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16 The e-learning tool Voxopop and its benefits on oral skills: Activities for final year students of German

Sascha Stollhans¹

Abstract

This case study demonstrates how **Voxopop**, a voice based e-learning tool, can be used to practise oral skills in the target language by presenting activities which have been developed for students of German at the University of Nottingham. The focus lies on an ongoing innovative project designed to improve final year students' oral skills by having them interact with each other on **Voxopop**, specifically in the context of debriefing them on their year abroad experience. Like many Internet forums, **Voxopop** is a platform to exchange ideas and engage in discussions. However, this is done in oral instead of written form and is therefore an opportunity to practise oral performances in the target language. The key advantage of **Voxopop** lies in the fact that it is self-explanatory, user-friendly and accessible online so students can use it anywhere, with minimal equipment (e.g. their laptop or smartphone). It creates an environment where students do not feel under pressure as they can practise, listen back and re-record themselves before uploading their contributions. This also gives students the opportunity to reflect on their own output and find out about their strengths and weaknesses when producing the target language orally.

Keywords: oral skills, collaborative dialogue, year abroad, autonomous learning, self-reflection, e-learning, online discussion.

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1. Context/rationale

“One learns to speak by speaking” (Swain, 1985, p. 248). This statement by second language acquisition researcher Merrill Swain might be controversial, it is, however, arguable that producing the target language is an essential part of the language learning process. Swain (1985) further explains that “producing the target language may be the trigger that forces the learner to pay attention to the means of expression needed in order to successfully convey his or her own intended meaning” (p. 249). This idea forms the basis of the *Comprehensible Output Hypothesis*, one of the main theories of language acquisition.

There is much debate in second language acquisition research about how one best acquires languages, and also about how fluency and accuracy in the target language should be evaluated in the context of real-world language use. Language teachers will find that oral skills in the target language are highly important to their students. Many students ask for more opportunities to improve their oral performance in terms of grammatical accuracy, pronunciation and fluency. Often they feel that after their year abroad they have become much more fluent, but they still find themselves making the same mistakes repeatedly, sometimes without even noticing them.

Whereas more and more educationalists see the benefits of technology enhanced language learning, and computer assisted teaching and learning is not foreign to language classrooms in the UK anymore, technology is hardly ever used to actively focus on productive skills. “Foreign language (FL) teachers have always been ahead of the curve in integrating technology in FL instruction and learning, seeing the benefits of technology” (LeLoup & Ponterio, 2003, para 1), but according to Sharma (2009), “the influence of technology on the productive skills of speaking and writing is, arguably, less. If you wish to improve fluency, many students would argue that nothing is better than a face-to-face language lesson, a discussion class with the teacher” (para 10).

This case study presents an innovative project which tries to fill this gap by providing opportunities for students to work independently on their oral

skills and to reflect on and evaluate their own output in the target language. It uses **Voxopop**, a voice based e-learning tool which facilitates recording online discussions. **Voxopop** is similar to other common internet forums, it is a platform to exchange ideas and engage in discussions. However, this is done in oral instead of in written form, and is hence an opportunity to practise oral performances in the target language. The key advantage of **Voxopop** lies in the fact that it is self-explanatory, user-friendly and accessible online so students can use it anywhere they go, e.g. at home, and with minimal equipment (e.g. their laptop or smartphone). Recordings can be private or restricted and in this safe environment students are not under pressure as they can practise, listen back and re-record themselves before uploading their contributions.

The project described and evaluated in this case study is an ongoing project at the University of Nottingham which allows final year students of German to record themselves speaking about an aspect of their year abroad and to discuss it in a **Voxopop** talkgroup. This involves listening to other students' contributions online, understanding them and replying to them with another recording.

2. Aims and objectives

The major aim of the project was to give students the opportunity to work on their oral language skills independently and autonomously whilst reflecting on their year abroad experience. Students were asked to record an anecdote from their year abroad, listen to their peers' recordings and comment on them. I anticipated that having to record themselves and being able to redo their recording would encourage students to prepare their oral contributions thoroughly and thus raise their language awareness in terms of accuracy, word choice and pronunciation. This is related to Merrill Swain's ideas about 'collaborative dialogue' and 'metatalk', i.e. opportunities for students to reflect on their own output in the target language collaboratively and maybe even discuss it on a metalinguistic level, which is considered to be highly beneficial to the language learning process (cf. **Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002**).

I also hoped that students would find it useful to share their impressions from their year abroad as well as learn from their fellow students' experiences. Against the background of task-based language learning I tried to create a relatable task, with a real context, to make students feel that what they were going to do had an authentic purpose other than, or in addition to language learning. In general, students both recognise and appreciate the opportunity to use their language skills in a real-life context, rather than a forced, non-contextual scenario.

3. What I did

The project aimed at a cohort of 48 final year students of German within the context of their core language module in the autumn semester of 2013-14. After an introduction to the tool and a practice run which was meant to enable students to familiarise themselves with the tool, they received the following instruction:

Report on something entertaining/interesting/exciting/sad/... you experienced on your year abroad in a German speaking country (approx. 3 minutes). Record at least five comments or questions as a response to your peers' contributions.

The project revolved around the year abroad because for many students this year marks a professional, linguistic and personal high point of their degree, which they wish and need to discuss and evaluate.

In preparation for the activity, the first thing I had to do was to create a **Voxopop** talkgroup and invite all students to join by email. I also created a **video tutorial** with *screencast-o-matic* in which I explained and demonstrated all required steps, from signing up to uploading a contribution and commenting on another contribution. In doing so, I tried to avoid confusion and make it easier for students to focus on the actual task. The talkgroup used for this project was a private talkgroup, i.e. students' recordings were private and only open to their fellow students, who were also invited members.

In the talkgroup, I created a discussion zone for each seminar group as well as two additional discussion zones, one for students to test the various features of the tool and one for them to ask questions and discuss any problems they might find. Each student started a new discussion for their main contribution within their respective discussion zone.

During our mid-term ‘Project Week’, the students worked on the task. They uploaded a recording of their story, listened to their classmates’ stories and commented on them. This resulted in very creative contributions and engaging discussions in the target language. Students shared interesting experiences which were sometimes funny and sometimes sad. Many stories reported on intercultural misunderstandings, new discoveries or unexpected reactions from people the students had met on their year abroad.

4. Discussion

I asked students to fill out a short survey to express their opinion on the project and their perception of its contribution to their language learning success. The majority of students described **Voxopop** as a “fun tool” and 85% stated that they had enjoyed using it. There were a few comments outlining that it was slightly awkward having to listen to one’s own voice and that this was something which students needed to get used to when working with **Voxopop** for the first time.

All students who took the survey had recorded their contribution more than once, 46% had recorded it twice, and 54% three times or more. This shows that students had taken the opportunity to listen back and re-record themselves, possibly after becoming aware of any grammatical inaccuracies or pronunciation weaknesses. All students *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that “listening back to my recording made me hear/become aware of my own mistakes” and “listening back to my recording made me hear/become aware of my own pronunciation weaknesses”, and 84% felt that the activity encouraged them to reflect on various linguistic aspects (e.g. grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) within

the context of oral target language use. This proves the usefulness of such an activity to raise students' language awareness, which is also reflected in the following two instances of collaborative dialogue and metatalk (cf. Swain et al., 2002) from the Voxopop talkgroup:

- (1) "That's a great story but what does the expression X mean? - It means something like Y."
- (2) "It's cool that you picked up an Austrian accent as well. Have you learned any dialect words? Let's speak Austrian!"

These two extracts from discussions students led on Voxopop focus on the linguistic output itself. The student who commented on the original contribution had picked up on certain aspects of the other student's language and now enquired about them. Working with the tool seems to have encouraged some students to pay close attention to certain linguistic aspects, which is also demonstrated quite clearly by the following two open comments made by students in the survey:

"Listening back to our own recordings makes you realise your own strengths and weaknesses in pronunciation and intonation etc. – we always hear ourselves speak, but never hear how we actually sound to other people, so I found that listening back to recordings was really useful, especially since our oral exams are recorded!"

"In an ordinary conversation I do not analyse in depth every sentence I speak as long as I am capable of getting my point across. While using Voxopop, on the other hand, I had to re-listen to what I said and thus focus on assessing my linguistic strengths or weaknesses. Consequently, it was a great tool which allowed me to improve some of my linguistic mistakes. I wish we had used it more."

In other comments students mentioned that the activity helped them to practise their spoken German and in particular accommodate students who don't feel

very comfortable speaking up in class. 92% of the students who took part in the survey agreed that this specific activity was contextually beneficial and that tools such as **Voxopop** can help them build their speaking confidence.

Some students also commented that they found it useful to listen to contributions from other students as it helped them learn new expressions in context.

The only negative aspect some students mentioned were technical problems they had encountered to begin with. In order to be able to use **Voxopop** adequately, the latest updates of Flash and Java must be installed. However, those problems could be resolved very quickly, and the **Voxopop** website contains a very useful section on how to deal with technical difficulties.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the project was very successful. Most students enjoyed working with **Voxopop** as it boosted their confidence and encouraged them to pay close attention to their own linguistic output when producing the target language orally. It also provided a very valuable self-study opportunity, a way to work on a project collaboratively and, not least, a fun supplement to the regular language classes.

There are plans to expand the project in the future and to integrate **Voxopop** on a more regular basis into language teaching at all levels, for instance by making it a joint second and final year project related to the year abroad. In this way, second year students who are still to leave for their year abroad could benefit from their fellow students' experience; and fruitful collaboration between students from different stages could be created.

At the moment, we are using **Voxopop** as a platform to facilitate the linguistic and cultural exchange between some of our second year students and our current Erasmus students from Germany and Austria. I am also looking into other e-learning tools which could be beneficial for oral skills in the target language.

This may be of particular interest to students on the *ab initio* strand who will be integrated with the post A-Level cohort at some point during their degree. That group of students is usually less confident about producing the target language orally and thus may benefit very much from opportunities to work on those skills independently.

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