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Practice and assessment of oral skills in developing online preparatory materials through the InGenio authoring shell

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Abstract

The practice of oral skills is a basic requirement of learning or teaching a new language, as one of the main goals in the field of language learning is developing oral communicative competence, especially needed in contexts where the students' L2 is the vehicular language and therefore the main means of interaction. The *InGenio* online authoring tool allows designers of new materials, as well as language teachers and students, to rethink and imagine new ways of dealing with practice and assessment of listening and speaking skills thanks to the flexibility of its templates, resources and tools. This article explores the ways in which the *InGenio* utilities, solutions and learning materials are being expanded and updated in order to address oral practice and assessment in a more efficient and effective manner making the most of these improvements to provide new learning opportunities.

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1. Introduction

The practice and assessment of oral skills are basic requirements of learning or teaching a new language as one of the main goals in the field of language learning is developing the oral communicative competence needed in those contexts where the students' L2 is the vehicular language and therefore the

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main means of interaction. The *InGenio* online authoring tool allows designers of new materials, as well as language teachers and students, to rethink and imagine new ways of dealing with practice and assessment of listening and speaking skills thanks to the flexibility of its templates, resources and tools. Listening skills are traditionally considered as the most complex and problematic skills from a technical point of view, as well as the most time-consuming, whereas speaking skills are hard to practise and assess (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2006), as well as difficult to teach, practise and test through technology (Levy & Stockwell, 2006).

Typically, the practice of speaking and listening skills has taken place in the classroom context and has been based on the interaction between the teacher and the student or among fellow learners, this being one of the main reasons why listening has usually been seen as the skill which presents the most difficulties in both practice and assessment. Nevertheless, the emergence of computer-assisted materials devoted to teaching or learning languages has provided efficient and innovative solutions, especially concerning listening practice and assessment. Therefore, most of the current challenges are related to finding new means of encouraging students to practise their speaking skills in a CALL environment, as well as the most effective ways to assess them. Another important challenge has to do with the new roles adopted by students and teachers when facing the use of these kinds of materials. In recent years, CALL researchers have suggested several ways in which the practice and assessment of oral skills could be enhanced in language-learning programmes, such as speech-recognition applications, broadband audio-visual technologies, intelligent tutors and new authoring tools and techniques (Levy & Stockwell, 2006: 242).

This article explores the ways in which the *InGenio* utilities, solutions and learning materials are being expanded and updated in order to address oral practice and assessment in a more efficient and effective manner, making the most of these improvements to provide new learning opportunities, particularly focusing on two recently developed online preparatory materials for the Cambridge First Certificate in English Examination (FCE) and its computer-based version, CBFCE: *FCE Online Course* and *FCE Online Tester*.

2. Listening and speaking practice and assessment

Listening skills are said to be the least understood (Alderson & Bachman, in Buck, 2001: preface) in spite of being extremely important for communication. The fact that listening is complex from a technical viewpoint as well as time consuming has often led teachers to exclude it from language assessment and even from practice. As for speaking, many studies acknowledge that the assessment of speaking skills is one of the most complex and controversial aspects within languages teaching (O'Sullivan, 2006). This is due to the fact that it is not easy at all to find appropriate ways to connect the targets of the assessment with the suitable tasks or instruments that assessment requires (Luoma, 2004). Moreover, speaking is considered as the hardest skill to teach, practise and test through technology (Levy & Stockwell, 2006), and this explains why the integration of the practice and assessment of communicative speaking into CALL materials is so challenging. A change in mentality is needed in order to be able to find ways to practise and assess listening and speaking skills while introducing innovations in teaching practices in such a way that teachers give these skills the attention they deserve.

Buck (2001: 31) points out that there is a great overlap between reading and listening and highlights the fact that the characteristics that are unique to listening are the ones that should be taken into account when designing preparatory and assessment materials: phonological modification, including assimilation, elision and intrusion; accent; prosodic features, such as stress and intonation; prosody and comprehension; speech rate; hesitation; and discourse structure. Other elements to be taken into account are the differences between linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge and also between verbal and non-

verbal communication and the elements that play a role in them all. Most of the linguistic knowledge in a second language is explicit because “it is to some extent consciously known and consciously applied” (Buck, 2001: 50) and there are often “gaps in their understanding” that influence the overall comprehension of the person listening, who might compensate by using any other information available, like visual information, general background knowledge or their common sense or any other kind of compensatory skill. Therefore, intensive listening practice and the development of compensation skills are needed as a means to activate the learner’s explicit linguistic knowledge and to foster their listening comprehension in order to guarantee a fluid communication.

In the case of speaking, there is a great variety of features and of types of speech (planned or not, formal or informal, etc.) that might produce substantial changes in vocabulary choices, grammar constructions or pronunciation depending on the type of discourse (Luoma, 2004), which in turn might influence communication. Another factor that is likely to influence the type of speech of a speaker is the social/situational context, as reflected in Hymes’ (1974) SPEAKING model, which includes Setting/Scene, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms and Genre. Before designing the speaking tasks, context – one of the main elements mentioned by Hymes (1974) – needs to be looked at, since all the elements present at the moment of interaction (that is, the linguistic, physical, psychological and social dimensions of the language that is being used) are likely to influence the speakers. Context also has to do with the concrete aspects of the situation in which the interaction takes place, such as the location or the interlocutors’ previous experiences of use, what is said and the way it is said in different situations. The implications of this are that conversation can be, to a certain extent, influenced by task designers through the manipulation of the context characteristics by means of the proprieties that are attributed to the tasks and to the activities suggested (Luoma, 2004: 30).

Even if there is a wide variety of approaches to the practice and assessment of oral skills, recent decades have witnessed a move towards a communicative approach in which “language is used for the purpose of communication, in a particular situation and for a particular purpose”, the important things being not “what a person knows about the language, nor how grammatically correct they are, but whether they can actually use it to communicate in the target language use situation” (Hymes, 1974, cited in Buck, 2001: 83), which means that language proficiency is seen as communicative competence. According to Buck (2001: 85), this communicative approach involves using authentic and genuine texts to be listened to and real-life situations in which communicative speaking is needed, as well as providing a specific target and having the students complete a wide range of authentic and motivating tasks.

A good way to foster the practice of oral skills and to overcome the difficulties of assessing large groups of students, while providing authentic and motivating tasks for them to accomplish, can be the use of CALL materials. When it comes to using technology to enhance the practice and assessment of listening comprehension and spoken production, it is essential to bear in mind that the technologies to be used should provide something extra that is not available through traditional means in order to foster learning and to enrich and improve the learning experience (Levy & Stockwell, 2006: 180). Otherwise, it would be a waste of time, energy and economic resources for both the teacher and the institution. That extra provision is guaranteed by the *InGenio FCE Online Course & Tester*, since these materials allow designers, as well as language teachers and students, to rethink and imagine new ways of dealing with practice and assessment of listening and speaking skills, thanks to the flexibility of the available templates, resources and tools within the *InGenio* online authoring shell (Gimeno, 2002). The *FCE Online Course & Tester* can help students overcome the limitations and difficulties encountered when using traditional materials, catering for the practice of oral skills in an individualised way while providing students with more exposure to native or native-like input, something that is not common in higher education contexts in Spain, where there are normally large numbers of students per class. Oversized classes are often an obstacle for both the practice and the assessment of oral skills, making it difficult for

the teacher to provide feedback to students, to assess their progress individually or to control student-to-student interaction in an effective way.

3. Conclusions

The practice and assessment of oral skills are essential in language learning since the development of oral communicative competence privileging the target language use situation (Hymes, 1974, in Buck, 2001: 83) is crucial in those contexts where the students' L2 is the main means of interaction. The limitations of practising and assessing listening and speaking in traditional settings and by traditional means can be overcome thanks to the use of CALL materials such as the *InGenio FCE Online Course & Tester*, the flexibility of which allows designers, language teachers and students to find new ways of dealing with the practice and the assessment of listening and speaking skills through the use of the different templates, resources and tools included in the *InGenio* online authoring tool.

Moreover, the *FCE Online Course & Tester* foster the individual practice of oral skills and provide students with more exposure to native or native-like input, making it easier for teachers to provide feedback to students, to assess their progress individually and to control student-to-student interaction in such a way that the technologies become an ideal tool that supplies what is not available through traditional means (Levy & Stockwell, 2006: 180), thus fostering students' learning and motivation while enriching and improving their learning experience.

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