TESOL Connections
Keeping English language professionals connected

Online Resources for Teaching Speaking and Listening

by Lucy Pickering, Lynn Henrichsen, and Elizabeth Wittner

Introduction

Lucy Pickering

"Using and Choosing Online Resources in the Teaching of Speaking and Listening" began as an invited session for the 2020 International TESOL Convention, which was cancelled because of COVID-19. The session was rescheduled and ultimately presented in a live online session as part of the TESOL 2021 Virtual Convention. When the session was conceived in 2019, we had no idea how relevant it would become in a COVID pandemic world where the online presence of English language teaching continues to expand. In our Applied Linguistics/TESOL MA degree program at Texas A&M University-Commerce, for example, we now have a class dedicated to teaching English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) online, and as part of that curriculum we spend significant time addressing the affordances of online teaching and learning resources.

In this session, we focused on two areas. Lynn Henrichsen, a professor in the Linguistics Department at Brigham Young University, discussed finding and evaluating online pronunciation teaching and learning resources. In addition to introducing us to a wealth of online pronunciation platforms and resources, Dr. Henrichsen shared a comprehensive evaluative framework within which these resources can be assessed for specific needs and contexts. Elizabeth Wittner, the academic director and International Teaching Assistant Program Coordinator for the Center of American English Language and Culture at the University of Virginia, considered how best we can integrate online resources to optimize student engagement with speaking and listening opportunities beyond the classroom. She presented a framework which can be used to scaffold students' online experience and thus enhance the pedagogical effectiveness of these resources.

In this *TESOL Connections* article, we present brief summaries of our presentations in this conference session. Longer, more detailed versions will appear in the Spring 2022 *SPLIS (Speech, Pronunciation, and Listening Interest Section) Newsletter*.

Finding and Evaluating Online Pronunciation Teaching/Learning Resources

Lynn Henrichsen

"What is the best app or website for improving my pronunciation?" English language learners often ask. Their teachers also inquire, "What computer-assisted pronunciation teaching (CAPT) resource should I refer my students to?"

My answer is, "It depends on your objectives, your level, your learning style, your budget, and many other things. No single pronunciation app will meet the needs of every pronunciation teacher or student. To find the best online CAPT resource for your needs, you'll have to do some searching and evaluating." To help in that process, my presentation provided information about several articles that I (and others) have published.

Finding and Evaluating CAPT Resources Online

Rather than searching for and evaluating the hundreds of existing CAPT apps and websites by yourself, a wiser approach is to read reviews of online CAPT resources that others have produced. For instance, Yoshida reviewed six different CAPT apps in the *California TESOL Journal*.

My graduate students and I authored an article that reviewed 21 different websites and mobile apps dealing with pronunciation for second language learners. It was published in the *TESL Reporter*. A shortened version of this review article later appeared in *TESOL Connections*.

A Typology of Online CAPT Resources

A more general approach to evaluating CAPT apps is to categorize them using a typology, as I did for the *Springer Encyclopedia of Educational Innovation*. Similar information appeared in a *RELC Journal* article. This typology categorizes CAPT resources according to (a) the sensory modality they use, and (b) the quality and quantity of feedback they provide. Examining various apps and websites with these factors in mind, I came up with seven types (and an example of each):

1. **Text and audio only** resources are built on the concept that accurate perception of new sounds in a foreign language leads to correct production. *English Accent Coach* builds pronunciation skills through listening.

2. A lot of CAPT resources online use a **listen and repeat** instructional model, presenting a recorded word or phrase that learners repeat as accurately as possible. The *Pronunciator* website and mobile app employs this instructional approach.

3. In **listening discrimination** activities, learners try to hear the difference between two phonetically similar but phonemically distinctive sounds. The website at shiporsheep.com utilizes such minimal pairs.

4. **Visual displays** of the **positions and the movements of the vocal articulators** show learners how to form target sounds. One of the best apps of this type is *Sounds of Speech*.

5. Some apps use **visual displays** that show *not* articulatory but **acoustic data**, such as waveforms, spectrograms, formant data, and pitch contours. *Mango Languages* uses this approach.

6. **Automatic speech recognition** (ASR) has now reached the point where it can be useful for pronunciation feedback. Using the voice recording dictation feature built into both Mac and Windows computers, language learners can speak into a microphone and watch the computer type what they say, which allows them to see how accurate their speech was (as perceived by the dictation program).

7. Finally, **corpora**—bodies of collected electronic text—constitute another sort of online CAPT resource. A number of corpora exist that allow students to hear different speakers, different dialects, and different accents. One of the best of these for practical teaching purposes is *Youglish*.

Other Evaluative Criteria

Sensory modality and *quality and quantity of feedback* are not the only two factors to consider when evaluating online CAPT resources. To help people remember the many criteria they should consider—such as *functionality, usability, instructional design, visuals, price, platform*, and so on—I created a checklist. This analytical tool was published in the proceedings of the 2018 PSLLT Conference; see the Appendix for a copy.

It Matters How You Use It: Making the Most of Online Speaking/Listening Resources

Elizabeth Wittner

Starting every new class, I ask students, "How often do you actually spend interacting in English outside of class?" The typical response is about 30 minutes a day—not just from my online EFL students but also from international staff and graduate students who work, study, and live at a U.S. university. This phenomenon is not simply due to COVID-19 either; I have received similar responses for many years. The pandemic only heightened students' isolation and struggles to find opportunities for English interaction.

Teaching in vastly different English for speakers of other languages contexts over 30 years, I have observed a common theme. Class time simply isn't enough. Students need more experiences interacting with the target language. The past decade, and particularly this past year, has brought some good news on that front. Broader access to technology has extended learning beyond face-to-face time. Nevertheless, just as students in "immersion" environments don't simply pick up English by osmosis, neither do they acquire it by having a long list of English websites. As instructors, we need to not only be selective about those online resources, but also mindful of how students use them.

My own experiences using online resources with students taught me that (no matter how good the sites were) my recommendations alone were simply not enough. Students needed guidance, support, structure, and accountability as they worked "independently" online. Over time, I have woven these principles into a framework to help my students optimize their autonomous online learning. As the figure shows, it has three major phases.

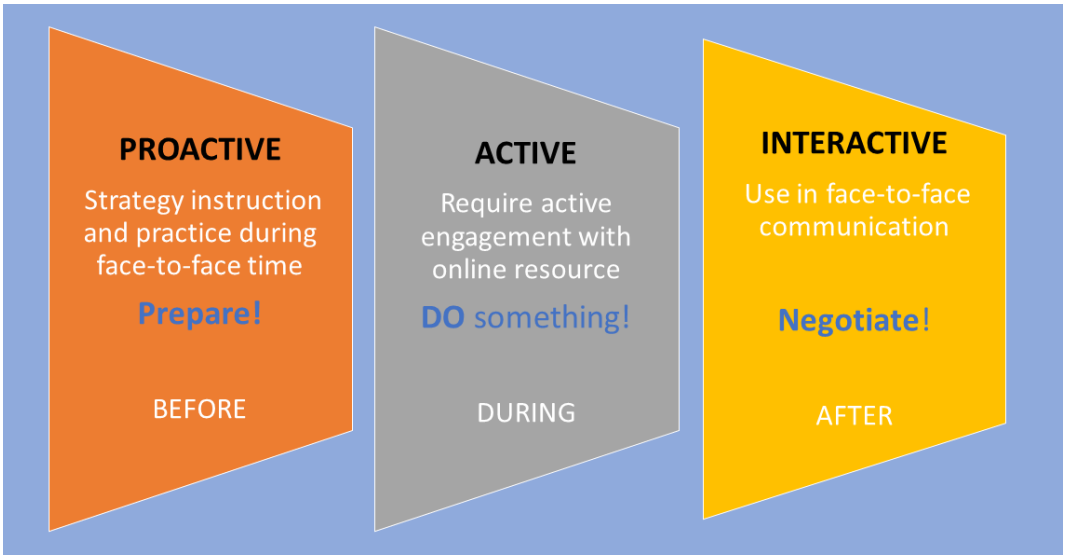

Figure. A framework for successful online learning.

BEFORE: Be Proactive—Use Class Time to Prepare Students

Share the Why: Busy adults need to know why they are being asked to spend precious time on something. For instance, let them know that spaced repetition accelerates acquisition (Nation, 2013) before assigning vocabulary review with a Quizlet assignment, or let them in on how mirroring online videos can promote comprehensibility (Meyers, 2018).

Teach Strategies: Use class time to show students how to make the most of their time outside of class (Webb, 2019). Don't just tell them, but *demonstrate* useful strategies. For instance, show how you find interesting, relevant, and appropriately leveled input by walking them through the process of selecting an interesting YouTube video, adjusting the speed, and turning on closed captioning.

Provide Scaffolding: Promote independent learning by equipping students with a map and directions. Preview, connect to prior knowledge, or have them look up related vocabulary. Help them organize their time on task with a list of "look-fors," comprehension questions, or a graphic organizer.

DURING: Be Active—Have Students Engage Actively With the Online Resource

Have students *do* something while watching or listening to an online resource. Being exposed to language does not guarantee acquisition. Students need focused, purposeful engagement. Have them prepare to report back in the next class session. Alternate top-down comprehension tasks,

like getting the gist of a TED Talk, with bottom-up strategies, such as shadowing the speaker's intonation.

AFTER: Be Interactive—Have Students Engage Actively With a Real Person

To complete the cycle, have students report back to a real person—a tutor, instructor, or classmate. Require students to take new language features from online work and use them in actual conversations. Structure activities that force negotiation (rather than simple presentation) with an interlocutor.

Of course, you will need to devote instructional time to these follow-up activities, but doing so demonstrates your commitment to learning outside of class and creates accountability, as well.

Conclusion

While the past year made us more aware of learners' isolation, students have *always* needed oral/aural English experiences beyond our limited instructional time. Using online resources thoughtfully and deliberately can overcome this challenge. Be selective about online resources; commit class time to preparing students for online, independent work; ensure that students are actively engaging with resources; and dedicate time in class for students to engage with others using the language they have learned.

References

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