

PROMOTING SPEAKING IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE VIA RICH INTERNET APPLICATIONS

After completing a six-day workshop on Rich Internet Applications (RIAs), I am convinced now more than ever that technology has its place in foreign language education. In the past decade, it has been stated more and more often that foreign language teaching and learning have been heavily influenced by the Internet and computer-assisted technologies, all of which provide authentic materials available for use in the classroom. Instructors have used the Internet with its abundance of varied Web pages to manipulate activities that focus on the development of foreign language reading and writing skills. Video clips are often downloaded from sites such as [Teachertube.com] or [Youtube.com] so that students can listen to authentic speech via the World Wide Web and can therefore improve their listening skills. What if we were able to target our students' speaking skills outside the classroom? Furthermore, what if we could have "proof" of this language practice?

Foreign language instructors know how difficult it can be to have each student participate orally in class on a daily basis. And even if each student does participate during a given class period, how much can truly be evaluated? Is it enough that the student briefly replied "yes" or "no" to a question? Is it enough that students speak in fragmented sentences to their partners during group work? These lackluster answers don't provide instructors with enough content for proper evaluation. Even if we assign pronunciation activities for homework, how are we to know if the students are actually following through with the work at home? The in-text CDs and the on-line workbook assignments often contain exercises that require students to listen and repeat. But do the students actually open their mouths and produce the foreign sounds on their own? How can we "police" this activity? What if there were a tool that allowed language instructors to have evidence of students' oral production? Good news. It is here and it works!

The Center for Language Education and Research¹ (CLEAR) has developed several RIAs that allow teachers to easily design Web pages (or mashups) that contain audio files, video clips, text, and/or photos. As Godwin-Jones (2007) states, "RIAs are being used to display text more dynamically and with added options. RIAs are Web applications that have many of the attributes of desktop apps...and in which the processing is done on the local client...while the bulk of the data to support the app resides on a Web server" (11). These RIAs are made possible by using Web 2.0 technologies. According to Kárpáti (2009), "[t]he most im-

portant feature of Web 2.0 for language education is the *change of direction in communication on the Internet*: while Web 1.0 was the "readable Web," where the dominant activity was *reception* of texts, sounds and images, Web 2.0 is the "writable Web," where *creation* of new content is dominant" (140). In this way, Web 2.0 technologies enable language instructors to manipulate the information on a given Web page. In addition, Web 2.0 technologies place learners at the center of the learning environment keeping the teacher at the side as mentor or guide.

By using CLEAR's free RIA tools, it is possible to create simply Web pages that contain a mixture of audio and visual information. In addition, in order to focus on students' oral production, it is also possible to create an audio dropbox, a place that allows the collection of audio data completed by the students, and these data are then automatically "dropped" into the teacher's personal dropbox (similar to an inbox for e-mail). There is no requirement for special hardware or software to complete these activities. However, I have found that Mozilla Firefox works better than Internet Explorer (you can receive a free download of Firefox). In addition, the latest version of Adobe Reader (a free tool) will need to be downloaded onto the computer. Other than those two items, students will need a computer with Internet access and a microphone (built-in on most computers). Students are directed to a specific teacher-designed URL where they are expected to follow the instructions on the page, and to complete their oral speaking homework that is automatically sent to the instructor's dropbox upon clicking the submit button. This sort of homework encourages (and forces) pronunciation and oral production outside the classroom. In this way, students are producing the target language on their own, which in turn, helps promote foreign language learning. When instructors are ready to listen to the students' recordings, they log into their personal audio dropbox (as one would do for e-mail) and a list of all the students' submissions is provided.

So how do you create this virtual dropbox? Although I spent six days in the workshop, I'm going to break it down to the bare "nuts and bolts" of the tool.

1. Create a free CLEAR account at the following Web address: [http://clear.msu.edu]. (You will receive an e-mail notification that requires you to activate your account).
2. Log in using your user name and password at [http://ria.clear.msu.edu]

3. Click on the link Audio Dropboxes 2 under the Apps column (be sure to select version 2). Click on Create a New Dropbox. Use the pencil (edit) icon to name it. At this point, you may also set a time limit for the students' recordings.
4. Return to the RIA homepage [http://ria.clear.msu.edu] and click on Mashups under the Apps column. Using the icons on the left-hand side of the page, click on Create a New Mashup. Use the pencil (edit) icon to get started. Name your mashup, and include an audio dropbox from the drop-down menu. Click Save. Add a text area that contains the instructions for the assignment. Click Save. If you want to add an embeddable item (a video clip, song clip, etc., add that item). Click Save. Arrange your inserted-items by using the icon from the left-hand side of the page (next to the pencil). Then use the eyeball (view) icon to view your new mashup. This is the URL you will supply for your students.
5. Give the URL to your students by either writing it on the board or supplying it as a link into your institution's own CMS (my preferred method). The students will complete the activity by typing in the Web address into any Web browser (I found that Mozilla Firefox works best). When they are ready to record themselves, they will click on the audio dropbox and follow the simple instructions. When satisfied with their response, they click on submit.
6. When the due date arrives, instructors log into their RIA account [http://ria.clear.msu.edu] and click on the Audio Dropbox 2 link. Click on the dropbox that you want to listen to. A list of all the students who submitted responses will appear. Click on the students' names and play their audio recording.

The use of Audio Dropboxes gives foreign language instructors the option of creating speaking activities outside of the constraints of the classroom. In addition, there is no more CD burning to do, no more software to install. Students simply click on the dropbox, record their speech, and submit their responses. This sort of exercise encourages language production outside class, and forces every student to participate because there are no time constraints (as with a traditional classroom setting). In addition, students are able to listen to their recordings before submitting them. In this way, students, too, can evaluate their own speaking abilities. The activities that can be created using these RIA tools are limitless and can range from simple comprehension-

check answers, to pronunciation exercises, to open-ended responses that allow students the freedom to speak on a given topic. Foreign language instructors will find themselves using these free tools once they take the initial steps to learn about them. The old problem: how to encourage student speaking? The solution: create an audio dropbox and let the submissions “drop” in!

For an example of a finished mashup related to this article, go to the following URL: [<http://clear.msu.edu/teaching/online/ria/mashup2/view.php?ID=2908>].

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Notes

¹ The Center of Language Education and Research (CLEAR) at Michigan State University was established in 1996 as a Language Resource Center (LRC) through a Title VI grant from the U.S. Department of Education. As an LRC, CLEAR strives to promote and support the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the U.S. through its various projects and outreach activities.

References

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- Kárpáti, A. *Web 2 Technologies for Net Native Language*. *ReCALL; the journal of EUROCALL*. 21(2), pp. 139-156. (2009).