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The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution

Task design for L2 oral practice in audioblogs

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Abstract

The development of oral skills poses a challenge in language teaching whether this takes place face-to-face, through distance education or in blended learning contexts. Two main problems arise: first of all students don't have enough opportunity to use their target language orally, and secondly, students oral performance is mostly unrecorded and therefore there is little opportunity for the student to revise it or for the teacher to give detailed feedback and design post-task activities for raising language awareness. New web 2.0 tools have opened new possibilities for the practice of oral skills outside the classroom, or within virtual classrooms. There are now many tools that make it possible for students to make audio or video recordings and share them easily and in an inexpensive manner. However it is important to find a way of managing these recordings efficiently within a classroom situation and to embed these oral activities within pedagogical tasks that will make the most out of their language learning potential. Audioblogs can be a solution for these problems and offer a favourable environment for oral tasks. This paper describes the results of a study looking at different ways teachers in a distance education university make use of LANGblog, an audioblog developed within the framework of the SpeakApps project².

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the use of an audioblog created in the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) for oral practice in language virtual classrooms. This tool, called Langblog, allowed for the integration of asynchronous oral tasks into a 100% online language programme. We describe the tool, its gradual integration into the programmes offered in the UOC School of Languages, and a study looking into the different practices undertaken by teachers of different languages and levels. In this study the participants were instructional designers, teachers and students, and their perspective and perceptions were taken into account.

The UOC instructional model relies fundamentally on *asynchronous online tuition* in online classrooms, where students in cohorts relate among them and with their tutor, have access to materials and resources, and perform individual and group tasks. When the UOC first started offering language courses, interaction in the classrooms and group work was mainly written, and oral production work was restricted to a cumbersome exchange of audio files attached to e-mails which did not facilitate interaction amongst students and was very time-consuming for teachers. Langblog was born in this context and its development was later integrated into the development of the European project SpeakApps seeking to develop online tools for oral production and interaction online, addressing the need for increasing opportunities of L2 oral practice.

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There have been different approaches in the use of tools for online asynchronous oral activities. Podcasting is popular and allows for easy access to audio files by means of RSS subscription (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007) allowing for increased L2 listening practice, but it has been used to a lesser extent for oral production (for an example see Vallance & Shibata, 2008). Student Voice Blogging has also been used in an attempt to provide a wider audience to student recordings and foster student interaction by means of asynchronous voice (Sun, 2009), however if all students have their own blogs they often find that they will still not have enough of an audience. Langblog uses blogging technology with the purpose of having an easier interface for what would conceptually be a voice forum. It enables easy online audio/video recording and listening to teacher and students, directly on the tool. All postings remain accessible to listen and comment. Upload of pre-recorded audio/video files is also possible, and postings can use a combination of text, audio/video and image. Easy download of files is also possible.

This study seeks to explore the use of the tool LANGblog by teachers in the UOC since its introduction to the first UOC language classrooms in 2008 and its gradual integration to all language classrooms up to the 2011 spring term when the study was carried out.

2. Method

2.1. Rationale

A research method was devised that could lead to combine the voices from subject matter coordinators, as designers of tasks presented and done with the tool, from subject teachers, who post the tasks, guide students through them, and assess them, and voices from students, as users of the tool and of the tasks designed. It was considered that this combination of voices would result in data that enabled researchers to:

1. know what LANGblog is actually used for in UOC language courses,
2. find out about patterns in the use of media (video, audio and text) in that tool,
3. compare teachers' and students' perceptions.

The research was carried out in the language courses of UOC's School of Languages, where LANGblog is used as part of the course for the practice of oral skills, including CEFR levels A and B in English and French, and level A for Chinese, Japanese and German.

The number of faculty designers was 7, teachers 174, and around 40 000 students. The designers were the faculty of the courses, who are full-time faculty at UOC; they plan the teaching action, the assessed assignments and they give support to teachers in the courses. Teachers are part-time academic staff who guide students, answer their queries, and assess students' assignments. Students are adults, mostly between 30 and 45 years-old, learning the languages above either required by their degree at UOC or as an optional.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Focus group with designers

The study began with an exploration of viewpoints about the tool, its use and related issues, by means of a focus group discussion that enabled to collect faculty's ideas, attitudes and experience freely and amply expressed. Focus group discussion can be used as a first stage in research, prior to surveys and experimentation, and it may be combined with other research methods (Kleiber, 2004).

All faculty in charge of the courses mentioned agreed to take part in the study, and the discussion took place in one of the regular staff meetings of the School of Languages, moderated by the two authors of this paper.

2.2.2. Survey addressed at online teachers

A survey was designed to know from the online teachers of the courses about their views and perceptions. Items in the questionnaire were based on the issues and points expressed by faculty in the focus group discussion, plus new items that would show specific perceptions from teachers as they are the ones who deal with students directly.

2.2.3. Survey addressed at online students

From the results of faculty's discussion, and of the questionnaire for teachers, a survey was created for students, with the same formal criteria explained for the questionnaire addressed at teachers mentioned above.

3. Results and discussion

3.1.1. Activity objectives

From the focus group discussion with the course designers a list of activity objectives was put together and formed the basis of a section in the surveys. Teachers and students were asked to indicate which task objectives had been met, and it became clear that there was a strong agreement between teacher and course designers. According to the results from the teacher surveys the vast majority of teachers thought Langblog tasks had the objective of developing oral production skills (94.6%) and pronunciation (93%), whereas listening comprehension skills got a much lower score (66.1%). On the other hand only 62.8% of the students thought the activities had the objective of developing oral production skills and 67.2% of the students agreed with the objective of listening comprehension. While teachers focused mainly on the practice of productive oral skills, students viewed oral productions and listening comprehension as equally important objectives of the tasks.

The tasks asked the students for the most to express opinions (85.7% agreement) or make descriptions (75% agreement), always based on content which students had previously learnt to convey in written. The tasks elicit mainly informative and expressive language, but considerably less directive language, and tasks in Langblog are used mainly for revision of previously learnt language in written. We found no use of Langblog for the teaching of new elements of language.

3.1.2. Video vs. Audio comments

While teachers valued highly the use of the webcam as a means of building a stronger sense of community, and suggested that the use of webcam become compulsory for all classroom members, 85.8% of the students preferred to record an audio comment to a video comment, and 65.2% preferred to listen to an audio comment to a video comment. There is a clear discrepancy here, this could be partly explained due to the fact that students become very nervous when having to make a recording, and webcam may add to this, but also perhaps because they did not see the value of using a webcam as a way to bringing students closer to each other.

Finally, from the teachers surveys it emerged that they were concerned about how to deal with the growing number of student contributions in Langblog and the pressure they felt to provide more feedback to students as their participation in activities increased. Students on the other hand complained that Langblog was used mainly to elicit their participation and expressed their wish to see more teacher contributions, not only in relation to the activities carried out but also for introducing new contents of the subject.

4. Conclusions

Overall the tool and activities carried out in Langblog were highly valued by course designers, teachers and students as the tool has become an indispensable element of the UOC language classrooms.

This study brought to light some unexpected patterns of use of the Langblog tool and differences in the perceptions of the tools and tasks by teachers and students. Bringing these patterns and differences to the attention of course designers and teachers can help widen the objectives for which the activities are developed and develop new creative use of the technology. The results of the survey also brought to light that it is necessary to train teachers more extensively not only in the use of the tool from a technological point of view, but it is also necessary to train course designers and teachers in the pedagogical exploitation of the tool. This would be done with a view to foster the design of activities so that LANGblog can be used not only as a communication tool for students, consolidating previously learnt language, but also as a teaching tool for the introduction of new content/language elements.

An issue that arises from this study is the need for reconceptualising how, when and how much feedback teachers can give as new tools facilitate student participation and increase the amount of language produced and recorded in the virtual classroom. With the emergence of web 2.0 communication tools the need for technological tools that can support and facilitate teacher and peer-to-peer feedback is pressing.

5. References

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