exercises. These kind of exercises can be useful as an extra or as a short repetition, but can never replace the productive skills like having a conversation or doing a presentation. When the switch was made from sole contact classes to blended learning with partly contact classes and partly independent learning, the teachers' intuition of



what the students needed shifted. Causes for this shift can be found in different factors and over a longer period of time. At first it resulted in good contact classes but the e-learning content wasn't divers enough.

2. Problems in diversifying e-learning content

First of all, most of the teachers weren't familiar with this kind of teaching. To them independent learning was a new concept and they had almost no experience in this field they could rely on. It soon became important to listen to each other and exchange expertise. But in the starting phase there wasn't yet a network available. And so, most of the teachers reached back to existing remedial exercises. These exercises were mostly based on drilling grammar and vocabulary. Where in the past during the sole contact lessons these kind of supportive exercises were used for extra homework or short drill moments, they now evolved to being main exercises during the distant learning part. Of course teachers evolved and a wider variety of exercises were developed. Now there is a wide range of e-learning content. Yet the skill speaking is a little left behind. Not many materials get developed or new ideas are implemented.

In our first experiments with e-learning we saw the necessity of teachers needing to learn new technologies. We provided and coached them gladly in this learning process but nevertheless it resulted in reticent and reluctant behavior of most teachers. Not everyone felt comfortable enough to start experimenting. And those who did tried out tools but often didn't get the result they wanted. The big example here being real time chatting, like Skype. So most reached back to the exercises based on repetition that seemingly had no faults and weren't too time investing. These exercises were more or less available and could be used and reused.

Teachers had to get acquainted with new technology and also had to develop new e-learning material for their students. Their return on investment wasn't in balance. They spend a lot of time on developing these drill exercises but had little return in results from the students. Now these students had less time to practice their productive skills in conversations and presentations. The practical moments consisted of the other types of e-learning material but with a lack of speaking exercises.

Students weren't familiar either with this new kind of teaching and/or the technology that went with it. Every new student needs time to get acquainted with the learning platform, how to use it, how to download and upload assignments, etc. Even though we provide sufficient support for everyone during class and during the independent learning moment, it still didn't mean they were convinced at all times of this new way of learning. And since we have adult students it meant most of them never experienced e-learning during their previous school career.

One change we saw was that teachers had the sense they weren't on top of the learning process anymore, or not in the same sense as they used to be. In class they could monitor easily how the student conversed or made a presentation. How fast a certain task was completed. Evolution was tangible to them. But they didn't see this enough in the drill exercises. Distant learning also meant that there was a different sort of contact between teacher and pupil. Teachers and students had to adjust to this.

Last but not least, money was a factor. Our school tries to provide the teachers with the necessary tools to develop e-learning course material. Nevertheless we have a budget and cannot provide every teacher with software licenses of € 300 per person. The use of freeware and online-tools that are compatible with our digital learning platform is essential. This means we are constantly looking for adequate, low-cost tools.

3. Requirements of the e-training for conversational skills

So what was necessary for a change? What did we need to do to get the student practicing his speaking skills during the independent learning moments? We want to bring back that good feeling in the language learning class. That meant drill exercises were possibly an aid but not as core task in the e-learning content.

E-learning doesn't mean that the teacher has to stay online 24/7. The student can work on his exercises whenever and wherever he wants to. But therefore tools like chatting and Skype can only be used if the teacher and the student meet online at set times. And obviously it means that you can't use real-time tools for all the e-learning content, since then you could be sitting in a classroom all the same. So how do you allow students to talk about something, provide them with feedback and let students listen to each other's efforts in order to create a strong learning environment?

We wanted tools where students can practice a small talk every week. This can be about a specific topic provided by the teacher or something chosen by the students themselves. They record their monologue with a recording tool and blog it so teacher and fellow learners can listen to the product of their effort. Using this method the teacher doesn't have to stay online 24/7 but can listen to his students at a chosen time and give them each individual feedback.

So we looked for a system where the teacher could write about a theme and set up a specific topic for the upcoming talk using text, images, videos, links and the likes. Plus we wanted a recording tool where students and teachers could record a short chat/presentation and which allowed others to post written and spoken feedback. We needed free and easy-to-use online equipment. Why exactly did we opt for these three requirements: easy-to-use, free and online?

Obviously the tool couldn't be overly complex since we wanted our teachers to use without them having to follow an additional course. Furthermore it should be easy so the students get the hang of it quickly and without too much support. We chose a free tool as it is more accessible for teacher and student. No costs means that teacher and student can experiment without investing money and risking the chance of losing on this investment. Finally we wanted an online tool, because it is more accessible. Users don't need to download and install software, which makes it almost immediately ready for use and lowers the chance of mishaps on your personal computer. So, what tools did we eventually choose?

4. Our solution

4.1 Posterous blog

An extremely easy-to-use blog is Posterous. In what sense is it different from other blogs? Posterous is a free online blogging tool where users can send anything in an e-mail and the appliance posts it automatically to the blog. This means you don't need to get familiar with the editorial tools. You can edit and change if wanted but if you don't want to learn the specifics, you can just e-mail it to a specific address of the blog and Posterous does everything for you.

4.2 Audioboo

Audioboo is a smart and easy, online audio-recording tool. All you need to get started is a pc with soundcard and a microphone. You set up an account within a minute and by simply pushing the red button on the website you can start recording. Once your recording is finished you can publish it on



your personal page and send the link to whomever you want. You can even embed the recording into another webpage (such as the aforementioned blog). The tool also works with mobile devices such as iPhone, Android phones and tablets. This makes it even more accessible and interesting for the students.

4.3 Combination

Combining these two tools, students can practice a small talk every week, share it and get feedback by both teacher and fellow students. They record their monologue with Audioboo and e-mail it to their blog. This way the teacher can listen to his pupils' products and give feedback when ready, perhaps using Audioboo himself.

5. Results and conclusion

We tried this new method as an experiment in two language classes. Students still needed some support in getting started, but once they got the hang of it, they were eager to try more. They were able to record their chats at home, if they have a computer and internet access, and at school.

Teachers can easily give feedback by either writing a commentary or recording a post. This quick way of commenting helps teachers to monitor the learning process of the student without spending hours on correcting assignments. There is an immediacy in this system that allows the teacher to adjust his pupil's errors even before the prospective end result. It can start a conversation between student and teacher. Even if it isn't real time conversation, students do appreciate the fact that they can express themselves and that their teacher is listening. It is evident important learning happens as a dialogue is developed between teacher and pupil on the latter's learning. Teachers felt that they could monitor much better the progress certain students were making. They were in touch again, being able to listen to their students and advising them, helping them, giving them useful feedback.

Overall this experiment brought useful insights and it was quite successful among teachers and students. It still needs fine-tuning such as providing proper support (e.g. tutorials) and showing students what kind of material they need to get started. Some students need to get more comfortable using the internet and computers in general, as do some teachers concerning new online tools they've never heard of before. Although any form of blogging will have its limitations, Posterous certainly is open for the integration of different and other forms of e-learning. Written reports, video's and slide show with voice over are the first to come to mind.

The use of Audioboo gives the teacher a digital, online tool to evaluate his students' capacities and evolution in the spoken use of the language. It allows direct, though therefore not necessarily immediate feedback. This commentary can be preliminary or final, but is always constructive. The use of Audioboo as a feedback mechanism itself gives the teacher the chance to remedy his pupil and provide him with the proper pronunciation or the right use of vocabulary, for example. As the emphasis in language learning is often and justly on the spoken word, this evolution in our e-learning environment is very important.