



3 Digital Tools to Increase Speaking Practice

by [Weina Li Chen](#)

When you assign homework for your English language classes, what assignments do you usually give? Worksheets? Essays? Readings? Book reports? Quizzes? As an English language learner and teacher, I noticed that most of the homework assignments that are given out focus on reading and writing but rarely on speaking. Multilingual learners of English (MLEs) often need ample time to practice speaking in the target language environment. Because of limited classroom hours, how we as educators expand that exercise time beyond the classroom becomes critical—speaking outside of the classroom, however, is difficult for the teachers to monitor. In addition, especially outside of the classroom, researchers have found that MLEs tend to have minimal use of English (Tanaka, 2007; Wu, 2012) and that they often face challenges in developing speaking skills due to anxiety and inhibition (Paneerselvam & Mohamad, 2019).

For English language teachers, then, the next question is how to create a low-stress speaking environment outside of the classroom, and how to make speaking assignments engaging and accountable. One way to address these considerations is by using digital assignments.

The Benefits of Digital Assignments

There are numerous benefits of using digital assignments to practice English speaking skills.

- **Track Learning Progress:** Digital assignments enable students to keep track of their learning progress. Digital assignments not only collect and store students' speaking artifacts and make reviewing learning easier, but they are also memory-keeping tools.
- **Promote Autonomous Learning:** Digital assignments make an individualized and accessible learning environment possible. Instead of typical speaking exercises, such as in-class presentations and role-plays, digital tools often allow MLEs to access the practice at any time and place.
- **Allow Self-Paced Practice:** Digital assignments allow students to move forward at their own pace. For example, when MLEs give oral presentations in class, they only have one

opportunity. However, when they are asked to record a presentation or a vlog (video blog), students spend much more time speaking, as they feel safe to make mistakes, repeat their recording process, and try again until they are satisfied with the end product. In short, students have the flexibility to choose how much time they can put into the assignment.

- **Encourage Social Learning:** When homework is done digitally, students have more opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other. For example, digital platforms such as WeChat and Flip serve as social spaces where students are able to hear or watch each other's contributions. These tools vastly increase student-student interactions and provide opportunities for informal learning throughout the process.
- **Engage, Motivate, and Empower Students:** Students today often prefer doing assignments digitally, and they are typically more encouraged and empowered when they are creating content for an audience. Typically, when students submit their assignments to their teachers, their work stops in the teacher's assignment box. But when students' work is being played, watched, and heard by their peers and even the larger community (e.g., through podcasting), students feel more motivated and empowered.
- **Extend Learning Time:** There is limited time within a class, which means that MLEs have limited time to practice speaking in class. Digital assignments allow additional time for learning and practice to continue beyond the classroom.

Though technology provides the necessary affordances for educators and students to achieve many of the preceding benefits, pedagogical consideration is another critical component of assignment design. To receive these benefits, we need to evolve our mindset about assignments, including what they are, when they are completed, and how they are submitted.

Communicative language teaching advocates the process of real communication, and we know that learning happens through social interactions (Amineh & Asl, 2015). In view of this, here are a couple of questions to consider while designing effective speaking assignments:

1. How can I create a shared space for peer learning, either formally or informally?
2. How can I create English-speaking opportunities for students when they are outside of the classroom?
3. What types of assignments would generate authentic communication?

3 Digital Tools to Increase Speaking

With these questions in mind, here are three free technology tools you could start using as soon as tomorrow: [Flip](#), [WeChat](#), and [Adobe Express Video](#). Under each tool, I've included sample ideas that will help increase social interactions and communicative language learning opportunities.

1. Flip

[Flip](#) (originally Flipgrid) is an educational video recording and discussion platform. It is easily accessible from computers, tablets, or mobile devices. This free tool is widely adopted by teachers around the world. Educators can set up groups and topics for their classes. Students can post short videos and view and respond to their classmates' videos. The best part about Flip is that teachers can set up private groups for their classrooms with email domain or password protection. Flip can be embedded in some LMSs as well, including Canvas, Google Classroom, and Sakai. Here are some ideas for using Flip for speaking exercises:

- **Digital Introductions/Ice-Breakers:** My go-to introduction prompt is “Tell us who you are, what you do, why you are in the class, and, last, what makes you smile.” This type of assignment works extremely well when the class is hybrid/online. Give students ample time to prepare an informative introduction as well as to connect with each other.
- **Storytelling/Paraphrase/Retell/Teach:** Provide reading assignments, such as short stories, then ask students to use Flip to retell, summarize, paraphrase, and/or teach others what they have read. Students can ask questions at the end of their Flip videos for their classmates to respond to, for further discussion, interaction, and peer learning.
- **Interviews:** Assign students to interview each other, family members, school teachers, or people from the community and feature them on their Flip videos. The interview topic can be as simple as “your favorite restaurant and why.” Encourage students to write their own interview questions as well. The purpose is to let students continue using English in speaking and listening outside of school, with different people, and in different settings.
- **Debates:** Set up debate topics and let students contribute their opinions on their Flip videos. Students will watch and listen to each other's perspectives and provide counter-arguments if required, depending on how complex you design this project to be.
- **Classroom Announcements:** Pass on a leadership role to students. When you need to make a classroom announcement, give the opportunity to your students and let them make a video announcement instead. Design a specific group and name it “Classroom Announcements” and designate it for this purpose only, having students rotate turns on the announcements.

For experienced Flip users, [FlipgridAR](#) is an exciting feature to explore; it allows you to add elements of augmented reality to Flip videos, “placing” virtual elements in the real world.

2. WeChat

[WeChat](#) is an instant messaging tool that has a strong voice messaging function. If Flip projects are best for weekly or biweekly practices, WeChat is the most convenient app for daily practices,

in-time communication, and student accountability. You can create a WeChat group for your class and invite all students to join the group. Once the routine and expectations are set up, WeChat is easy, quick, and user friendly for both teachers and students.

- **Word of the Day:** Assign one word each day for students to practice pronunciation and meaning-making. For example, you may ask students to use the voice text function to repeat the word a few times and create a sentence based on that word. You can simply voice text the word in the group WeChat every day or assign five words together at the beginning of each week.
- **Sentence of the Day:** Similar to Word of the Day, you can assign a sentence or a sentence structure for students to practice for the purpose of enhancing pronunciation, fluency, intonation, and memory of sentence patterns. Not only are students able to quickly turn in their recorded practice, but they can also access their classmates' work and interact with each other organically on this app.
- **Exit Tickets/Reflections:** With in-class reflections, there is just not enough time for everyone to verbally share their thoughts at the end of class. Instead, move this part to a WeChat group and let students debrief verbally with a voice message about what they have learned after each class? (Limit this task to 1 minute to keep it quick and concise.)
- **14-Day Challenges/28-Day Challenges/60-Day Challenges:** To add more fun, you can make the assignment a game/challenge, incentivizing by providing a reward to students who complete the task every day of the challenge. For example, a "14-day audio diary challenge" would have students create a diary entry every day for 2 weeks, and a "28-day famous quotes read-aloud challenge" would have students find and read a famous quote every day. You can be as creative as you'd like!

All these practices are easily accessible on smart phones, and students only need to spend a few minutes every day to complete this practice, at any time and anywhere. Meanwhile, students are able to hear and learn from each other's responses organically.

3. Adobe Express Video

[Adobe Express](#) is a free-to-use graphic and video design tool. Unlike other professional tools that belong to the Adobe family, such as Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Express is very simple to use. [Adobe Express Video](#), the video maker component of the software, is an ideal tool for relatively larger projects, such as midterm or end-of-term assignments. (See [this tutorial link](#) for making an Adobe Express Video). Here are a few ideas to consider:

- **Intercultural Storytelling:** MLEs can use this tool to create short films introducing their culture, including names, traditions, hometowns, and schooling differences.

- **Vlogging:** Ask students to create documentaries using a [vlog style](#). For example, “My Life in the United States,” “My First Gym Experience,” “My trip to San Diego.”

These larger projects provide students opportunities to showcase their personalities and lives, amplify MLEs’ voices in cultural conversations, and bridge connections between who students are and the language they are learning.

Conclusion and Additional Resources

Flip, WeChat, and Adobe Express all have excellent audio input options and offer creative experiences for the learners. These digital tools can each create new and different opportunities for MLEs to speak and listen in English. Remember: Though technology is the medium, your pedagogical knowledge and creativity are the keys to effective learning experiences for your students. I encourage you to design your own digital speaking assignments by using these or similar tools and focusing on interactivity, accessibility, and authenticity—so students feel at ease and empowered to share.

Resources

Flip

- [Flip](#)
- [Flip Educator Inspiration](#)
- [Flip Twitter Account](#)
- Article: “[Flipgrid for ALL! 50+ Ways to Use Flipgrid in Your Class](#)”

WeChat

- [WeChat](#)

Adobe Express

- [Adobe Express](#)
- [Adobe Express Video](#)
- Blog: “[How To Start a Vlog 101: Everything You Need To Know](#)”
- Video: “[Create a Video Using Adobe Express](#)”

Additional Tools for Digital Speaking Assignments

Following is a list of additional tools that can be adapted for digital speaking assignments.

- [Mote](#)
- Podcast ([Anchor](#))
- Social media ([TikTok](#), [Instagram](#))

- AI assistants (Amazon Alexa, Siri, and Google Homes)
- Gaming ([Roblox](#), [Minecraft Education](#))
- VR/Metaverse ([Spatial](#), [Gather](#), [VRChat](#))

References

Amineh, R. J., & Asl, H. D. (2015). Review of constructivism and social constructivism. *Journal of Social Sciences, Literature and Languages*, 1(1), 9–16.

Paneerselvam, A., & Mohamad, M. (2019). Learners' challenges and English educators' approaches in teaching speaking skills in an ESL classroom: A literature review. *Creative Education*, 10(13), 3299–3305.

Tanaka, K. (2007). Japanese students' contact with English outside the classroom during study abroad. *New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics*, 13(1), 36–54.

Wu, M. M. (2012). Beliefs and out-of-class language learning of Chinese-speaking ESL learners in Hong Kong. *New Horizons in Education*, 60(1), 35–52.

Weina Li Chen, PhD, is a clinical assistant professor at Pepperdine University Graduate School of Education and Psychology. Her professional passions include educational technologies, learning design, language education, and teacher leadership in the classroom.