

# RAISING OUR STUDENTS' CONFIDENCE IN THEIR SPEAKING WITH WEB 2.0 SPEAKING TOOLS<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The paper focuses on two speaking/listening Web 2.0 tools: VoxoPop and VoiceThread that can be adapted in order to extend EFL use and exposure, promote student centeredness, accomodate different levels of proficiency and enhance motivation while engaging students in memorable learning experiences.*

**Key-words:** speaking, Voxopop, VoiceThread, Web 2.0.

Twenty-first century education witnesses a shift from the book-based paradigm to the Web-based paradigm (Treadwell, 2005), with Web 2.0 representing a technological as well as a social revolution where connectivism and communicative learning gain ground in favor of constructivism (Siemens & Tittenberger, 2009).

In foreign language education technology is a growing and rapidly evolving practice with potential benefits such as impact, motivation, enhanced student gratification, flexibility and affordability of resources as well as opportunities to work outside the confined classroom walls through independent practice. Moreover, exploitation of technology opens the classroom walls to the real world experiences. "If language learning happens in different contexts, with different people at different times, educators should not confine it to the classroom alone. The world outside does not speak the language of the classroom so we must venture outside its walls. Guiding learners into uncharted territory (learning situations over

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which neither teachers nor students have complete control) gives them exposure. Letting them interact with whoever they choose according to their interests and needs will allow them to own the words through which they express their identity and voice their thoughts, thus relating the language to their individual selves” (Dieu et al, 2006).

### **The Pedagogy**

Voice tools are essential prerequisites for any foreign language learning. Web 2.0 asynchronous voice tools allow language students to practise and enhance their speaking skills outside the classroom while receiving feedback on their performance, to use the language communicatively and be exposed to it at diverse hours and from diverse settings while developing their learning autonomy and reflective thinking skills needed in their future professions.

Generally speaking, voice tools work on similar principles of which “Repetition is the mother of learning” (asynchrony allows revision and reediting) and “Listening to your own voice and the voice of the others “ are the most conspicuous and likely to enhance learning by improving pronunciation as well as intonation, the range of vocabulary, grammar structures, even creativity and critical thinking.

Therefore, with Web 2.0 speaking tools, the two hours a week spent in the *in vitro* L2 environment formal instruction can be redesigned so as to exploit *in vivo* out-of-class engaging experiences that will enrich and expand our students’ exposure and use of the target language.

The most frequently employed voice tools that have been successfully applied in English language teaching/learning are:

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**Voice Thread – group audio blog <http://voicethread.com>**

**Voxopop – message boards with real voices - <http://www.voxopop.com>**

**Lingt – online speaking assignments and exams - <http://lingtlanguage.com>**

**Vaestro – audio forum software <http://www.vaestro.com>**

**Audacity – audio editor and recorder <http://audacity.sourceforge.net>**

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### **Our experience**

Starting from the premise that adult students in EFL/ESP have outside commitments (part or full time jobs, family, commuting) that prevent them from attending all the classes, that they have mixed ability levels and needs and learn informally extensively, Voxopop and

VoiceThread voice tools were adopted in EFL/ESP teaching/learning at “Dimitrie Cantemir “ University from Targu Mures, Romania, as a venue for autonomous speaking/listening out-of-class practice.

The hypothesis of study for this class-size project was that frequent speaking, speaking for a real audience as well as novel and engaging speaking will enhance the speaking skill and raise the students’ confidence in their own speaking.

The main objective was to bring students together in a safe, democratic, out of class environment, in order to help them practice the oral tasks and share their opinions with the rest of the group or the world, while leaving them some time to organize their ideas and prepare the points in advance. Voxopop and VoiceThread were selected based on user-friendliness and increasing degree of input and comment complexity.

### VoxOPop

Voxopop (fig.1) is a free message board or forum that uses the real voice (**vox**) of people (**populi**) through asynchronous online talkgroups. EFL/ESP teachers can either create their own talkgroup to suit their students’ needs and levels or advise students to engage in existing categorized forums. Students have to sign up in order to participate but the positive side of this is that setup is easy and quick. If the teacher/administrator opts for membership moderation and therefore increased group safety, joining presupposes previous membership request and approval.

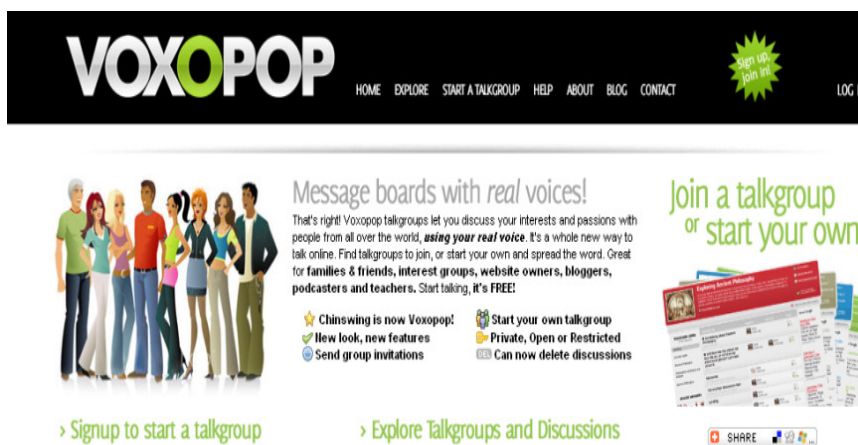


Fig. 1. Voxopop

We have created Voxopop talkgroups for practising:

- grammatical structures in context (Fig. 2: Conversation E-Club: Have you ever...?, What are you going to do/will you do after you graduate?)

- reflective practice: [Reflections on my first blog](#) is a reflective speaking task for students in economic sciences to share their first experience as ELT bloggers.

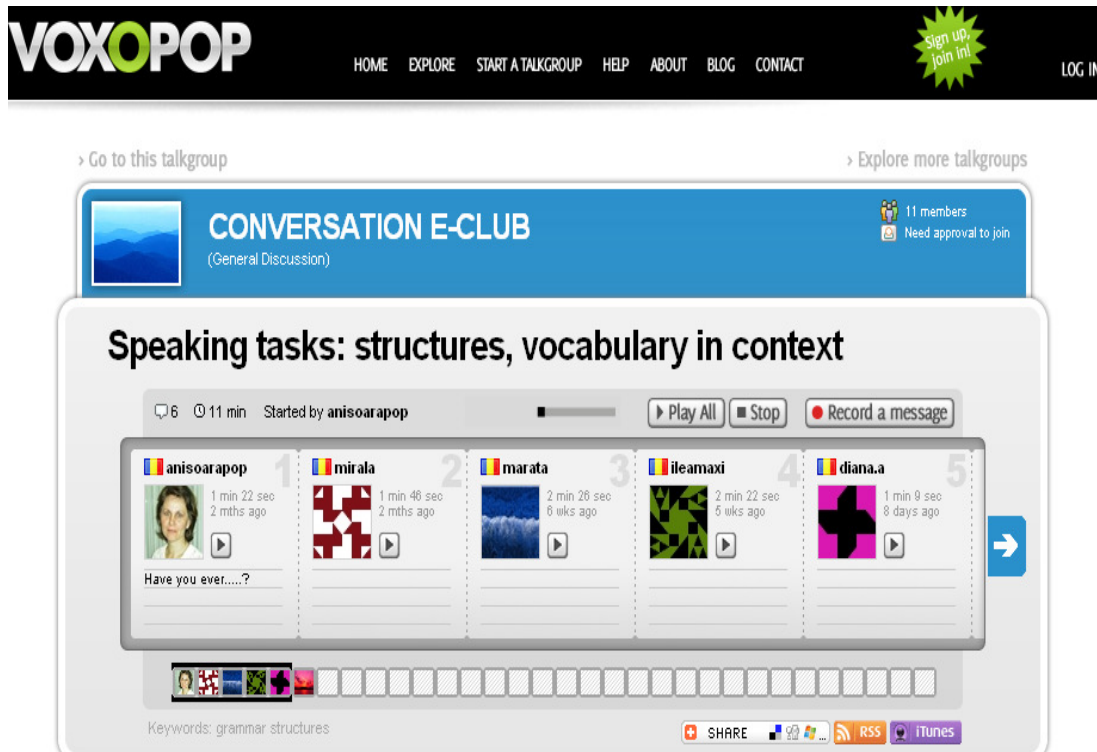


Fig. 2 Conversation E-Club

### Voice Thread

VT was created to re-purpose a commonly used media (PowerPoint) as a springboard for increased student engagement and conversation. To put it differently, Voice Thread takes slide-type presentations to a whole new level: almost any digital media ranging from a photo to a PowerPoint presentation can be uploaded and shared online. Static media (documents, photos, videos) can be imbued with recorded sound commentary via webcam, phone, text or audio files that can be shared, whereas images can be doodled on or highlighted for emphasis. Rather than a narrated PowerPoint, VoiceThread presentation format effectively reveals the different students, personalities, and ideas which contributed to the projects, a feature which might be called “multiple voices” (Frier, 2008).

In our project the VT audio blog was exploited in order to consolidate different question patterns under the form of an Interview (fig. 3): What’s your favorite...? [What/Where/How] Do you....? [What/When/Where] Would you.....? If you..... [what] would you.....? What + verb...? Who + verb....? [What/When/Where] Did you.....?, etc.



Fig. 3 VoiceThread – The Interview

## Results

Students, teachers, even adult students' children contributed to the *VT discussion* and practised grammar structures unawares while disclosing interesting personal information that facilitates mutual understanding and enhances general communication. Adult lower intermediate students who used to be less anxious to take part in class discussions for fear of losing face in front of more proficient peers, appreciated the tool for its reduced anxiety: instead of talking in front of an audience they were talking from a safe environment but with a real audience in mind.

*Voxopop* was highly appreciated by advanced students who could take part in categorized discussions (eg. the advanced students preparing for TOEFL or CAE, IELTS). The “false beginners” had the opportunity to re-record when not satisfied with their production, to listen to models, to join in at less busy periods and from different locations (some students who would have otherwise missed the class, participated from abroad).

Despite inherent pronunciation and grammar errors, most students felt proud to have had their voices recorded on the Internet. For the teacher, having a recorded production sample represents undeniable hard evidence for evaluation and a springboard for assessment and correction of recurrent errors while enabling students to reflect on their own and their peers' strong and weak points as far as pronunciation, accuracy and fluency were concerned.

The email noticing feature of *Voxopop* facilitated teacher monitoring of the group progress and allowed encouragement and intervention in their discussions constructively at appropriate times as well as reward of successful contributions or removal of deadlocks.

### **Other Effective application of Voice in EFL/ESP**

**Vocabulary practice** starting from expressing an opinion on a certain topic to arguments and stirring debates from most different fields can be accommodated by both voice tools. At university level ESP and Business vocabulary are especially suitable for voice tool practice, from job applications and interviews to negotiations and problem solving simulations.

**Speaking activities** can differ in the degree of complexity either with beginners reading a text and having it recorded or recording can be preceded by/integrated with writing the text. Teachers can have students introduce and describe themselves, their houses, town, experiences, routines, etc. Alternatively, voice tools can be employed for tutorials to guide students without the teacher being physically there.

A more complex activity would be represented by *Class poems* and *chain stories /digital stories* where students are expected to sum up and take the story a step forward. The element of surprise is present with this type of activity as students never know which way the story will go.

Voice Thread **class projects** such as GREAT BOOKS where students share a favorite book and receive feedback, can breathe new life into book reports while for ESP/BE, oral presentations can be made either individually or as group projects on specific topics such as: my company, insurance, financial crisis, global warming, etc.

Listening practice can take the form of *drawing dictation*, a reply to a text or an audio message or can represent a venue for more complex tasks where students take part in real threads on controversial topics: sports events, financial crisis, global warming, etc.

**Multitasking** with voice tools would involve the presence of slides (students read the slides or are provided a link to a reading task), listen to the oral explanations (listening) and then we could have them react by speaking, which is crucial especially in distance learning.

For lower intermediate levels voice tools can also represent assessment tools as teachers can record the correct pronunciation and associate it with an image while students can either doodle on the objects and say and label them or they can also describe and comment on a given image or photo.

However, effective communication involves interaction and if with voice tools all participants seem to be responding to the original poster (in our case the teacher) or the posted image, the teacher's aim is to make students active listeners by asking them to react to the previous participants' choices, justify the choices, as well as pose questions themselves and reward students for keeping the conversation going.

## Conclusion

21st century teachers can explore and exploit Web 2.0 voice tools in EFL/ESP since having an audience beyond the classroom walls can encourage and motivate students to be more careful about vocabulary selection and second, they can benefit from the comments provided.

Both Voice Thread and Voxopop can be applied in different foreign language instructional contexts in a continuous degree of complexity from elementary to advanced levels and integrated with a whole array of reading, speaking and listening activities involving both grammar and vocabulary elements in three steps that include inputting information, processing it and generating an output.

By exploiting voice tools teachers help raise the students' confidence in their speaking abilities, can reach the whole range of student learning styles and rekindle their motivation to speak.

Voice Thread and Voxopop are fun, motivating, user-friendly, and versatile, and represent a venue for authentic, memorable and engaging asynchronous EFL/ESP activities.

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