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The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution

The *VoiceForum* platform for spoken interaction

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Abstract

Showcased in the courseware exhibition, *VoiceForum* is a web-based software platform for asynchronous learner interaction in threaded discussions using voice and text. A dedicated space is provided for the tutor who can give feedback on a posted message and dialogue with the participants at a separate level from the main interactional activity. In this way, the pedagogical input is always based on the contextualized needs of the participants, can be accessed as often as required and even searched as a resource for future reference.

The software features a built-in sound recorder/player, a rich text editor and management tools to enrol participants, and create forums. Although still in the development stage, this software can be downloaded freely but must be installed on a web server. *VoiceForum* has been used extensively with French university students of English since 2006.

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1. Introduction

The interactive spoken medium is perhaps the skill which presents the greatest challenge to language learning and assessment. Common methods for training oral production skills usually involve face-to-face learning activity. The assumption is that face-to-face group work is closer to real world situations and that technological solutions would only be used where the former would not be practical. Our experience at Blaise Pascal University in Clermont-Ferrand, France has shown, however, the limitations of face-to-face work especially when the possibilities for teacher feedback are considered. Tasks and interactivity between participants do allow opportunity for communicative language skills to be developed and assessed in something approaching a realistic or real world context but can computer-mediated communication (CMC) software actually provide not only a satisfactory alternative to the traditional oral production classroom environment but even offer some advantages?

VoiceForum is a web-based in-house project developed as a result of observation and research into ways of overcoming some of the limitations of face-to-face interaction, on the one hand, and recording dialogues on the computer, on the other, as many teachers do with tools like *Audacity*. The problem with the former is the limited possibilities for performance feedback and the problem with the latter is the lack of interactivity outside of the computer-based pair work.

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2. The software

2.1 An asynchronous oral solution using a threaded forum structure

As a software tool, *VoiceForum* sets out to address the need for a pedagogical framework for the development of learners' interactive skills. Few software tools explicitly provide such a framework to encourage the co-construction of meaning by language learners as described by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001: 73):

In interactive activities the language user acts alternately as speaker and listener with one or more interlocutors so as to construct conjointly, through the negotiation of meaning following the co-operative principle, conversational discourse.

In order to achieve this, *VoiceForum* adopts the principle of asynchronous oral interaction in a threaded discussion format. For message creation, a built-in audio recorder/player is accompanied by a rich text editor. The user creates a spoken message to initiate a topic or subtopic or to reply to another user. The participants thus talk to each other by recording their utterances, typing a short subject title or label for each message and posting the labelled voice message to a server running the forum software. Using a hierarchical or threaded forum model, *VoiceForum* allows each participant to address the group or particular members of the group, introduce a new theme or continue an existing one.



Fig. 1 Detail from the message list in a threaded discussion voice forum.

The message list displays the interrelationships between the messages in order to help recreate some of the key aspects of a real conversation. The more the threads of the discussion are expanded by replies to messages, the more interactive the speaking activity can be seen to be.

2.2 A special status for student-teacher dialogue

The software's most original feature is the provision of a separate pedagogical space for teacher-student dialogue. The teacher can intervene at a separate sub-message level via a commenting facility in order to offer guidance and feedback (oral and/or written as required) as well as any suggestions for remedial work or further study. This is done by the teacher clicking on a "Comment" link available for each individual student's message. This opens the message creation window allowing the teacher to provide the feedback that will always be associated with the particular message being commented on. A "T" symbol appears next to the student's message in the main message list each time such feedback is posted by the teacher. Any student enrolled on the forum can then initiate further dialogue if desired by replying to this comment, asking the teacher, for example, for more advice or explanation. This pedagogical dialogue can be consulted and developed at will from the link that has been automatically embedded in the relevant message consultation window. It is important to appreciate that the participants' interpersonal interactions are not hindered by the teacher's intervention. The pedagogical dialogues that take place are not listed with the exchanges among the interactants in the forum who thus remain the owners of their discussion. At the communicative level, the recorded speaking activity exists in its own right. Indeed,

without a login, the forum can be consulted as a conversation between participants without any access to or visibility of the pedagogical input or dialogue. Obviously, the teacher's feedback is always available to the teacher and the participant concerned but it can also be hidden from other participants in circumstances like a test where the participants don't necessarily know each other nor wish to have that feedback made public.

In normal visibility mode, a system of icons, displayed after messages in the list of student interactions, not only informs the students of teacher feedback but also the teacher of any access by the student concerned to his/her comment. This tells the teacher that the student has at least consulted the feedback. A reply to the feedback by the student alerts the teacher by generating another specific symbol.

Other functions include two search tools. The first of these is available to all except anonymous users. This tool enables users to search on a given string of characters. The main use of this is to allow access to teacher feedback which can be useful, for example, for revision purposes. It is up to the teacher to place keywords in his/her comments to make efficient use of this search facility. Thus, if a user types in the word "pronunciation", the system will display all the messages in which this word appears either in the subject title or in the body of the message if text has been used for the comment. The second search tool is specifically teacher-oriented. This tool provides teachers with a per-user message listing function to avoid the problem raised by Kol and Scholnik (2008) who, when discussing usability of assessment criteria in a threaded text forum for English for Academic Purposes (EAP), refer to the time lost "because reading a student's contributions often required "jumping" from page to page to find all of that student's messages".

3. The context of *VoiceForum*'s creation and experience of use

3.1 The fluency - accuracy dilemma

We mentioned in the introduction the limited possibilities for performance feedback in the traditional oral production classroom environment. For oral practice, *VoiceForum* achieves what is actually impossible in a face-to-face situation: you cannot interrupt a discussion in real time to provide contextualised feedback to the participants without seriously undermining the communicative freedom necessary for the discussion (Tsutsui, 2004; Fynn 2007). The software was in fact originally developed as a complement to face-to-face group work to address this particular issue. Giving linguistic help at the right time has always been a tricky skill for communicative language teachers to master. In a face-to-face classroom situation where oral group work has been set up, it is customary for the teacher to place more importance on encouraging communication than on correcting mistakes or giving useful linguistic guidance. Accuracy issues may understandably be sacrificed in favour of the encouragement of fluency. The accuracy work tends to be done when the actual communication is over. The dilemma is that the accuracy work loses some of its relevance when the heat is off. *VoiceForum* resolves this fluency - accuracy dilemma by giving the teacher's role a special unobtrusive and unintrusive status. Each participant's message has the potential to include, via one or more clicks, any amount of teacher feedback or interactive teacher-student dialogues. This facility was designed to allow teachers to provide participants with contextualised guidance in a very practical way whilst avoiding the type of intrusive feedback that can inhibit discussion.

3.2 The experience of students and teachers

We have been working with non-literary Modern Foreign Language (MFL) students as well as with non-specialist learners of English at levels of B1 to C2. Our experience of using *VoiceForum* intensively at these levels since 2006 has shown remarkable uptake and motivation among both students and teachers which suggests to us that it addresses a real need. Teachers have underlined the relevance of the software solution while many students have suggested that it actually offers some advantages over classroom interaction. In course-assessment feedback, students cite a more even distribution of the speaking time, less inhibition in speaking directly in front of a group and greater opportunity for linguistic guidance.

4. Future perspectives

From the technical point of view, there are improvements still to be made with the platform administration aspect of the software. The current English and French language versions can easily be extended to other languages. Another current limitation is that students have to be manually enrolled in the platform. This procedure will be simplified. For the other users, an important improvement is

scheduled for the criteria-based search facility which needs to be extended to include other forums. The issue here is that *VoiceForum* automatically creates a repository, not only of student oral interactions but also of teacher feedback and we hope to find ways of exploiting this resource to a greater extent by improved functionality.

From the pedagogical point of view, the possibilities for teacher feedback open a new area for research into effective contextual correction strategies in the light of the needs that can be analysed from an ever-growing oral database of student interactions.

5. References

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