



The IALLT Journal

A publication of the International Association for Language Learning Technology

ASSESSING STUDENT ORAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY: COST-CONSCIOUS TOOLS, PRACTICES & OUTCOMES

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Abstract

Second language teachers have an ever increasing abundance of technology choices for assessment of student oral proficiency through the adaptation of consumer electronics and multimedia devices. The purpose of this article is two-fold: (1) to address the benefits and ease of using different multimedia tools to assess students' oral language proficiency regardless of grade level and (2) to report the findings of an oral language assessment study. Results from the empirical study ($N = 128$) show that there are manifold benefits of using technology for oral proficiency assessment for both students and instructors. Additionally, this research emphasizes the importance of maximum use of the target language in the classroom and the importance of aligning assessment rubrics to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language's speaking proficiency guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

Encouraging and motivating student engagement in the foreign language classroom is challenging on multiple levels, not the least of which is overcoming perceptions of irrelevance in real-world applications. Additionally, learning languages is becoming

increasingly more difficult because research suggests that foreign language teachers tend to not use the target language exclusively in the classroom (Kraemer, 2006), in effect discounting the notion of the Comprehensible Input hypothesis (Krashen, 1981). According to theory, learners improve and progress along a natural order when they receive consistent second language input that is one step beyond their current stage of linguistic competence. Therefore, to advance second language competence in students, language teachers should maximize teacher use of the target language in the classroom and provide ample opportunities for students to speak and listen to the others exclusively in the target language.

However, affective barriers to oral language production such as public performance anxiety and authentic self-representation tend to complicate the language learning process. Research indicates performance anxiety is negatively related to language performance and MacIntyre (1999) claims that the presence of such anxiety is one of the strongest predictors of foreign language success. Specific to the relationship between anxiety and oral performance in the target language, Woodrow (2006) found that students reported the most stress for having to give oral presentations via the traditional speaking assessment procedure, face-to-face with the instructor. Her research found that the major stressors reported by the subjects were performing in front of class and talking to native speakers, noting that it was imperative for teachers to consider assessing oral language ability both in and outside the classroom. She recommended that oral language assessment “could be achieved by setting out-of-class tasks utilizing the rich linguistic resources available to learners” (p. 324).

One method to approach the task of lowering student anxiety while increasing student involvement in the language learning process to measure students’ oral proficiency is to offer students the opportunity to create out-of-class recordings in order to demonstrate their proficiency. By creating such a process, students have the ability to self-select the recordings they believe best represent their true level of oral proficiency. However, prior to the decision to begin such assessments, considerations must be made in regard to the most appropriate technology and the creation of meaningful and authentic tasks.

Oral language assessments & Current Technology

Communicative second language instruction at every level focuses on the development of language proficiency in four distinct skills: written language, reading proficiency, listening comprehension, and oral language production (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999). The first three skills are routinely evaluated within the classroom as well as through formal assessments, whereas the challenge to assess spoken language ability has resulted in more frequent formative assessments in the classroom, but fewer formal assessments. This is due primarily to the challenges presented by oral assessment, namely the difficulty inherent in the development of useful and flexible rubrics for

scoring (Foster, Tonkyn, & Wigglesworth, 2000) and instructors' time required for individual learner assessment (Flewelling, 2002).

In addition to these challenges, traditional, formative oral assessments conducted in the classroom rarely leave an assessment artifact. The creation of assessment artifacts contributes greatly to evaluation, in that they can be archived for future reference and can be used for comparison between-subjects to measure overall progress towards proficiency goals. Digital technology and the conversion of analog language lab systems to digital recording capability are advancing the capabilities for whole-class, concurrent archival recordings (Flewelling, 2002). Researchers in language learning and instruction are beginning to investigate the uses of commercially available digital technologies for the potential benefit they promise when incorporated into the language curriculum for the purpose of oral proficiency development and assessment (Chan, 2003; Egbert, 1999; Volle, 2005).

Rapid advances in personal digital technology and the availability of both hardware and software resources for individual recording may provide instructors with the capabilities to collect digital oral production artifacts, while at the same time reducing the amount of class-time required for oral assessment. Each year new digital tools are introduced into the interactive web environment for the use of bloggers, podcasters, amateur (and increasingly, professional) artists, and multimedia aficionados, and although primarily created for the non-educational market, these tools are easily adapted for use in the language curriculum. In addition, with growing market saturation of consumer personal media tools, the price of these digital devices continues to fall, while storage capacity and functionality are increased or enhanced. To begin, we will briefly outline the functionality, challenges, and advantages of digital tools in four distinct groups: portable hardware (Creative Zen Mosaic LX™, and the SansaClip™), software (Windows Sound Recorder™ and Audacity™), webware (gCast™, Vocaroo™, and VoiceThread™) and Voice-Over-Internet (VOIP) applications (Skype).

Portable, Personal Hardware

With the widespread diffusion of digital music technology, the prices for personal, portable devices have fallen within a comfortable range for educational purchases. Although the large capacity iPods are still among the digital elite, it is possible to find mp3 recorders with built-in microphones for prices starting around \$35, depending upon the features and the storage size of the unit. (The iPod was not evaluated as part of this research due to the requirement of an accessory microphone in order to facilitate recording. Only devices with integrated microphones were included.) The underlying premise of using a portable device is that instructors could issue a written prompt to the class or prerecord an audio prompt onto the devices, check out the units to each student, who then record their responses outside of class. The students would then return the device to the instructor, who could either offload the recordings onto a master archive, or simply evaluate the

recordings at their leisure. The primary challenges inherent in this approach could be the transfer of the prompts to each unit and the administration requirements of checking the equipment out to students (considering the possibility of loss or damage).

Distinctions in the cost and utility of digital devices can usually be attributed to differences in file storage size and available features. The lowest-priced unit investigated was the Sandisk Sansa Clip (\$35), a basic 2GB mp3 player and voice recorder with push-button recording and an integrated microphone. Although the quality of the recording had a distinctly mechanical tone to it, the articulation was clear and comprehensible. Another comparable product is the Creative Zen Mosaic LX (\$55), with 4 GB of storage and an integrated microphone. The process of recording was rather simple, with “microphone” selected from a list of resources on the main menu. Recording quality was clearer than that of the previous device. An additional advantage to the Creative recorder is the ability for the instructor to transfer, not only an audio prompt to the students via a prerecorded message stored on the player, but also deliver images as prompts, by transferring digital images to the player and having them called up by the student.

Software

Although application software exists in many forms and environments, for the purposes of this article, software is defined as an executable computer application that is directly installed on an individual workstation. Through a search of software download sites, it is possible to identify dozens of shareware and freeware digital recording programs, each with its own interface and features, but all capable of recording oral production in one or more recording file formats, the most common formats being .wav and .mp3. For more information regarding these file types, refer to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Audio_file_formats>. When recording via software (or webware, to be discussed next) a minor investment in microphones and headphones will be required. These accessories are easily purchased from any electronics or discount store and can be as low as \$10 for a reasonably durable and functional model.

For the purposes of this article, we dispense with the discussion regarding the issues surrounding the digital divide and acknowledge that instructors must evaluate their students and consider whether or not most students will have access to computers outside of the school environment. If students are requested to produce recordings via a personal computer at home, it is highly recommended that parents be informed or included in the process prior to the assignment. It is ethically essential to be certain that the recorder installation requested is free of adware, spyware, or license limitations, and that the tool itself will not monopolize computer processing and storage resources.

The free Audacity recorder (Mazzoni & Dannenberg, 2000), available at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>, is an open-source recorder (available to the public with relaxed or non-existent intellectual property restrictions) that meets these requirements. Its familiar buttons and interface contribute to ease of use, and for the more technically proficient user, the software also allows relatively sophisticated editing capabilities. Sound files are recorded in the .wav format, but if .mp3 recording is required due to file storage limitations, an additional LAME encoder can be easily downloaded and installed from an associated website.

Every computer that utilizes the Windows operating system comes already equipped with the Windows Sound Recorder™. This program is accessible via the Start Menu by clicking on Programs > Accessories > Entertainment > Sound Recorder. One main disadvantage inherent in the Windows Sound Recorder™ is the limited recording time available (60 seconds). In addition, the only file format available with the Sound Recorder is the .wav format, but the limited functionality of the recorder can also contribute to its ease of use, as users do not have to download an additional file encoder.

Webware

Webware encompasses online applications of software that do not require downloads and installation of software on individual computers. As such, these tools are available from any web-enabled computer provided it is capable of sufficient connection and processing speed. An immediate advantage presented in these tools is the non-dependence on computer operating system, making them accessible to all platforms: Windows, Apple, and Linux. An administrative, and potentially legal, concern in using webware for student assessments is the fact that these recordings are created, and stored, via third-party servers, raising questions of confidentiality and reliability. However, in the system presented below, it is possible for teachers to create their own archives of student work, an important consideration in the event that the third party server is out of order or goes offline.

One particularly useful tool is gCast, developed as a tool to make podcast production and distribution easily accessible to bloggers and accessible at <www.gcast.com>. Although it is still a free-to-use webservice, there is now an annual subscription cost of \$99 for the ability to utilize its most useful feature for educators. While categorized as a web tool, it holds a distinct advantage over the other tools in that it requires no student computer in order to record student voice. gCast is unique in its ability to record input via telephone and archive it on an established web account. In order to utilize gCast, the instructor must first create a gCast account. Again, it is highly recommended that separate accounts be created for individual classes to facilitate organization of recordings. Once the account is created, a gCast web page is created for that user (the instructor) and a PIN number, or access code, is identified for that account. Instructors may then distribute a toll-free telephone number indicated by gCast, and the access code, to their students.

Using any telephone, students can call into the gCast account, record their responses, review them, and then submit them using simple commands that are now familiar to anyone who has used an electronic voice mail system. By logging into the gCast account, instructors can review and evaluate their student recordings. Because the microphone technology in telephones is quite sophisticated, the high quality and clarity of recordings is remarkably consistent. One disadvantage of this system is that the filenames as they appear on the account website do not indicate the name of the caller, so it would be necessary for students to state their names orally at the beginning of each recording. Of course, the primary advantage for this system of recording is that it does not make presumptions regarding student access to digital technology; any student with access to a telephone can record their voice.

Another free-to-use web service is Vocaroo, at <www.vocaroo.com>, a completely web-enabled recording service. Through Vocaroo's exceptionally simple web interface, students can record their voice at any computer with a microphone and then send that recording to a teacher's email address. The advantage to this system can be found in that teachers can designate different email addresses for different classes and easily manage the influx of messages by class. In addition, Vocaroo offers an embeddable widget that a teacher can insert into a class website or blog. However, the student's recording is never directly sent to the teacher, but instead, a clickable link to the audio file is delivered via email. As a result, the teacher cannot archive the recording on his personal computer, but must rely on the third-party server for access to the file.

One final webware tool highlighted in this article is VoiceThread (Papell, & Muth, 2007) <www.voicethread.com>, a free service that allows people to upload a photograph and annotate it either by text, by voice, or both using a simple web interface. Once the image is uploaded and posted, a weblink is generated that can be shared in email or on a website. Educators could then use this image as a visual prompt for the speaking assignment, utilizing both the text and the recorded comment for instructions for students to hear. Students may then record their voices using the same simple interface from any web-enabled computer with a microphone, and these audible comments are saved on the site. It should be noted, however, that students will be able to hear the comments of the other students in the class, which may make this tool more suitable for formative assessments than for high-stakes summative assessments. VoiceThread is keenly aware of the possibilities for this tool in the education market, and as a result they provide additional services geared to teachers for minor subscription charges, such as exportable files of recordings and expanded file storage. In addition, the VoiceThread offers several downloadable instruction sheets for teachers, an education forum, and a robust and informative education blog.

Voice-Over-Internet (VOIP) Solutions

VOIP communication is known primarily as a replacement for traditional telephone services, but has garnered much interest among language instructors as a tool for creating conversations in the target language that are unlimited by physical borders. Through VOIP technology, students on one continent can easily speak to students on another, increasing the relevance of language study to real-world communication situations. Skype is among the most widely recognizable VOIP services <www.skype.com> available to consumers. Skype supports audio, video, chat, and conference-calling between groups of multiple users. The free version of Skype allows for unlimited communication between one Skype-enabled computer and other Skype-enabled computers, a service known as Skype-to-Skype. However, for a very reasonable fee (approximately \$30 per year), instructors can set up a subscription account that offers two additional features that give the application great potential as an oral assessment tool.

With a paid subscription to Skype, users have the advantage of both VOIP voicemail and the opportunity to select a local Skype “phone” number, called Skype-In service. Skype-In allows students to call the Skype number from their traditional telephones. Because the Skype account holder can select a number from the local area code and phone exchange, all calls to this number are free to the caller. A potential model for using Skype-In for oral assessments would involve the instructor recoding the voicemail greeting with a suitable prompt and instructions for the students. The students would then record their response in the same way that a caller would leave a recorded message on an answering machine, and the instructor can review the recordings at his leisure. As in the gCast method cited above, the Skype system makes digital recording available to any student with access to a telephone and local phone service, while setting up a secure and private telephone number and voicemail system for the instructor. In addition, Skype has an advantage over the gCast system in that the student will hear the language prompt immediately upon calling the Skype-In number. However, at the time of this writing, there is no mechanism inherent in the Skype voicemail feature that allows students to review their recording before submitting it for evaluation by the instructor. In cases where the student wanted to make a second attempt, they would need to make a second call and a recording and submit it.

The tools mentioned here are but a small sample of the technology available to language educators and can be implemented immediately within limited budgets. Further, the tools discussed earlier are available at the time of this writing; new digital recording tools are developed and existing tools refined each year, adding greater capabilities and user interfaces that are easier to navigate. These tools, although created for the general web population, add functionality and practicality to both oral production and listening comprehension development and assessment in the language curriculum.

In the following section, we discuss a study that was conducted after a technology tool was selected and implemented for oral language assessment (OLA) at a large research university. The research questions for this study were:

1. How do students rank the importance of seven linguistic variables (Pronunciation, Meaning, Content, Grammar, Vocabulary, Creativity, and Authenticity) during the recording phase and during the listening phase of digital OLA?
2. Which language skills are most important to students learning a second language?
3. What are students' perceptions of digital OLA?

METHODOLOGY

The research sample (N = 128) was taken from a group of traditional and non-traditional undergraduate students ranging from 18 to 52 years of age (M = 23) matriculated in first- and second-semester Japanese (n = 67) and Spanish (n = 61) courses at a large urban university in the southern United States of America. We contacted the instructors of both languages for participation in the study and four instructors, two teaching Japanese and two teaching Spanish volunteered after talking with their students. Females outnumbered males almost two-to one, and there was an even distribution of Caucasian (34%), African American (32%), and Hispanic/Asian (34%) students. Eighty-eight percent of the students reported having studied foreign languages previously in secondary schools in and out of the country.

Instruments

We created an online survey with four sections to measure student opinion of various aspects of second language learning. The first section asked students to rank the importance of seven aspects of language acquisition (Pronunciation, Meaning, Content, Grammar, Vocabulary, Creativity, and Authenticity) using a rating scale (1 = Most Important, 2 = Second Most Important, and so forth). Students were asked to rate the importance of the seven aspects (1) when recording their responses and (2) when listening to their responses. The second section used the same rating scale but asked participants to rate the four linguistic skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in order of importance for them learning a second language.

The third section of the survey sought to measure student opinion of digital technology for oral language assessment purposes. Using a ten-point Likert scale, students were requested to answer 10 questions expressing agreement from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 10 (Strongly Disagree) regarding their perceptions of digital voice recording assessments. Students were asked about their perceptions of anxiety,

locus of control for success, accuracy of responses, amount of time students spent preparing for assessment, and vocabulary/structures usage in the target language. The final section of the survey included a brief demographic sheet asking students for age, sex, ethnicity, previous foreign language study prior to attending the university, and language class in which student is currently enrolled.

Procedure

As part of course requirements, subjects had a minimum of two oral language assessments during the semester, once at the third week and again at the thirteenth week of a fifteen-week semester. Instructors assessed student oral language ability in the university language lab by having students digitally record responses to prompts. For this research, the investigators selected two Japanese and two Spanish courses that met twice per week for a total of three instructional hours. The class day before the assessments, students were given examples of the two assessments and were told that the actual prompts would be slightly different.

In the university language lab, the instructors utilized the Sanako recorder to assess oral language proficiency (assisted by the second author). Once logged in at the lab, students followed on-screen directions in order to record their responses in the target language to teacher-created prompts. The first prompt, randomly selected from 20 possible prompts, asked students to read a short paragraph that contains descriptions of fictitious people (approximately 40 words) written in the target language. Students were allowed as much time as necessary to practice, record, listen to the recording, and re-record their voices as they read the description. Once satisfied with the recording, students saved the file with their name followed by a numerical one (1) to signify that the recording is the reading. Then, students placed the file in their instructor's folder, which instructors accessed online to retrieve student work.

Next, the computer displayed instructions for the second assessment that informed students that they had 60 seconds to answer an impromptu question. The students indicated their readiness to begin by clicking the "next" button, and one of 20 prompts was randomly assigned to each student on the computer screen. A digital timer counted down 60 seconds before the voice recorder automatically began to record student responses. Instructors encouraged students to maximize use of the target language vocabulary, grammar, and syntax as well as to concentrate on the meaning of their response, the accuracy of the content, the creativity and the authenticity of their answer. Additionally, students were reminded to speak for the entire time limit (30 seconds). After one minute, the software instructed students to save the file with their name followed by a numerical two (2) to signify the second recording. Again, students placed the voice file in the instructor's folder before logging off the system. At the end of the semester, students were asked to fill out the online survey before taking their last oral language assessment.

RESULTS

Data were retrieved from the database containing students' responses to the survey questions and were entered into a statistical software package (SPSS 17.0) for data analysis. First, the reliability was examined and a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .90 indicated a high degree of reliability. Next, to answer the first research question, we computed students' responses about the importance of each of the seven variables (Pronunciation, Meaning, Content, Grammar, Vocabulary, Creativity, and Authenticity). Table 1 reflects participant opinion in rank order of the importance for each variable regarding the recording of their responses and then listening to those responses once they have finished recording.

Table 1: Rank order for recording of answers followed by what students listen for after recording.

RECORDING	Most	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	Least
Pronunciation	43%	14%	9%	9%	3%	3%	20%
Grammar	9%	41%	16%	19%	3%	12%	0%
Vocabulary	7%	17%	28%	14%	10%	17%	7%
Content	18%	7%	11%	25%	14%	18%	7%
Meaning	21%	6%	18%	13%	27%	6%	9%
Authenticity	11%	13%	18%	16%	8%	16%	18%
Creativity	11%	9%	11%	17%	9%	14%	29%
LISTENING	Most	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	Least
Pronunciation	58%	6%	9%	3%	3%	3%	18%
Meaning	10%	43%	23%	10%	1%	13%	0%
Content	3%	20%	33%	3%	21%	13%	7%
Grammar	14%	10%	7%	45%	11%	3%	10%
Vocabulary	10%	10%	16%	19%	35%	10%	0%
Creativity	9%	3%	15%	21%	12%	16%	24%
Authenticity	13%	16%	16%	16%	0%	13%	26%

Overwhelmingly, almost half (43%) of the students rated Pronunciation as the most important element on which they focused during the recording process. Forty-one percent ranked Grammar as the second most important consideration and Vocabulary was ranked as the third most important element after Pronunciation. Authenticity of the response and Creativity of the response were the least important to the subjects, respectively. Both Content and Meaning were found to be moderately important to students during the recording of responses.

However, when asked about the importance of listening to their responses after they have recorded it, students ranked six of the seven variables differently. The lower part of Table 1 shows that 58% of the participants ranked Pronunciation as the most important aspect on which to concentrate. However, Meaning, ranked fifth in importance when recording a response for oral language assessment purposes, was now the second most important variable to students, followed by Content, Grammar, and Vocabulary. Again, Creativity (6th) and Authenticity (7th) were ranked last, this time in reverse order of importance.

Next, in order to answer the second research question, we examined student perception of the importance of the four linguistic skills and we found that students rated the oral and aural skills the highest (see Table 2).

Table 2: Rank order of importance four skills

	Most	Second	Third	Least
Speaking	62%	21%	9%	7%
Listening	28%	50%	10%	11%
Reading	7%	17%	56%	20%
Writing	8%	9%	21%	65%

Listening was rated as the most important skill by slightly more than a quarter of the subjects. Fifteen percent of the participants felt that reading and writing were the most important of the four skills. Half of the subjects rated listening as the second most important skill, well above speaking and reading. In order of overall importance, participants ranked Reading as the third most important skill and almost two out of every three participants ranked Writing as the least important skill to learn.

Lastly, we turned to analyzing the data regarding student perception of using digital technology for OLA to answer the third research question. Over half of the

subjects (55%) reported feeling more comfortable and more relaxed recording their responses in the language lab. Forty-five percent of the participants preferred using voice recording to traditional in-class OLA. An almost equal number of students (44%) considered their recorded responses to be more accurate and complete using the recording system as compared to being evaluated in class. Even more (55%) valued the ability to review, edit, and improve oral language proficiency using technology. More than three quarters of the students (78%) of the students reported that they typically recorded and re-recorded responses more than once with almost a third (31%) stating that they had recorded their responses at least four times or more before turning them in for grading. Fifty-two percent of the students reported that they were more likely to experiment with new grammatical structures and vocabulary using digital recording technology and 78% reported that they were more likely to try to imitate native speakers' when using voice recording. Lastly, the majority of the group perceived having more control of their academic success (52%) and almost every student (955) stated that they liked using voice recording for OLA.

DISCUSSION

There is a variety of digital options, hardware, software, webware, and VOIP resources, available to language teachers to use for digital OLA due to rapid advances in personal digital technology. These tools offer language educators and students manifold advantages such as assigning out-of-class OLA where students can record and submit responses outside of the traditional classroom, reducing student performance anxiety, and increasing precious instructional time. These recordings can be used for multiple purposes from documenting student progress to increasing OLA reliability by having more than one expert review and evaluate student oral language performance. It is important for language teachers to clearly articulate their program goals as they choose a digital option and we strongly urge educators to consult with their instructional technology leaders and/or departments.

In the present study, we chose to use the Sanako recorder and results from this investigation have several implications for language educators. First, the data showed that students tended to focus on pronunciation primarily during the recording and the listening process, which answered the first research question. Interestingly, students reported to focus less on meaning during the initial recording. However, once the first recording was completed, they shifted focus to the meaning of their responses. Additionally, the students tended to place lower importance on grammar and vocabulary, which many times is inconsistent with language teachers' assessment instruments (rubrics, check lists, etc.).

All too often teacher-created OLA rubrics tend to concentrate on discrete linguistic skills such as grammatical structure and vocabulary instead of focusing on the meaning of the student response, suggesting a lack of congruence between teachers' expectations and students' responses to oral language tasks. In an effort to

promote successful language learning, we strongly urge language instructors to reevaluate program goals of student proficiency and align OLA instruments with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking (Breiner-Sanders, Lowe, Miles, & Swender, 2000), where proficient speakers use various factors of the language to convey meaning in real life scenarios.

A second implication of this research involves the importance of documenting that students rate the skills of speaking and listening higher than reading and writing. While competence in all four skills is clearly important, language teachers need to keep students' reasons for second language learning in mind and implement procedures that maximize learning opportunities by assessing oral language ability both in and outside the classroom (Woodrow, 2006). The present study revealed that students felt less stress and anxiety recording their responses and also reported being more comfortable recording responses to teacher-created language tasks for assessment purposes than having to be evaluated orally in class. Because research indicates that speaking in front of peers in the second language classroom creates anxiety which can impede student performance (Woodrow, 2006), perhaps it is time for language educators to seriously consider using technology for OLA. Findings from this study support the notion that implementing digital recording in the OLA process holds multiple benefits for both the instructor as well as the students.

Many times language teachers conduct speaking assessments in the classroom where students have a single opportunity to respond to the language task(s). Findings reported here indicate that by using digital technology during OLA, student anxiety decreases and students feel that their responses are more accurate than those assessed using the traditional face-to-face method. An apparent advantage of using technology for OLA is that students have the ability to listen to their initial response, revise or edit their work prior to turning it in for teacher evaluation. Because it can be argued that students may solicit and receive assistance on the assessment task, thus putting the validity of the assessment in jeopardy, it is important to reiterate Woodrow's suggestion to use both in-class and out-of-class assessment of speaking proficiency. Nevertheless, the findings clearly indicated that many of the students revised and re-recorded their responses multiple times, in effect increasing the amount of time devoted to creating language.

While the present study highlights new and interesting options for language instructors, this research does have its limitations. The data were self-reported and the limitation of self-reported data is that researchers have no way of verifying the accuracy of the respondents' answers to the survey. Moreover, because this was a perceptual study of students' reactions to digital OLA, no data were collected to investigate if using any of these digital tools led to improve speaking and listening ability. Therefore, we call for more research in the area of digital technology for OLA purposes. It would be informative to investigate students currently enrolled in other languages to compare their perceptions of digital voice recordings to those reported here. Also, increasing the number and frequency of the assessments may

provide interesting findings that support the notion of using technology for speaking and listening assessments. Clearly, quality assessment of student oral language ability is crucial and digital recording appears to be a valuable option available to language instructors.

Perhaps by using technology for OLA purposes, of which there is a variety of tools available, teachers will begin to note in their students an improved ability to communicate in the target language, which is a central goal of language teaching (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999). As described in the beginning of this article, there is an abundance of free, low cost, and rather expensive digital voice recording options available to educators. The authors urge language teachers to investigate these tools for assessing student oral language competence and implement more technology in the second language classroom.

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