

Using Sound Recorders as a Pedagogical Tool for Language Development

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Introduction

Whereas journal writing is universally used in reading and writing classes to provide learners with opportunities to communicate meaningfully in written language, “oral journals,” the practice of recording students’ oral language to develop their spoken language suggested by Mir (2006), is less popular among language teachers. If students only practice speaking the target language in class, chances are it may take a long time for them to become fluent in the language (particularly in EFL contexts). Extensive practice outside of class is needed for students to get used to speaking the target language. Moreover, the ephemeral and instantaneous nature of oral language complicates the process of correcting student oral mistakes. If their language is recorded, it can be heard multiple times by the teacher, other students, and the students themselves so weaknesses can be identified and improved. This paper discusses ways in which a voice recorder may be used for fostering learner autonomy, confidence, pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy. Devices and programs for voice recording are also briefly discussed.

Recording to Improve Autonomy

Learner autonomy is defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3) or “the capacity to control one’s own learning” (Benson, 2003, p. 305). The best example of an autonomous learner is a person who learns on their own and monitors his or her learning. An effective teacher is one who is able to inspire their students to discover the joy of learning on their own. Schooling years are limited, but things students have to learn are unlimited. Students, therefore, have to be assisted in learning to self-learn, self-evaluate, and self-motivate. Reversing the teacher as the sole authority and a constant source of help is a way to limit self-discovery and self-learning. Teachers work hard and sometimes are inclined

to do too much for their learners in the hope that learners will benefit from what they do for them. The naked reality is, regardless of how hard the teacher works, without learners' conspicuous effort, no sizable learning is likely to take place. Writing teachers help learners to write by asking them to do the writing, give them some feedback to improve frequent and noticeable errors and then ask them to write again and again.

The same approach may be used for oral communication development. In oral communication classes, there is usually only one teacher and a group of students. If students expect to improve their speaking skills from classroom instruction only, it may take them an extended period of time to make any noticeable progress. Ideally, students are expected to go out and interact with others in the target language. However, in most contexts where students learn the target language as a foreign language, opportunity to interact in the target language may not be always readily available.

The teacher can enable students to take charge of the task to improve their speaking by asking them to complete assignments such as recording their own speech, listening to it again to improve it many times prior to presenting it to other students and the teacher for feedback and evaluation. Students do not usually have concrete evidence of their learning and progress, so the use of recordings can give them a way to see their progress over time. The teacher need not listen to all recordings, but it is important that they make their students do so to encourage self-learning and evaluation. Simply put, showing students how to improve their speaking, language accuracy, and fluency on their own using recording devices and software (with some monitoring and evaluation from the teacher) is one way to foster learner autonomy, which may serve them a lifetime.

Benson (2003) offered five principles for encouraging learner autonomy: playing an active role in students' learning process, giving students an array of learning resources and choices, giving students opportunities for making their own decisions, providing support to students, and encouraging students to be reflective learners. The principles Benson suggested can be put into practice by showing students how to utilize recording devices and software to enhance their oral language development. Teachers can give students a wide array of learning resources and choices by allowing them to choose topics they are personally interested in and using the devices (e.g., cellphones, audio recorders) or software programs (free

online software for audio and video recording) they are comfortable with to complete the assignments. During the process of completing the recording, students can also decide how many times they would like to record depending on how motivated and committed they are in fulfilling the requirement of the assignments.

By asking students to listen to what they have recorded and evaluate their own speaking, teachers take students a step closer to self-reflection by using themselves as a source for oral language development. Students can see what their areas of weaknesses are and what they need to do to improve such weaknesses.

Throughout the process of helping students to successfully complete the recording assignments, teachers can play an active role in students' learning via clear and detailed instructions on how to complete the task, giving students possible topics and materials for the task, and offering students easy-to-use rubrics for self or peer evaluation. Finally, the teacher can give students support by giving encouraging and motivating feedback to students so they can be ready to take on more responsibility for and control of their future learning endeavors.

Recording to Boost Confidence

In an attempt to clarify the concept of confidence in second language learning, Yates and Chisari (2013, p. 1) noted: "For the ESL learner, confidence is defined as a form of self-reliance and is often linked to self-esteem and motivation." When students feel confident, they think they are good at doing something. In order for students to be good at a skill, they need to undertake a tremendous amount of practice. In fact, it has been claimed that in order to perform a skill at an expert level, it takes approximately ten years of deliberate practice with optimal efforts (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). To be able to use the target language with great confidence, students may have to complete an extended period of using it.

Adult second language learners are generally highly proficient in their native language and cognitively mature. their primary concern is typically their ability to effectively use the target language to convey ideas. Recording allows learners to focus better on their language issues, and prepare for class work in advance by recording it, listening to it, and identifying areas that need further improvement. With mutual consent, students can also record practice conversations with their classmates to listen and find areas of weaknesses.

One way to improve confidence using recording is to write out the planned speech and rehearse it multiple times prior to delivering the speech. The teacher can require students to prepare a written speech in advance, record the first and fifth presentations of the speech, and listen to the first and the fifth presentations in the end to see the progress they have made after deliberate practice. The progress the students see and hear can foster their confidence in speaking another language.

Recording to Perfect Pronunciation

In a book about teaching pronunciation, Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, and Giner (2010) reviewed the literature on teaching pronunciation and provided a list of ten approaches to pronunciation instruction. One of the approaches is having students record their language production such as “rehearsed and spontaneous speeches, free conversations, and role plays” (p. 10) so that evaluation from the teacher, other students, and the student who does the recording can be conducted. The advantage of recorded speech is that it allows for an indefinite number of replays and can provide the teacher with negative evidence from students’ interlanguage.

In natural contexts, when the teacher provides feedback, the student’s speaking has completed and the student may not remember exactly what he or she has said. Sometimes, it is not possible for the teacher to repeat verbatim the erroneous version of students’ utterances. The recording saves the teacher from having to repeat what the student has mispronounced to show him or her that such pronunciation is not correct or problematic. The teacher can also indicate the words, the specific minute and second or time range in the recording to enable students to self-correct on their own.

One way to help students to improve pronunciation is to tell them to record the speech again to improve the problematic pronunciation prior to assigning a grade for the assignment. A better grade for the assignment may be one way to motivate students to pay attention to themselves and the recording. Alternatively, students may be asked to exchange recordings they make and listen to one another’s recording to provide feedback. Students may be given a simple rubric to use when carrying out peer-evaluation. Students can tell the person who did the recording the words and phrases they failed to understand to get clarification and find out the correct pronunciation together using an online dictionary or by seeking assistance from the teacher. Importantly, the recording allows the student an

opportunity to listen to what they have produced and self-evaluate their speech using a rubric developed by the teacher.

Another way to help students improve their pronunciation is to give them a conversation, a paragraph or a short text and ask them to record their reading of the materials. In a lesson focusing on word stress, for example, students may be asked to underline the words in the text that should be stressed, record their reading the passage, and have the recording evaluated by their peers and teacher. Teachers can also create a list of questions about a reading passage in a textbook or a newspaper article and have pairs of students work together to find out the answer from the text. Students will then use the questions and answers to create an interview. They may be required to practice in class or at home with their partners. Students may be required to send their recorded interviews to the teacher for a grade. Students can practice as many times as needed until they are happy with their production.

Recording to Increase Fluency

Nation (2001; 2014) described a 4/3/2 activity to help learners develop fluency in speaking. Students prepare a four minute talk and tell one student in four minutes, then another in three minutes, and a third student in two minutes. A similar activity can be required of students to complete at home on their own. Students may be asked to record themselves telling a story or retelling a piece of news read from a newspaper in 4, 3, and 2 two minutes with the same amount of information. The idea is for students to repeat what they have said again faster to gain fluency. Nation (2014) emphasized that students need to repeat the same materials again and again to improve speaking fluency. In fact, part of language learning is a matter of repetition. Students rarely learn a new word or grammar structure and know how to use it immediately. They usually have to learn it on multiple occasions. Particularly for speaking, although students may know how to say things in the target language, they may not be able to say them fluently.

One way to foster speaking fluency is practice speaking under time constraint. Being pushed to speak faster pushes students to speak more fluently, and familiarity with the content of what they say makes it easier for them to practice and reach the goal of communicating the same amount of information within a shorter period of time. Recording their speech enables students to keep track of the time when

they complete the activity. Students may also see that with ample practice they can communicate with better fluency.

Recording to Elevate Accuracy

In a recent publication, Dormer (2013) suggested that English language learners can improve their language accuracy through six stages of awareness, one of which is awareness of personal language use. Students have to know first what is wrong with their own language production regarding accuracy prior to being able to improving such inaccuracies. One simple way to help students improve their oral language accuracy is by having them record their presentation, listen to it, transcribe their own presentation, and read it to identify problematic language use. Students can then be asked to correct their own mistakes and record the presentation again to eliminate the mistakes made in the previous recording.

Another way to help students see their mistakes and improve their accuracy is providing students with erroneous segments from their speech (e.g., from and to a certain minute and second) and having them record the presentation again using the revised structures in their presentation. One of the learning outcomes in my oral presentation class is being able to use complete sentences. In addition to asking students to complete recordings as a practice step for homework assignments, I recorded students' presentations in class, sent the files to each student, and asked them to record the presentation again using complete sentences instead of the incomplete sentences and fragments noted during the presentations. The notes taken during the presentations were given to students to help them easily locate the places where more accurate language use was needed.

Devices and Programs for Voice Recording

Most cellphones these days have a recording function allowing users to record sounds and send them electronically. Professional digital voice recorders are another option. They are reliable and have very good sound quality. Modern professional voice recorders allow users to easily transfer data to external sources such as computers. Cellphones and professional voice recorders are portable and convenient for use in and out of classroom. For computer users, Sound Recorder for Windows or Audio Recorder for the Mac are relatively simple to use. Users can record, save, and send the files without much training.

There are various types of software programs available for quality voice recording. Below are several I have used and found useful:

- <http://www.audacityteam.org/> - a free software that allows recording and editing
- <http://vocaroo.com/> - allows users to record and save the file online. This website is very user-friendly.
- <https://online-voice-recorder.com/> - after recording, users are prompted to save the file to their computers.

Conclusion

Part of what makes a teacher effective is giving students the right kind of resources and direction to make learners take control of their learning so they can become autonomous in their own academic pursuits. Teachers may see the saying that one can take a horse to water but one cannot make it drink sometimes relevant for their teaching situations. Teachers may provide all learning opportunities for their students to learn, but ultimately it is the students who have to do the learning for themselves if they wish to improve their own knowledge and skills. Technology innovations have offered teachers and students with infinite ways to be creatively adapted for their own teaching and learning contexts. As discussed earlier, sound recording functions available in most electronic devices may be a pedagogical tool for students to enhance learning autonomy, confidence, pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy. Learning possibilities are endless if learners are shown how to make use of the recording devices and software available to them.

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