

21 Using audio description to improve FLL students' oral competence in MALL: methodological preliminaries

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Abstract

During the last decades of the 20th century, audiovisual products began to be audio described in order to make them accessible to blind and visually impaired people (Benecke, 2004). This means that visual information is orally described in the gaps between dialogues. In order to meet the wishes of the so-called On Demand (OD) generation that wants ‘anything, anytime, anyplace’, we implemented Audio Description (AD) as a tool to promote oral production skills by means of mobile devices (android smart phones) and designed an app named VIdeos for SPEaking (VISP). In this paper we describe the methodological steps followed until the achievement of this first version of VISP, and we present the first prototype, which will be applied to distance education students and in other ubiquitous learning environments.

Keywords: audio description, oral competence, foreign language learning, FLL, mobile assisted language learning, MALL, mobile apps.

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1. Introduction: AD and Foreign Language Learning (FLL)

As mentioned by Krejtz et al. (2012) and the *Dual Coding Theory* (Paivio, 1986; Sadoski & Paivio, 2004), we have the capacity to store and retrieve information in verbal as well as non-verbal ways; when this is done simultaneously, learning is facilitated since the same data is available through several channels.

In the same vein, the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (Mayer, 2001) states that the processing of information improves when it is provided by two channels, namely the auditory and the visual. That makes audiovisual texts, which combine the verbal sign with images and sound, an attractive and stimulating tool for language learners, since their multimodal nature provides information through multiple channels, which strengthens memory retrieval (Moreno & Mayer, 2007).

AD, as a modality of multimodal audiovisual translation, was created for a specific audience, the blind and visually impaired people, and for a specific purpose: to make the visual content of an event accessible by conveying it into spoken words (Benecke, 2004). Back in 1992, studies on multimodal learning which compared learning with and without AD indicated that students with no narration performed significantly worse on problem-solving tests than those who heard the AD (Mayer & Anderson, 1992).

Recently, AD has been applied as a tool to promote the writing skills of English translation students (Clouet, 2005) and to enhance self-learning vocabulary (Martínez, 2012). The Ghent University-based project *Audiodescripción como Recurso Didáctico en ELE* (ARDELE) – that is, AD as a Didactic Resource for Spanish as a Foreign Language (hereafter FL) – also explores different aspects of the use of AD in the FLL classroom. To date, its results show that AD enhances the lexical and the phraseological competence (Ibáñez & Vermeulen, 2013). Since AD can be rendered, recorded (based on a written script, the so-called *AD script*, hereafter ADS), as well as live, it serves to train both written and oral competences (Ibáñez & Vermeulen, 2014).

2. The use of Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) to improve oral competences

Some authors set the emergence of MALL in 2009 with the appearance of the first mobile application (‘app’) to learn languages, developed by the British Council (Hockly, 2013). More recently, MALL has been defined by Kukulska-Hulme (2013) as “mobile technologies in language learning, especially in situations where device portability offers specific advantages” (cited in Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013, p. 2). This concept is intimately linked to the deep development that mobile technology has experienced in the last decade, as well as to the wide variety of mobile devices, users and uses included, in this growing world.

Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2007) stated that the implementation of collaborative oral activities in a mobile context would only be possible through synchronous communication based on chatting. They claim that although nowadays it is possible to maintain voice dialogues using mobile devices, this would violate the ‘anytime, anyplace’ principle of mobile learning (m-learning) in some specific context, for instance a bus full of people talking to each other. Siskin (2009) proposed a comprehensive classification of different ways to teach languages through m-learning. Kim, Rueckert, Kim, and Seo (2013) successfully set up a project based on the use of the mobile phone outside the classroom. One of the activities consisted of recording and sharing videos on *YouTube* to practice students’ speaking competence.

There are different ways to practice and improve student’s competences in FL by using mobile technology. Some of them are listed below:

1.1 Mobile-based Synchronous Computer Mediated Communication (M-SCMC).

1.2 Mobile versions of websites designed to practice foreign languages.

1.3 Podcasting and other ways of subscription.

1.4 Authoring tools to create new material.

1.5 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) applications ('apps').

Out of these resources, those dealing with oral competences are (1.3) and (1.5). As regards podcasting (1.3), it is one of the pioneering MALL activities to improve oral competences. [Rosell-Aguilar \(2013\)](#) shows its benefits for FLL students in a study about different aspects of their language development derived from their exposition to podcasts. Another option is subscribing to an RSS channel by speaking. This has been applied in a MALL app called *ANT*, created to listen to the news (see [Pareja-Lora et al., 2013](#)).

As for (1.5), nowadays, there are dozens of apps created to learn English. However, very few promote spoken language. A selection of the most comprehensive apps is provided below:

- *Sounds*, The Pronunciation App.
- *English conversations*.
- *Speak English* (Listen, repeat and compare).
- *Talk English*.
- *Vaughan System*.

As for apps that have been specifically developed within the academic world, there is almost nothing available, and apart from a few proposals that are being tested, there is not much material ([Godwin-Jones, 2011](#)). Moreover, there are no empirical studies based on testing these apps, especially with regards to oral competences. Given that this field is still under development, our aim is to propose a MALL app with strong academic grounds and pedagogically solid, as well as motivating and stimulating for FLL students.

3. Proposal and description of a mobile app: VISP

In line with the current trend of applying audiovisual translation to FLL and teaching and following the principles of the communicative approach to language teaching, we have designed a MALL application based on AD that can be used to improve oral production skills in English: VISP v1. This first prototype has been initially conceived for B1 students of English. The theoretical background of this mobile app, as well as recent research on the field of FLL, establishes the solid base for its conception, departing from the following series of premises.

First, from the FLL perspective, exposing learners to audiovisual material containing specific lexicon will help them to learn and use it more efficiently (Tight, 2010). As stated elsewhere, “[e]ven if ubiquitous learning environments have increased and new technologies have been developed to adapt to the new learning styles (Jones & Ho, 2004), we believe that there are fewer chances for the average user, in [a ubiquitous] context, to practice oral production. In this [respect], AD has showed to be a useful tool to promote oral skills in the [FLL] classroom” (Ibáñez Moreno & Vermeulen, 2015, p. 250). However, it has not yet been tested in the field of MALL. Therefore, VISP v1 would be the first MALL application based on AD.

Second, from the perspective of MALL, we depart from the premise that ubiquitous learning environments can improve motivation and promote learning (Keramidas, 2010; Lee & Hammer, 2011). In this sense, this application is conceived to meet the needs of the OD generation: learning anytime, anywhere. Figure 1 shows its home screen.

VISP v1 is framed within the communicative approach, especially within the task-based approach, in the sense that VISP v1 consists of communicative activities whose goal is to achieve a specific learning objective (Ellis, 2003). Tasks are the backbone of VISP v1.

Figure 1. Home screen of VISP v1



For this first version, we chose a 30” clip of the film *Moulin Rouge* (Luhmann, 2001). Following the conventions of AD, an audio describer is allowed to use 180 words per minute. In VISP v1, however, users should employ around 60 words only. The clip was selected on the basis of its absence of dialogue and little action. This gives users time to describe what they see. The ADs of the whole clip are provided below (as originally recorded):

“A handsome young man, Christian, in his twenties, with dark hair and beard, takes a new line on his typewriter. He puts his hand to his forehead. Through his open window lies Paris at night. Tearfully, he stares out of the window at the Moulin Rouge. He turns back to the typewriter; the Paris cityscape”.

Second, the instructions for the usability of VISP v1 were designed. They consisted of several steps, beginning with a very brief introduction to AD. A

great effort was done in order to select the most essential information about AD, so as to comply with smartphones' and tablets' usability and readability (Fling, 2009).

From the introduction screen the user can access a real AD sample: a clip of 4", extracted from *Memoirs of a Geisha*, so users can first listen to a real AD. Finally, a button at the bottom of the screen directs users to a pre-questionnaire where they fill in their personal data: name, surname and email. They also complete a short language test.

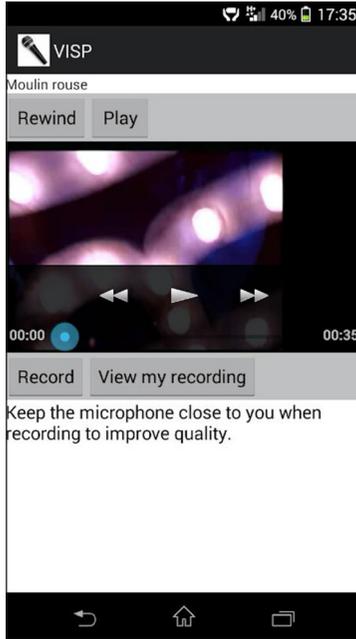
The pre-questionnaire has several purposes: 1) to obtain data from the users (with the corresponding disclaimer informing about the confidential use of such data) and keep track of their progress; 2) to obtain data about the users' previous knowledge of English so that their progress can be assessed and the validity of VISP v1 can be confirmed; and 3) to provide users with some background knowledge of the vocabulary that will be necessary to accomplish an accurate exercise.

Once users have been introduced to AD, watched and listened to an example, and filled in their data, they can continue to the next step by clicking on the *Instructions* button.

The instructions are very simple, brief and direct, so as to keep the user's attention and interest. Also, tips are given, as well as three basic rules of audio describing. Finally, users are reminded that there are no time limits to perform the task. They can repeat the task as many times as they want before sending their recording. The next step is the practice itself. The screen included in [Figure 2](#) shows the core of the whole activity, and of the application.

In this screen, users can watch the clip as many times as they want, by clicking on *Play* and *Rewind*, until they feel ready to record their own AD. When this moment comes, they will have to click on *Record*. After the recording, they have the option of listening to their performance. Once users are satisfied with their AD, they go back to the *Home* screen and click on the button *Finish* (see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 2. Practice screen of VISP v1



In the *Finish* screen, users fill in their name, and send their recording. If the users have filled in their personal data in the initial questionnaire, we can also send some feedback on their performance by taking into account their improvement. Besides, this screen also includes a self-evaluation section, accessible by clicking on the button below *Send*. This button directs the users to another post-questionnaire, where they can listen to the original clip with AD (among other activities), which are aimed at an autonomous assessment of their performance.

4. Concluding remarks and future research

In this work we have presented the methodological steps taken by three members of the research group Applying Technology to LAnguageS (ATLAS). ATLAS

is a UNED-based research group working on MALL, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), among other areas, to develop a MALL app (VISP v1) that aims to help B1 English language learners to work their oral skills, especially speaking. VISP v1 has been developed from the idea that the use of AD, which offers the same information that is accessible visually in an oral way, can create an effective multimodal learning environment. VISP v1 is already one of the pioneering MALL apps that has used AD as a technique to practice oral production skills in FLL; however, it is still a prototype that has to be tested on distance learning students of English. Therefore, very soon the results will show its benefits and limitations. These limitations will lead us to its further development, for instance by implementing level A1, A2 and B2 tasks, and by removing all the elements that are not useful.

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