

The Interactive Oral Assessment (IOA) Project:

**Annie Eardley, Valérie Demouy, Prithvi Shrestha,
Agnes Kukulska-Hulme**

The Open University (United Kingdom)

a.f.eardley@open.ac.uk, v.e.demouy@open.ac.uk, p.n.shrestha@open.ac.uk, a.m.kukulska-Hulme@open.ac.uk

Abstract

The Department of Languages at the Open University is always keen to explore the use of new technologies to deliver its distance learning language courses more effectively and dynamically. Although students are offered regular tutorials, face-to-face and online, and work through a series of activities on DVD Rom, oral practice is a crucial issue in our modules.

Following a project run in spring 2009 in collaboration with Learnosity, we offered a two-strand 6-week free pilot module starting in October 2010 aimed at students who had just completed our French Beginners module and at those who had just completed our level 1 English for Academic Purposes module.

We designed a series of activities aimed at practising oral competency by using Talkback® (powered by Learnosity). Students accessed those activities on their mobile, landline or Skype or through an Iphone App. Their recordings were immediately available on the Learnosity website to both students and tutors who could mark students' responses and provide feedback, oral and written.

Both groups were asked to report via weekly short online questionnaires, recording their experience. Through this project, we wanted to explore the possibility of using Talkback® for oral practice and possibly for assessment purposes.

The results obtained were very encouraging and provided considerable amounts of data which we are still analysing. Students reported increased confidence and tutors reported a noticeable improvement of oral skills among the students.

1. Introduction

One of the crucial areas in distance language learning is the practice and assessment of oral skills. Open University languages students practise listening and speaking through a variety of tried and tested ways: CDs, DVD-ROMs and online tools. Students can attend optional tutorials where oral practice is the main focus. Many students arrange self-help sessions with fellow students, mainly through Elluminate®. Finally, at Level 2, students attend a week-long residential school in the target language country. Speaking is assessed via Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) throughout the module and an End of Module Assessment (EMA). Speaking tasks consist of recorded presentations. Speaking EMAs are conducted online via Elluminate®. Presently, only the Speaking EMA offers the possibility of assessing oral interaction (via role-plays, conversations or group discussions).

Following promising results on a previous project which piloted the use of Learnosity's Voice Response tool, the IOA (Interactive Oral Assessment) project was established in autumn 2010 to further investigate its feasibility with two groups of students who had just completed their respective modules: French beginner, and level 1 of English for Academic Purpose.

2. Description of the project

2.1 Aims and Objectives

The main objective of this 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. A secondary objective was to explore students' reactions to mobile access to the activities, since mobile devices are increasingly used in language learning and the emphasis is shifting from mobile content delivery to supported collaboration and interaction (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008).

2.2 Learnosity's Talkback®

Learnosity provides 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 telephone call. A series of audio questions prompts students to respond orally. On completion of the activity, a phone review plays back the series of questions, each followed by the student's answers, themselves followed by recorded sample answers where appropriate.

The students' responses are simultaneously uploaded on a dedicated password-protected website that can be reviewed by both students and tutors who can mark and comment on the activities both orally and in writing. Additionally, Talkback® has a simple authoring tool which allows teachers to create activities.

On the IOA project, activities could be accessed:

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

2.3 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 2010. Each strand followed its own syllabus and set of Talkback® activities. Students were assessed by doing two assignments on Talkback®. All activities and assignments 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 and a forum.

Data collection

Feedback from students was gathered through a weekly questionnaire, recordings by students directly after each activity, a forum and interviews of selected participants.

3. Brief summary of findings

Participation was high with most 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. A fair number on EAP used a landline phone. Only a few participants used a mobile phone or the 'OU Voice' App'.

From a functional point of view, most participants reported favourably on the ease of access. 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'.

The majority of participants enjoyed doing assignments via Talkback®. They particularly appreciated the ease of access to their marks and tutor feedback. The audio feedback facility was very well received as it made it possible for tutors to be specific in their comments and audio corrections.

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

For more information about the project, consult the conference proceedings of the ICL conference Pietšť'any, Slovakia, September 2011 (in press)

4. Designing activities for Talkback®

4.1 Specificities of Talkback activities

- Creating an authentic/real life environment

In both projects, many students commented on the 'real life feel' of the tool. As an immediate answer is required, students are, as in a real life situation, put on the spot. Although stressful, participants recognised it to be a necessary part of learning a language. Talkback® allows the opportunity to practise this skill in a 'safe' environment.

- Providing short bites for "little and often" practice

Thanks to the multi-modal access of the tool, it is possible to offer a series of short activities to be tackled any time any place, allowing students to be truly mobile (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005). This is not necessarily true of activities on a DVD-Rom which students undertake during a longer study session. It is important however that the activities are designed to scaffold practice while being able to stand alone.

- Providing targeted feedback

This is particularly valuable for activities which aim to improve pronunciation and intonation. Tutors could provide targeted oral and written feedback on the same web page as the recorded answer in a very straightforward way. In addition, sample answers being available straight after completing the activity was deemed invaluable.

4.2 Types of activities

4.2.1 French beginners

- Pronunciation/intonation practice

Pronunciation and intonation activities were quite popular, perhaps not surprisingly because the medium lends itself very well to the practice and assessment of these skills. Quite crucially too,

personalised feedback in Talkback can pinpoint errors or areas to work on very specifically and therefore was often perceived as 'invaluable', undoubtedly playing an important part in the students' perception of achievement and progress.

- Dialogues

Unsurprisingly, this type of activity where students take part in a conversation either prompted or open-ended was deemed as most 'authentic' by participants. They felt as if they were taking part in a real telephone conversation and the designers of the activities took care to ensure that the context was as authentic as possible. Although this was true for most types of activities (except perhaps pronunciation and intonation practice), it was particularly important for dialogue activities.

- Grammar drills

These focused on a grammar difficulty and required some manipulation of a language structure. As mentioned above, great care was taken by the designers of the activities to keep the activities in a genuine context. As an example, practice of the present tense of the verb 'pouvoir' (to be able) was a conversation between two relatives organising a party : ' Q : Qui peut envoyer les invitations ? A : Moi, je peux envoyer les invitations.' (Q: Who can send the invitations ? A : I can send the invitations).

Interestingly, grammar was rated quite highly by participants. This may be due to the fact that more often than not grammar is practised in writing or in written drills such as gapfill activities.

- Listening comprehensions

During our original project, participants found Talkback® very useful to practise listening skills but remarked that it was difficult to retain much information while concentrating on understanding, particularly on the phone. In order to avoid over reliance on memory, two formats (different from the one used on our earlier project) were tried. The first one consisted in working with a very short stimulus (3 seconds) followed by a question which was then repeated followed by a new piece of information followed by a new question etc. The second format consisted in giving students two nearly identical stories containing 5 differences. For these activities, Learnosity made it possible for students to replay the stimulus together with the question. Difficulties in retaining all the information even when students fully understood the passages were still reported and newer approaches might be required.

- Presentations

Under this title, we included any activity which required more open-ended creativity such as leaving a message on an answerphone or talking about oneself.

Talkback is slightly at odds with the presentation type as it was designed with interaction in mind. Bearing this in mind, students did not reject it but often mentioned that it might need visual support or more scaffolding, perhaps in a similar way to the listening comprehension activities.

4.2.1 English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

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

- Responses to prompts
- Short dialogues
- Mini academic presentations
- Summaries

EAP followed a slightly different model to that of the French beginners strand regarding the design of practice and assessment tasks. The EAP team had the notion that such tasks are dependent on the purpose and the context of language use (Hyland, 2007). In order to reflect this view, EAP assessment tasks focused on communicative functions for the purpose of academic study rather than general communication skills. This meant designing activities that students encounter in academic



seminars and workshops in higher education where they would be provided with preparation material. This aspect of the activity design is an extension of Talkback® originally designed for short interactions.

5. Conclusion

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. 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' (Demouy & Kukulska-Hulme, 2010). 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.

References

1. Demouy, V. & Kukulska-Hulme, A. (2010). On the spot: using mobile devices for listening and speaking skills on a French language programme, *Open Learning: The Journal of Open and Distance Learning*, 25:3, 217 – 232.
2. Hyland, K. (2007). Genre pedagogy: Language, literacy and L2 writing instruction. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16(3), 148-164.
3. Kukulska-Hulme, A. & Shield, L. (2008). An overview of mobile assisted language learning: From content delivery to supported collaboration and interaction. *ReCALL*, 20(3), pp. 271–289.
4. Kukulska-Hulme, A. & Traxler, J. (eds) (2005) *Mobile Learning: A Handbook for Educators and Trainers*, Routledge, London.