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Technology and the Teaching of Oral Skills

- This article is a personal statement of the ways in which technology has affected the author's teaching of oral communication skills. Both low-tech and high-tech means are presented. She begins with the use of simple household devices as visual and kinesthetic aids, describes how readily audiotape and videotape can be used for receptive and productive skills development, and outlines how comprehensively an interactive language lab can contribute to oral skills development. She explores the benefits of accessing sound files on CD-ROM, in presentation software, and on Web pages. She introduces the telephone and voice mail for oral practice and illustrates the advantages of using voiced email for oral development and assessment. The author concludes with a description of the ways technology has affected her teaching overall. She lists the downsides of using technology and closes with the opportunities that technology has brought her students.

Through my many years of language teaching, I've been exposed to and taken advantage of a wide range of technology in the classroom, both high tech and low tech. I teach at Mission College, Santa Clara, in the heart of Silicon Valley, and I've been fortunate to work in an environment supportive of instruction and experimentation using technology.

My personal teaching style leads me to incorporate technology in all classes I teach—English grammar, writing, reading, vocabulary, listening, speaking, and pronunciation. However, in this paper I will concentrate on ways in which technology has affected my teaching of oral communication skills. I will try to lead the reader up the rungs of a technology ladder, from low tech to high.

Low Tech

I interpret the term *technology* broadly. For example, I continue to advocate the use of low-tech mirrors as one of the best ways for students to see how they articulate sounds with their mouths. Nowadays, though, I've added a somewhat high-tech twist: instead of discarding all of those shiny AOL

“700 hours free!” CD-ROMs that come unsolicited in the mail, I stockpile them to bring to class for the students who don’t have mirrors. Another low-tech device is the wide rubber band, the use of which has been popularized by Judy Gilbert (2001). The bands, when stretched between the hands, are helpful to activate kinesthetic perception of the lengthening of vowels in stressed syllables. I have no high-tech twist for rubber bands—I simply eat a lot of broccoli so that I have a good supply of the strong, blue rubber bands that hold the bunches together. Use of the hands alone can also demonstrate variation in vowel length (Chan, 1987). For a combination of low- and high-tech suggestions for improving student autonomy, see Chan (2002a).

Audiotape

Moving up the technology ladder, I have found the use of audiotape essential. For receptive skills development, the tape player is the easiest way for students to listen to a variety of speakers on a variety of topics in a variety of genres, for instance, dialogs, interviews, lectures, stories, songs, and poems. For productive skills, the audiotape recorder is the most accessible piece of voice-recording equipment. A couple of decades ago, not all of my students had access to tape recorders at home, and sometimes I would have to lend them equipment. Like the prices of other popular electronic devices, those of tape recorders have dropped. Nowadays, practically all students have some kind of tape recorder, and for far less money than they spend to buy a textbook for their business or chemistry classes.

In my ESL speaking and pronunciation classes, students regularly tape-record interviews with native speakers and record their own voices. Audiotape is a convenient means of capturing their voices for evaluation and analysis, clearly an advantage that cannot be realized during the ephemeral act of speech itself. I also record new material for listening, speaking, and pronunciation practice and testing. The positive side for students is that they receive individualized instruction and guidance from someone who is a model speaker, so ideally both the message and the medium are valuable and promote their learning. A drawback of using this technology is that I collect baskets of tapes every week, and I spend a great deal of time listening to them, analyzing students’ spoken English, and recording and writing down my comments and corrections. Of course, I believe the benefits for the students outweigh the inconveniences, so I recommend using audiotape in these ways.

Videotape and Video Camera

Videotape is a step up from audiotape in that it provides both auditory and visual input. Prerecorded tapes provide the audiovisual information that helps students observe, understand, and imitate oral communication, from language expressions and sentence structure to lip shape, facial expressions, gestures, and distance between speakers, as well as other cultural, behavioral, and sociological aspects of language.

Using a video camera to record students' interactions and oral presentations demands more set-up than simply playing a tape. It usually involves reserving the camera, picking it up from an audiovisual department in another building, and returning it after class. But it is worth the extra effort because, if a picture speaks a thousand words, a moving picture speaks a million. Videotape provides learners with a view of themselves that they don't otherwise have, and it gives them a stronger basis for evaluating their performance and setting goals for future learning.

Traditional Language Lab

Another invaluable technology for listening and speaking skills is the language lab. At one time, the audio lab was considered the height of technology, and a fully operating lab can still be intimidating to the teacher just becoming familiar with technology. However, I am a proselytizing proponent of the use of such a system. Why? Because the language lab can contribute to oral skills development better than the regular nontech classroom. For example, in choral repetition drills, students wearing earphones and listening through the system can concentrate on the model (teacher or tape) with far less interference from the voices of classmates. They can concentrate on the sound of their own voices, and they can record both the model and their own voices for later comparison and practice. In contrast, they can't take home our voices from the nontech classroom without a great deal of planning and individual equipment.

Another type of activity in which the language lab can provide some advantages is in pairing and grouping students and assigning them speaking tasks. Group work greatly increases students' speaking and listening practice, but in the language lab, since students may be randomly grouped with others sitting in another part of the lab, they cannot rely on writing or body language; the only way they can communicate is by truly listening and speaking to their partners. The teacher can join, monitor, and help groups of students with the touch of a button on a screen, and can do so faster than physically traveling around the classroom from group to group. Regrouping is done electronically from the teacher's console, so there is no lost time as in the traditional classroom, where students have to pick up their book bags and move physically to a new seat.

For administering listening tests—dictations, comprehension, cloze, and the like—the language lab is also advantageous: when the students are wearing earphones, they are much less affected by interference from ambient noises such as airplanes flying overhead, doors slamming, or people coughing. Speaking tests are also easier in the lab, where a class full of students can simultaneously record oral responses to questions, a description of a picture, or solutions to a problem—whatever kind of prompt is suitable for the proficiency level of the students and the specific skills I am trying to test. Afterward, I listen to their tapes and evaluate their spoken language individually.

Clearly, being able to use these functions of the language lab is a step up the technology ladder that requires more investment of time and energy on the teacher's part than simply bringing a tape player to class or not using any technology at all. In my experience, however, this investment has great rewards in students' gains in accuracy and fluency.

Voice Mail

You have probably noticed that all of the activities described above take a great deal of teacher preparation. Newer technologies might be thought of as a lateral step on the ladder of complexity because they are not so time-consuming for teachers to master. In fact, even as the technologies are becoming more sophisticated, they are getting easier to use. Students need only a telephone to reach an answering machine or voice-mail system. Listening to instructions on a voice-mail system and leaving messages are skills that help students in "real life." Students can quickly learn to record a message, review it, delete and record it again, and finally save it, send it, and exit the system. The benefit to students is that they get listening and speaking practice and life-skills practice at the same time. The convenience for me as the teacher is that the length of the message is limited to 2 minutes. I can access my voice-mail box from any location on or off campus, there are no tapes to carry around, and I don't record an oral response. I listen to each message and jot down notes and a score on paper. Compared to audiotape journals, voice-mail assignments are much less labor-intensive for the teacher. The corollary is that the students get less corrective feedback, but they have performed speaking practice and learned a useful new skill. (For a sample assignment, see Chan, 2002d.)

Software and Web Lessons

There are other exciting changes in the digital realm, changes that do not require additional steps up the technology ladder. Students and teachers can play sound files on CD-ROMs and Web pages. The repetition of sounds, words, and sentences has never before been accomplished as easily. With a click of a button, the student can hear the target language again and again, and the "speaker" never gets tired of saying the same thing in the same way. Another advantage is that digital retrieval is easier than analog retrieval: rewinding the tape and trying to get to the phrase you want to replay is a lot less efficient than pushing a button or double-clicking with the mouse. I've created many sound files and embedded them into PowerPoint presentations and/or placed them on Web pages (for demonstrations of lesson types, see Chan, 2002b). Students can play them and practice with them on computers in the learning center or at home with Internet access. Virtually all computers now come with the built-in capability to play (and record) sound files, and increasingly, with CD burners, which allow hundreds of files to be saved and readily transported from computer to computer.

Voiced Email

For the past several years, I've been using PureVoice, a free Internet player-recorder, to create voiced messages that can be sent via the Internet. Instead of typing a text, students record their voices using a computer's microphone; the resulting sound file can be attached to any email. Both the sender and the recipient must have the software to send and receive messages. The audio files created by PureVoice are ultracompressed, but they sound as clear as local telephone calls. (For sample lesson plans and instructions in using PureVoice, see Chan, 2002c).

An application such as PureVoice is the digital replacement for the audiotape and improves on it in several ways, but the technology represents only a tiny step up in complexity. The students and I transfer sound file attachments via email, instead of tapes. It has the advantages of click to play, click to record, and click to stop. I can insert my comments and corrections into the students' recording exactly where correction is needed, whereas with audiotape, I have to record over the student's voice or at the end of the tape. In my private business, I teach students in distant locations using a medley of technologies: audiotape and videotape, Web pages with text and sound, telephone for individual coaching, and email with PureVoice sound files. For my students at Mission College, the PureVoice technology allowed me to retain at least two students who otherwise would have dropped my pronunciation class. One had severe health problems that prevented her from coming to class and from turning in and getting back assignments on time. Another got married, went back to her home country for the wedding celebrations, and was absent for the last month of class. I was able to keep both of these students involved and participating by using voice messages via email. I even created the final exam, which I normally administer in the language lab, as a Web-based text that could be accessed overseas, and then had the student send her voice recording back from thousands of miles away.

Conclusion

I am always on the lookout for technology that can enhance my teaching even though it requires a commitment of time and psychic energy to learn new things. In some cases, the learning curve is steep. Furthermore, technology changes often. Just when I become brave enough to try one new thing, and even learn to use it, another generation or product is released and I have to relearn! Also, during class, when the electrical equipment malfunctions, when the software has a glitch, or when the computer crashes, a loss of valuable instructional time occurs. In these cases, the technology detracts from the learning goals. Without a nontech backup plan, dependence on electronic technology can create stress and frustration.

However, technology has provided richer resources, greater access to resources, greater interactivity, and greater opportunities for students to manipulate and use language. I think adding the sound of my voice to text, especially when students can listen to it outside of my physical presence in

class, gives a personal touch to the learning experience. Having students use technology also contributes to their overall technical literacy, which has obvious benefits in today's workplace.

Although there are some occasions when a return to the simplicity of pencils, books, chalkboards, and mirrors is attractive, that feeling is fleeting. I accept the challenges of turning technology into rewards for students.

Author

Marsha Chan teaches English as a Second Language at Mission College in Santa Clara. She promotes learner-centered activities using current technology, including presentation and interactive multimedia software, Web pages, and online communication. She has authored books, articles, and multimedia focusing on pronunciation, listening, and speaking. She presents frequently at professional conferences.

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