

TECHNOLOGY-ENRICHED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN THE SLOVAK EDUCATION CONTEXT: USING WEB 2.0 TOOLS FOR DEVELOPING STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstrakt

Modern technology tools automatically used in our everyday lives are gradually becoming an inevitable part of education process and despite the fact that their use at English language lessons has not been normalised yet according to Jarvis (2012, p. 9), i.e. they are not as common as a pen and book, their use for self-study purposes is globally spread (ibid.). Technology-enriched learning environment provides students and teachers with a database of tools that can be used to develop language skills. The author focuses on their use for improving speaking skills belonging to the most neglected ones at Slovak English language lessons. She briefly characterises Web 2.0 tools thanks to which users become producers (Pim, 2012) and describes theories underpinning the research aimed at exploring whether Web 2.0 tools can be used to develop students' speaking skills. These include the question of student's autonomy, speaking proficiency, feedback, reflection and self-reflection. She believes that a systematic, thoughtful and appropriate use of Web 2.0 tools can help students improve their oral proficiency if feedback is provided to students by their peers as well as the teacher and students themselves evaluate their oral performance. The practical part of the contribution deals with a concise description of selected Web 2.0 tools (e.g. Skyp, Vocaroo, Voice Thread etc.) and proposes their selections criteria that might change during the study.

Key words: Information communication technology, Web 2.0 tools, autonomy, speaking skills

Abstrakt

Moderné technológie, ktoré automaticky využívame sa stávajú nevyhnutnou súčasťou vzdelávacieho procesu. Aj napriek tomu, že ich používanie na hodinách anglického jazyka nie je ešte podľa Jarvisa (2012, p. 9) úplne zautomatizované, mnohí pedagógovia s nimi experimentujú, a tak ako to uvádza Jarvis (ibid.) ich využitie na samoštudijné účely je globálne rozšírené. Technológiou podporované učebné prostredie poskytuje študentom a učiteľom obrovskú databázu nástrojov, ktoré pri premyslenom, systematickom a správnom využívaní môžu byť použité na rozvoj jazykových zručností. Autorka príspevku sa zameriava na ich využitie na rozvoj jazykovej zručnosti rozprávania, keďže rozvoj tejto zručnosti patrí z viacerých dôvodov k najviac zanedbávaným na hodinách anglického jazyka na Slovensku. Stručne charakterizuje nástroje Web 2.0, vďaka ktorým sa užívatelia samotní stávajú tvorcami digitálneho obsahu (Pim, 2012). Opisuje východiská, o ktoré sa bude vo výskume zameranom na to, či je možné využiť nástroje Web 2.0 na rozvoj jazykovej zručnosti hovorenia u študentov anglického jazyka. Konkrétne sa zaoberá otázkou autonómie študenta, charakteristikou ústneho prejavu študentov v anglickom jazyku, poskytovaní spätnej väzby, reflexie a sebareflexie. Autorka verí, že systematické a premyslené využívanie Web 2.0 nástrojov umožní študentom zlepšiť ich úroveň hovorenia, s tým, že študentom bude poskytnutá spätná väzba učiteľom, ako aj ostatnými študentmi a študenti budú sami hodnotiť svoj ústny prejav. V praktickej časti príspevku sa autorka zaoberá stručným opisom voľne dostupných vybraných Web 2.0 nástrojov (napr. Skype, Vocaroo, Voice Thread atď.), ktoré môžu byť použité na rozvoj jazykovej zručnosti

rozprávania a navrhuje kritéria na hodnotenie ich výberu, ktoré sú len prvotnými odporúčaniami a v priebehu výskumu sa môžu meniť.

Kľúčové slová: informačné a komunikačné technológie, nástroje Web 2.0, autonómia, zručnosť hovorenia

Introduction

The use of modern technology in education currently belongs to widely discussed and researched topics. Teachers and educators experimenting with freely available or purchased digital tools report on both their positive effects and challenges related to their use (Light and Keisch, 2010; Zelick, 2013). One of the positive impacts, a changed approach to teaching and learning in general is described by a multitude of short-and-long-term studies (Motteram, 2013; Cowie and Sakui 2014).

Modern Web 2.0 tools, such as video upload sites, social networks, wikis, blogs and others (Walker and White, 2013, p. 19; Dudeney and Hockly, 2007), thanks to which users become producers (Pim, 2012), are gradually becoming an inevitable part of educational process and despite the fact that their use at English language lessons has not been normalised yet according to Jarvis (2012, p. 9), i.e. they are not as common as a pen and book, their use for self-study purposes is globally spread (ibid.). The potential buried in the active integration of these tools into learning and teaching process is huge and forms a part of modern pedagogy (Light and Keisch, 2010).

Digital technology is also a buzzword in a Slovak educational context and educators and teachers are well aware of its significance for the time being as well as for the future. Currently, a special attention is paid to English as a foreign language teaching in the context of which a national project, New Trends in Teaching English at Primary Schools is being carried out. Its main objective is the implementation of modern pedagogical approaches and digital technology into traditional Slovak lessons. I believe that modern technology provides English language students and teachers with rich educational environment that has not been fully explored, which has motivated me to focus on this issue in the context of English language teaching at a selected higher education institution with a special attention to the development of students' speaking skills. As these are the skills Slovak English language students struggle with most often. The research initiated by the European Commission in June 2012 reports that only 17 per cent of Slovaks claim to understand English well enough to use it in online communication (Special Eurobarometer 386, p 35), and 26 per cent say they speak English well enough to have a conversation in English (ibid., p. 21). Taking into consideration the early start of English language teaching and learning, this percentage is relatively small.

Speaking skills seem to be most neglected at English lessons due to various reasons. Lack of time, limitations caused by curriculum and other factors do not allow education process participants to pay as much attention to speaking as it would be necessary.

The internet and Web 2.0 tools provide the plethora of authentic materials, resources and instruments that might be specifically used for improving students' English language speaking competence, if used systematically, thoughtfully and appropriately. I will explore the potential and impact modern digital tools have in the Slovak educational setting more deeply in the study. Particularly, I will be interested in English language teacher trainees who will use English on daily basis once they become teachers.

In line with the philosophy of postmodern social constructivist pedagogy (Moodle, 2012) underpinning popular online learning programmes, the importance of active engagement and interaction of students with their peers and the inevitability of feedback provided by the teacher and peers as well as self-assessment and/or self-reflection will be emphasised.

1 Theoretical perspective

Autonomy of a student and its development have been frequently discussed phenomena that have affected the education policy in Europe and the whole planet since the end of the last century (Benson, 2006). They have also influenced methods and approaches to language teaching where the attention and responsibility for learning shifts to the student who according to Holec (1981) becomes responsible for his or her learning, which means he or she makes decisions about the whole process of learning (i.e. planning, learning contents, selecting methods and techniques, monitoring his or her progress and evaluating the results). This ability or willingness to take responsibility for one's learning as Sinclair refers to it (2000) is not innate but develops with the help of an expert, in our case a teacher. Existing research and observations (Little, 2000) characterise the autonomous student as a student who knows why he or she learns, takes responsibility for one's own learning and shares his or her aims with other students, plans, does learning activities and monitors their effectiveness. Efforts to develop learner's autonomy is supported by Vygotsky's theory of zone of proximal development (Oxford, 2003), according to which learning happens in social interaction with other learners. Results of the empirical research of Dam and Legenhausen (1996) show that learner-centred approach focused on development of learners' autonomy is more effective than teacher-centred approaches.

Postmodern approach to learning emphasising learner-centred approaches and students' autonomy is reflected in the initiatives of the Council of Europe and its European Language Portfolio comprising a Language Biography, a Language Passport and a Dossier '*providing an overview of learners' experiences, skills and qualifications in foreign languages*' (Little, D. and Percová, R., 2002, p.5), where 'language skills are defined in terms of levels of proficiency presented in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR)' (ibid., 2002, p.5). Self-assessment by means of '*Can do*' statements and evaluation of the language level through CEFR descriptors form a significantly important part of this tool. This reflects current tendency in assessment where emphasis is put on formative assessment (during the course or lesson), peer evaluation and self-evaluation (Stannard and Bassiel, 2013). Thus, assessment process, which leads to self-improvement (Cimermanová, 2014)

and itself becomes a part of the learning cycle, actively engages all participants of education process (Stannard and Basiel, 2013).

Speaking proficiency, as Canale and Swain (1980, pp. 206-208) define it, is a complex phenomenon comprising a number of competencies: grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic one. To express his or her ideas a student has to master vocabulary of a foreign language and he or she must be able to use the words in sentences (grammatical competence). Moreover, he or she must be able to connect ideas into longer coherent and cohesive units (discourse competence) and must master norms and rules of speech acts in a social and cultural context of the target language (sociolinguistic competence). Furthermore, he or she must be aware of and be able to use communicative strategies that will help him or her reach their communication aim and overcome obstacles.

Thornbury (2008, p. 6) compares speaking to “any other skill, such as driving or playing a musical instrument in terms of developing fluency of speaking.” He points out that the more students practise certain speech acts in their natural context, ‘the more likely’ they “will be able to chunk units into larger ones,” and thus become more fluent (ibid. p. 6). He (ibid. p. 40) recognises three stages of learning process in terms of learning speaking: awareness-raising, during which students familiarise themselves with new knowledge. Appropriation, during which students integrate the new knowledge into existing one and autonomy, allowing students to use this newly constructed knowledge in real-life conditions without any assistance.

The question arising here is whether the pool of authentic materials, tools and resources available online may be used to design activities and tasks that would help learners develop their speaking skills. It is believed that carefully selected tools and appropriately designed tasks that students will do outside the class will help them improve their speaking competence under the condition appropriate feedback will be provided by the teacher and peers and the students themselves will evaluate their performance. As a practitioner Stannard (2013, pp. 150-151) suggests assessment through accurate and constructive feedback is an important part of learning cycle and plays a significant role in achievement of student’s goals. Moreover, Kim’s (2014) results of the study show that self-assessment, and motivation play a significant role in developing students speaking skills. As she (2014, p. 27) maintains “self-assessment allows learners to monitor their level of success of specific tasks through a reflective process”, during which learners become aware of their strengths and weaknesses in their speaking performance. This reflective observation as Kolb (cited in McLeod, 2010; Cimermanová, 2014) calls it, will lead to a second stage of his cyclical reflective model of learning i.e. abstract conceptualisation (during which learners restructure their existing knowledge base). This will result into active experimentation, the phase during which learners test reconstructed concepts in new situations.

These theoretical assumptions will underpin the study aimed at English language teacher trainees and development of their oral proficiency. Students will have a traditional conversation course that will be supplemented by tasks and assignments requiring the use on Web 2.0 tools and a management learning system, Moodle.

I believe that current modern technology might be used to develop higher education students' English oral proficiency in such a way that its use would increase students' autonomy through feedback delivered by peers and a teacher. The following part of the paper provides a brief overview of selected online tools that might potentially be used for developing students' speaking skills.

2 Research questions

The main objective of the study is to find out if current modern technology might be employed to develop higher education students' English oral proficiency in such a way that its use would increase students' autonomy through feedback delivered by peers and a teacher. In addition, the study aims to highlight the importance of reflection and self-reflection for the development of students' oral proficiency. The study will be guided by the following questions:

Can learners (English language teacher trainees) improve their oral proficiency by autonomously using selected online tools: if the following conditions are met?

- feedback on speaking production is provided by peers and a teacher
- participants self-assess their own performance
- teacher provides guidance if needed?

Sub-questions guiding the research:

Do participants find using selected online tools for speaking production useful and helpful?

Do reflection and self-reflection stimulated by feedback and self-assessment play a role in improving participants' oral proficiency?

Does participants' level of oral proficiency improve during the course?

3 Methodology and methods

3.1 The sampling frame

Participants of the study will be English language teacher trainees at a selected higher education institution. The sample size will be determined by the number of students in classes selected based on their accessibility. It will probably be small (up to 30 participants). Data gathered by the research will be analysed using appropriate statistical tools for small-group data processing.

3.2 Procedure

In the course of the study I will be collecting data in line with my research interests. Particularly in the following areas:

Speaking skill of participants: The level of participants' speaking performance will be assessed at the beginning and the end of the course by a selected assessment method using a holistic and analytic scoring (Luoma, 2004). The type of speaking tasks will be selected in accord with participants' needs. The results of the assessment will be compared, analysed and interpreted. Students will also be asked to assess their own level of speaking performance through 'can do statements' and CEFR descriptors.

Reflection and self-reflection. The impact of feedback provided by the teacher and peers and self-assessment: By using the qualitative method of unstructured observation, I will observe participants' reactions to feedback provided by the teacher and peers as well as the feedback itself given by individual participants. During this longitudinal observation, I will explore what impact information from the feedback has on participants. The feedback will be given in a written form and will be embedded into Moodle learning environment. This will allow the researcher to work with data indirectly. These qualitative data collected within the course will be analysed and interpreted in line with the research questions. I believe that continuous formative assessment will lead to self-reflection, improvement of participants' speaking skills and change of their attitude to oral performance and their mistakes (they will be aware of their own mistakes as well as other students' mistakes).

Guided group interview: At the end of the course, the researcher will perform a guided group interview that will be specifically designed to evaluate the impact of reflection and self-reflection on the development of participants speaking performance. The interview will be recorded and transcribed and the data will be analysed and interpreted. As a result students will confirm or deny the influence of reflection and self-reflection on development of their speaking performance.

4 Usefulness of selected online tools

In the course of the study the participants will be assigned oral speaking tasks that will be performed using selected online tools. Recordings of their oral performance that will be stored and assessed by the teacher, peers and participants themselves. The online platform creates autonomous learning environment where students can work individually or collaboratively at their own time and pace. In order to investigate the usefulness and effectiveness of selected online tools, I will use a questionnaire designed to meet research objectives.

To ensure validity and reliability of selected research techniques: indirect unstructured observation, assessment of the level of speaking performance of participants, questionnaire and guided group interview, appropriate tools will be selected based on previous research in given areas and they will be designed after careful study of theoretical perspectives underpinning respective research interests. The validity and reliability of techniques will be tested during the piloting phase of the research project and if necessary they will be modified.

5 Selection of online tools

The idea of providing students with speaking practice outside the classroom is not new. Previously used tapes and CDs have been replaced by online audio/video files that can be downloaded onto various devices (computers, tablets etc.). As Walker and White state “technology provides exciting opportunities for students to interact with spoken language in ways which allow them to replay, rehearse, and repeat oral language in non-threatening and supportive contexts” (2013, p. 42). Current Web 2.0 defined as ‘read-write’ websites which consist largely of materials created and posted online by users’ (ibid., p. 190) contain a great number of tools available for teachers and students. The question arising here is how to choose an appropriate tool in a fast-changing world and what criteria to focus on in the selection process.

Experts in the field (McNeil, 2015; Stannard, 2015) suggest creating one’s personal toolbox. They propose starting by using simple tools and gradually adding the new ones and arranging them with one’s set of skills and tasks. McNeil (2015) emphasises that it is essential to understand ‘the type and nature of the instructional task or issue’ to be able to choose the tool with the right features.

The following section of the paper deals with selected online tools and characteristics of the features one might consider in the selection process. A general description of particular tools is followed by an overview of basic features of selected tools given in two tables: Table 1 and Table 2. The tables are included in the Appendix.

The explored Web 2.0 tools: Skype, Vocaroo, Voice Thread, Sound Cloud, Voxopop, Voki, AudioBoom, Audacity, PresentMe and Speakapps have been selected based on the review given by practitioners and teachers (Stannard, 2015; Pop, 2011; Speakapps, 2015).

Skype (2015) is a software application that allows users to make phone/video calls over the internet. It is popular because of its other features, like instant and video messaging as well as sharing files, screens etc. It is a freely available tool that has to be downloaded and installed onto your computer.

Vocaroo (2015) is a free, very simple tool allowing users to record, share and embed short audio files within a few clicks. The website claims that the service provided is still in the process of development and advises users not to use it for anything important (Vocaroo Info, 2015).

Voice Thread is a “cloud based application that allows users to download many different types of media, such as images, videos, presentations, and audio files into one central place for an asynchronous discussion.” Uploaded documents can be shared with other people via a link or a web page. Other users can comment on the material by adding a text, audio, video file or by making a phone call. These comments can then be viewed by other people (VoiceThread, 2015). This tool can be used for collaborative projects, asynchronous discussions and for providing feedback.

As the title suggests, Sound Cloud (2015) is a “cloud based social platform that allows users to share sounds enabling them to upload sound files or create their own recordings that can

be downloaded, shared or embedded into blogs, websites, VLEs etc.” It requires registration and a free account is limited up to 3 hours of uploaded material. The tool is relatively user-friendly. The great advantage is an enormous source of content genres of recorded material that can be explored by English language students.

Voxopop (2015) is an online tool designed for language learning and teaching. It allows users to create talkgroups and discussion forums other users can join and they can respond to issues raised by audio messages.

Voki is an “educational tool that allows users to create their very own talking avatars” (Voki, 2015). The basic service allowing you to create your speaking avatar that can be then emailed, shared on social media and embedded on websites, is free. However, the free account is limited to only a one-minute audio recording.

AudioBoom, “the leading mobile, web and connected device platform for the very best spoken-word content in news, current affairs, business, entertainment and sports” (AudioBoom, 2015), is a great source of authentic materials for English language learners. It provides users with a free account allowing up to ten minutes of recording time per a clip as well as enabling following, commenting and sending voice messages and uploading clips to one’s audio Boom profile (AudioBoom, 2015).

Audacity is “a free, easy-to-use, multi-track audio editor and recorder for Windows” and other operating systems (Audacity, 2015). It can be used to create audio recordings that can be converted into an MP3 format. In order to use this tool it is necessary to download a free software as well as “a LAME MP3 encoder” (ibid.).

The company presents Present.me (2015) as an easy-to-use online tool that allows individuals to record the content over documents, images, and slides. Recordings can be shared via an email, facebook or other social media. “Your recorded content is stored in the cloud and is easily accessible from various desktop or mobile devices” (Present.me, 2015). A monthly subscription per 50 users is 25 dollars.

The SpeakApps, a project funded with the support from the Lifelong Learning Programme of European Commission, “focuses on creating a free and open source online platform that gathers ICT-based applications and pedagogies to practice oral skills online.” (Speakapps, 2015). It is a platform that is specifically designed to serve the needs of foreign language teacher-student community. The platform requires registration that gives you a free access to Moodle classroom with three tools: Langblog, Videochat and Tandem.

The Langblog is defined as a blog for recording and uploading video, audio and image contributions designed for the teaching of oral production skills (Demo Classroom – English, 2015).

Tandem, “a web-based content management tool for synchronous oral tasks is designed for pairs and provides users with an opportunity to practice speaking outside the classroom”

(What is Tandem, 2015). Both participants must be online at the same time, and once they are both logged in and in Tandem they can work on a communicative oral task.

Videochat gives students and teachers opportunity to create videoconference sessions “with up to six people, using audio or video” (What is Videochat, 2015).

The described tools are just a few examples of instruments existing online at the time of writing. In the course of time some might disappear or free service might be replaced by the paid one. Nevertheless, I think they are attractive tools that can be used effectively to develop students speaking skills.

The following part of the paper gives a brief overview of the selected Web 2.0 tools shown in the Table 1 and Table 2 provided in the Appendix. The criteria I observed are listed in the left column and they include features that could be divided into three major categories. The first category comprises practical features namely the payment for the service provided. The second one includes technical features such as the internet connection, requirements for registration and software installation, the possibility of sharing and embedding recorded material via social media; and user-friendliness of the website interface. The last one contains communication-related features i.e. ways of communication – allowing audio, video recordings, as well as audio over image/document/presentation recordings; possible interaction between users – enabling individual recordings, pair and group work; a type of users’ activity: synchronous (communication happening at the same time) or asynchronous (communication not happening at the same time). The presence of the feature is indicated by a tick with some extra information added if necessary.

As can be seen from the tables almost all the tools are free to use, with the exception of Voice Thread, Sound Cloud and AudioBoom whose free accounts are limited from several minutes to a few hours of recordings and Present me that does not provide free recording service.

All the tools require high-speed internet connection in order to work properly and almost all of them store users’ recorded content online. The only exception is Audacity, an audio recorder and editor that requires software installation and allows you to create your recordings offline. All the tools with the exception of Vocaroo and Audacity require registration and creation of your personal profile that enables you to manage your content. Nearly all the mentioned tools give users the opportunity to share the content with other people via email, social media or to embed it onto blogs and websites. This is considered to be a great advantage for English language teaching as it allows students and teachers to create a dossier of their audio content that can be commented on and gathered in one place. The writer sees the disadvantage of the content stored online in relation to privacy issues.

All of the tools enable audio recordings that can be listened to and commented on asynchronously, which provides students with safe environment for rehearsing and practising. Skype, Voice Thread, and PresentMe allow users to create video recordings as well as record content alongside images, documents or presentations. All the tools allow for individual

recordings with Skype and Speakapps being the only tools enabling synchronous two-way communication or group discussions. In addition Speakapps allows a pair work or synchronous video chat which is in this case stored in online community for later viewing.

The given overview of basic features of selected online tools provides the criteria that will be taken into consideration when choosing a particular tool for a speaking task. This, however, will be done later on in the process of the study after deciding on the nature of speaking tasks for developing students' speaking skills.

All in all I will select the tool based on its free accessibility, user-friendly interface and the possibility of sharing or embedding recording content into Moodle virtual learning environment that will be used for an outside classroom speaking community.

Conclusion

In the initial stage of the research, I have to admit that the process of searching for and selecting an appropriate Web 2.0 tool is time-consuming and at moments challenging for inexperienced users, thus the selection criteria are important. The categories mentioned in this paper are just initial recommendations based on the hands-on experience of the writer and they might develop in the process of study.

I assume that after the course the participants' level of speaking competence will be improved. They will increase their confidence in speaking and become aware of new strategies that will motivate them to use available Web 2.0 tools even after the end of the course. Furthermore, guidance on providing feedback leading to reflection and self-reflection will stimulate learners' critical thinking skills.

The platform allowing students to learn at their own time, place and pace will make them responsible for their own learning. This hands-on experience is invaluable for future English language teachers for whom the use of digital and online resources and development of competences and critical thinking skills are a must if they want to teach English effectively and with respect to the needs of the 21st century learners.

After the successful accomplishment of the research projects, some aspects of teaching speaking skills via Web 2.0 tools might be integrated into English teacher trainee course.

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Appendix

Table 1: The Overview of Selected Web 2.0 tools - Part 1

	Tool	Sky pe	Voc aroo	Voice Thread	Sound Cloud	Voxop op	Voki
Website		http://www.skype.com/cs/	http://vocaroo.com/	http://voicethread.com/	https://soundcloud.com/	http://www.voxopop.com/	http://www.voki.com/
Service	Free	✓	✓	5 recordings	3 hours of uploaded material	✓	✓ 1 min
	Paid			✓	✓		✓
High-speed internet connection		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Registration		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Software installation		✓					
Ways of	Audio files	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

communication	Video files	✓		✓			
	Audio over image/document	✓		✓			
Possible interaction	Individual	✓ video message	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Pair	✓					
	Group	✓					
Activity	Synchronous	✓					
	Asynchronous	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sharing/ embedding	Yes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	No						
Interface	Friendly	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Unfriendly						

Table 2: The Overview of Selected Web 2.0 tools - Part 2

	Tool	AudioBoom	Audacity	PresentMe	Speakapps
Website		https://audioboom.com/	http://audacity.sourceforge.net/?lang=sk	https://present.me/content/	http://www.speakapps.eu/participate/
Service	Free	✓ 10 minutes	✓		✓
	Paid	✓		✓	
High speed internet connection		✓	✓	✓	✓
Registration		✓		✓	✓
Software installation			✓		
Ways of communication	Audio files	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Video files			✓	✓
	Audio over image/document			✓	
Possible interaction	Individual	✓	✓	✓	✓ Langblog
	Pair				✓ Tandem
	Group				✓ Videochat
Activity	Synchronous				✓
	Asynchronous	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sharing/ embedding	Yes	✓	✓	✓	✓
	No				
Interface	Friendly	✓	✓	✓	
	Unfriendly				✓