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Technical Evaluation Report

28. Speak2Me: Using Synchronous Audio for ESL Teaching in Taiwan

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Abstract

The use of a synchronous audio tool is discussed for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in Taiwan. Over several months, a community of practice has formed among teachers and teaching assistants, transcending cultural differences. Exploring the relationship that has developed between teachers and teaching assistants forms the basis of this report. We will also consider the technology underlying Speak2Me's program and its relationship to providing students with quality pedagogy and learning flexibility.

Online Content: Articles and cultural perceptions

The biggest challenge facing English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Taiwan is their lack of opportunity to practice speaking English. To meet this need, Ladder Publishing Co., Ltd. of Taipei, began an innovative Web-based ESL program in February, 2003, called *Speak2Me*. The cost of designing, developing, and implementing the project was less than US \$50,000, making it an affordable distance learning alternative for developing nations. Using an *iTalk* synchronous platform, American teachers, assisted by bilingual Taiwanese teaching assistants, using voice and chat, teach conversational English based on a brief article on a topic of current interest.

The report proposes that synchronous learning environments provide a richer context than asynchronous environments for online intercultural communities of practice, to develop into engaging and empathetic virtual communities. The use of synchronous voice in teaching ESL has enabled further investigation of cultural practices and norms in Taiwan that could not have been possible in a static, asynchronous environment. Central to the *Speak2Me* program are the articles,

taken from *Speak2Me*'s print magazine and placed online in the *iTalk* window. Teaching assistants and, if present, students, read the articles aloud, paragraph by paragraph. Discussions around each of these current topics have enabled us to understand Taiwanese culture in more depth and to form closer bonds with the teaching assistants.

For example, the article 'Talk Dirty to Me' discussed the issue of online pornography, including vocabulary words such as 'skin flick.' While we, as older female Euro-Americans, were quite taken aback at the article, the younger female Taiwanese teaching assistants had no qualms about teaching it. Their response to teaching what we considered a very controversial article, suggests that our perceptions regarding sex and sexuality are quite different. Another article, 'Play On!' talked about the possible link between violent video games and violent behavior. Again, in our conversations with both male and female teaching assistants, we found that our liberal American views linking video games and violence were quite different from theirs. The teaching assistants to whom we spoke at length, felt there was no connection between playing violent video games and actually committing a violent crime. Other articles on business and culture, for example, have provided additional opportunities for discussion and debate, enabling us to identify and learn more about cultural differences, leading to scaffolding of knowledge.

Social Interaction

Such social interaction has always been a defining characteristic of education, training, and more generally of learning. In fact, several learning theories rely, in part, on social interaction to explain how learning occurs (Beatty, 2002). Socio-cultural theory, for one, focuses on the causal relationship between social interaction with others and an individual's cognitive development. Vygotsky (1978) wrote that the individual grows into the intellectual life of those around him or her, as more knowledgeable persons act as facilitators, leading the learner beyond where he or she can function without help. Until the learner internalizes society's tool kit of ideas, concepts, and theories, the learner must 'borrow' the knowledge and consciousness of the facilitator to enter a language (Bruner, 1986), discipline, community of practice, or culture.

Acting as facilitators and bridging that gap for the American teachers are the teaching assistants. As the teacher/ teaching assistant community has evolved, the role of the teaching assistants has evolved as well, from an almost silent partner acting only when called upon (e.g., providing translations when necessary), into taking on the active role of co-teacher. This team-teaching relationship facilitates teaching assistants' role in the virtual classroom, which often provides a richer cultural environment, better student interaction, and a more dynamic learning experience for all involved.

Another form of interaction has been through role-playing. When students are absent from the classroom, teaching assistants may role play as students. This enables us to practice our synchronous teaching skills, while at the same time trying out different teaching methods targeted at differing levels of language ability. Often these sessions are quite fun, bringing out everyone's personalities as both sides try to act out their roles.

As the *Speak2Me* online community has matured, the 'electronic personality' (Palloff and Pratt, 1999) of each teacher and teaching assistant has also emerged. Pratt's work has shown that for an electronic personality to exist certain elements must manifest, including the ability to deal with emotional issues in textual form and the ability to create a sense of presence online through the personalization of communication. Both these elements are present in daily interactions between

teachers and teaching assistants, who often must cross cultural barriers to understanding between themselves and *Speak2Me*'s students. In the months since *Speak2Me* was launched, close bonds have been formed with only voice and text chat to create a sense of social presence.

Synchronous Intimacy and Immediacy

Mayer (1999) asserts: "students are better able to integrate verbal and visual representations when they receive both verbal and visual materials rather than when they receive only verbal [or text] material." In addition, Jelfs and Whitelock (2000) stress that: "sound gives feedback to the user and offers greater levels of reality." The synchronous voice capability of *Speak2Me*'s platform has enabled teachers and teaching assistants to share personal experiences more intimately and immediately than through asynchronous discussions or plain text chat. We believe that the relationships that have grown out of these conversations have developed more rapidly and more deeply, and have been sustained longer, because of the voice capability. For example, one teaching assistant has shared her family's wedding with us; another supplied the recipe for mango ice cream, while another shared her thoughts of loneliness upon moving to a new home. Yet another teaching assistant told us his feelings about entering a mandatory stint in the military. These emotional attachments were felt even more deeply upon hearing of the loss of one of *Speak2Me*'s staff members. Though we never met him face to face, we felt a profound sadness for both him and his family.

Understanding the electronic personalities that have emerged through the *Speak2Me* classroom and technology suggests the sense of the alternativeness of human possibility (Bruner, 1986). Yet intimacy and immediacy are not a one-way street. As teachers, we share our personal stories as well. As a group, we have shared views on spirituality, comparing Western and Eastern beliefs; talked about New Mexico history and heritage; and even delved into marriage and relationships, offering up experiences and advice when asked.

One teacher had established a personality talking with the teaching assistants about the "little stuff of everyday life" – the daily chitchat. The teaching assistants and teacher talk about day jobs, daily meals, fruits available in Taiwan, vacations and holiday plans, pets' names and personalities, videogames, new recording artists, and family members. Another teacher has established an "intercultural food swap" with the Taiwanese teaching assistants. The teacher mails foods traditional to the New Mexican culture and diet to Taipei, and in return receives menus and examples of traditional Taiwanese cooking. For the most part, all the teachers and teaching assistants have exchanged some form of intimate communication about themselves, which has enhanced the social presences of all participants. This exchange of information has also taken the form of individual and family photos, pet photos, and websites to give each other more information about personal topics. As a result of the exchange of personal information, there is a higher level of familiarity, which leads to a greater degree of intimacy for all involved (Tu, 2001).

Social Presence and Emoticons

Two key factors in social presence are intimacy and immediacy, both of which are influenced by interactivity, collaboration, and reflectivity. Research by Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) has shown that participants who felt a higher sense of social presence within a conference enhanced their socio-cultural or socio-emotional experience by using emoticons to express non-verbal cues in written form. Teaching assistants and teachers occasionally include emoticons in their text

messages to each other in the S2M classroom and in the email messages they exchange. During our many voice-chat sessions with teaching assistants, we have encountered a number of unusual and expressive emoticons (e.g. “@@” and “^_^”). The emoticons serve to “warm” and personalize the discussions or messages by greeting each other, showing agreement, clarifying the intent of a message, and suggesting a solution while leaving the discussion open (Fahy, 2003) and generally adding charm to a message. Both the teaching assistants and teachers use emoticons to accomplish similar purposes; however, frequency of use and the shapes of the emoticons vary.

At first, the U.S. teachers infrequently used U.S. emoticons, which are most often built with keyboard characters, producing an image of a sideways face, requiring the reader to tilt his or her head to read the U.S. emoticons. U.S. emoticons seem to emphasize the role of the mouth when conveying the emotional context of a message. Common U.S. emoticons include:

:-)	Happy person	8-O	Shocked
:(Sad person	:-\	Undecided
;))	Winking person		

The Asian emoticons are read horizontally without tilting one’s head. The teaching assistants use emoticons more frequently than U.S. teachers do in their text messages. The Taiwan emoticons emphasize the shape and role of the eyes in portraying an emotion (Sugimoto and Levin, 2000). Frequently used Asian emoticons include:

^_^ or (^ ^)	Happy person	(@_@) or (@@)	Giddy, dizzy, shocked person
(I__I)	Crying person		
> < or >.<	Sad or angry	(^_^;) or ^.^"	Cold sweat; writer is afraid he or she is saying something too strongly
^__*	Winking person		

The use of emoticons has enabled the community to express feelings in textual form. As we have become increasingly friendly with the teaching assistants, we have begun to use emoticons, including the Asian emoticons listed above. We have also begun to create new emoticons. For example, during a discussion about the approaching Thanksgiving holiday and pumpkin pie, one of us typed this emoticon: **__**. It was decided, this emoticon would refer to eating too much pumpkin pie. Likewise, over time the teaching assistants have increased the frequency of their use of emoticons in messages to us. This increased use of emoticons suggests the development of electronic personalities and an increase in social presence.

Speak2me’S Website: Intersection of Technology and Culture

Supporting these online interactions, the community, and the ESL classes is the *Speak2Me* website itself. The basic site (<http://www.speak2me.net>) focuses on text and audio combined with the use of graphics and a chat box. A high-speed modem connection (e.g., cable, DSL) is a necessity for voices to be heard clearly and reliably, without breaking up during transmission.

This aspect of technology might be a barrier to access for some developing nations, particularly those with large rural populations. However, with the rapid deployment of cellular technologies and the advent of satellite Internet, implementing higher bandwidth applications in rural areas will become increasingly possible.

The synchronous voice technology and the additional equipment required can add technological problems to the classroom. Therefore, the teacher and a bilingual teaching assistant provide learner support during the class period. Although the teacher facilitates each individual lesson plan, the majority of the classroom interaction is based on learner participation and control of the multimedia environment, with primary importance based on functionality of the interface within the overall multimedia design. In this manner, the synchronous *Speak2Me* learning environment enables the students, teachers and teaching assistants to learn from each other, scaffolding on previous experiences and knowledge to construct new meaning, not only between the different cultures but with regard to the different languages, as well.

Many technical improvements have been made to the virtual classroom since the inception of the *Speak2Me* program. While some of the changes have focused on basic modifications to the multimedia interface (e.g., color of the background, text size, addition of digital clocks), other revisions have focused on cultural differences and improved communication strategies. Several adjustments made to the classroom to improve communication are the result of teacher/teaching assistant suggestions. For instance, the chat-box was altered to allow for direct text communication between teacher and teaching assistant and/ or the teaching assistant and a student. This chat-box modification allowed for bilingual interpretation for students of technical assistance and clarification of directions when necessary. The direct line chat-box also allows the teacher and the teaching assistant private communication where they can discuss and adjust the lesson plan to match students' level of English fluency.

Many more modifications clearly reflect the Taiwanese culture. As noted by Deubel (2003), the "user interface plays a central role in learning [when] using multimedia." Indeed, the technology selected by Ladder to facilitate interaction and learning must provide quality pedagogy which (1) allows flexibility of learning; (2) supports diverse learning styles and degrees of learner control; (3) is responsive to learner and teacher support; and (4) affords novelty. Therefore, it follows that the user interface reflects the culture of the students it serves. Some of the cultural modifications include headings and labels in Chinese instead of English and the design of the HELP! icon. Unlike American help icons, which are often friendly and playful animations (i.e., the Microsoft Paperclip), the HELP! icon for *Speak2Me* is a small green figure with a large head, a distressed look, and waving arms. When students click on the icon, a Chinese question and answer troubleshooting guide is provided.

Conclusion

The *Speak2Me* ESL model supports previous assertions that students integrate verbal and visual representations better using verbal and visual materials than when they receive verbal [or text] material only. We conclude that the audio and visual technology driving the *Speak2Me* synchronous method of teaching ESL bridges cultural differences and establishes tightly knit communities of practice more rapidly than other, asynchronous methods of distance education. Moreover, the *iTalk* platform is an inexpensive distance education alternative for use by developing nations that seek to improve upon current educational practices, and to put into practice collaborative learning environments able to reach geographically distant populations.

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The next report in the series reviews a series of integrated learning management systems.

N.B. Owing to the speed with which Web addresses are changed, the online references cited in this report may be outdated. They can be checked at the Athabasca University software evaluation site: cde.athabascau.ca/softeval/. Italicised product names in this report can be assumed to be registered trademarks.

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