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Innovative use of mobile technologies in EAP oral assessment: a pilot study from The Open University

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Innovative use of mobile technologies in EAP oral assessment: a pilot study from The Open University

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Introduction

In this chapter, we explore the use of mobile technologies in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which is an emerging field both in language teaching and EAP. The value of mobile technologies in language learning and teaching is widely recognised (e.g., Demouy & Kukulska-Hulme, 2010; Agnes Kukulska-Hulme, 2009; Shrestha, 2012). However, the extent of research on mobile technologies within EAP is extremely sparse. Particularly, opportunities for practising English academic speaking skills in open and distance learning (ODL) are often limited unlike in a face-to-face context. By the same token, assessing oral skills in ODL academic contexts is further complicated and demanding administratively and pedagogically. Therefore, the current practices in ODL are limited to assessing less or non-interactive oral skills such as oral presentations.

In response to this problem, computers have been used recently to assess oral language skills, particularly in commercial tests (e.g., see Xi, 2010). Yet, there are issues around human versus machine rating. This chapter reports on an innovative application of mobile technologies in teaching and assessing academic English speaking skills in ODL. A pilot study was conducted with a group of English for Academic Purposes students once they completed their existing course between October and December 2010. A series of activities were designed and delivered through Talkback®, a voice response system powered by Learnosity (http://www.learnosity.com/). Talkback® allowed students to use mobile phones including smartphones, landlines, Skype or OU Voice (iTunes app) for practice and doing assignments.

These students' experience of using this system was investigated through weekly online survey questionnaires and telephone interviews. The chapter reports on the results from the study.

We first critically review the relevant literature in the field of mobile technology use in EAP briefly. Then, the context of the study is described. This is followed by a description of the project reported here. Next, we explain the methodology employed in the study and the type of data collected, which is followed by the results. The results are discussed in light of the research questions given in the literature review section. Finally, we conclude the chapter by presenting a number of pedagogical implications of the use of Talkback® for EAP oral assessment and speaking practice in the light of the results which may be applicable to other EAP contexts.

A brief review of the use of mobile technologies in EAP assessment

A recent surge in the use of ICTs is having an impact on how English and other languages are taught and learned (see, for example, Beatty, 2010; Motteram, 2013; Stockwell, 2007). The value of ICTs for language learning is widely accepted, albeit in some cases with caution (Warschauer & Ware, 2008). Mobile technologies for English language teaching and learning are still an emerging field. However, studies in developing and developed countries do offer evidence of mobile technologies' impact across various global contexts in regards to the aforementioned fields (e.g., see Agnes Kukulska-Hulme, 2012; Motteram, 2013; Shrestha, 2012).

Unlike tethered technologies, mobile technologies offer learners more flexibility and mobility with regard to accessing language learning resources. For example, the learner does not have to be in one particular place. More importantly, mobile technologies break the barrier of distance between the teacher and the learner (Beckmann, 2010). Given the rapid growth of users of mobile devices such as mobile phones and tablets globally (for global mobile phone subscribers, see ITU, 2013), the prospect of mobile technologies for language learning has increased over the last ten years. However, despite the increasing trend in using mobile technologies for English language teaching and learning, they are under-used in the field of English for specific or academic purposes (ESP/ EAP). For example, it is recognised that they are useful tools for both ESP and EAP and yet there appears to be no specific study measuring the use of mobile technologies in these fields (Gilbert, 2013; Kern, 2013). With regard to English language assessment, the use of technologies such as computers and specific softwares (e.g., speech recognition software) has been investigated (Chapelle & Chung, 2010; Chapelle & Douglas, 2006; Xi, 2010). Such technologies, nevertheless, do not appear to be examined in the context of EAP assessment (i.e.,

assessing the use of English for academic studies). For example, when the articles in two key EAP and ESP journals, *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* and *English for Specific Purposes Journal* were searched, there were no articles that directly addressed assessment and technologies, let alone the use of mobile technologies in EAP assessment. This may be true because most EAP and ESP teachers are interested in practical solutions to their challenges and thus may not have examined their context from a research perspective for various reasons.

Based on the brief review of literature above, it is clear that there is more need for understanding what affordances mobile technologies offer to EAP assessment, particularly EAP oral assessment. It is not only about affordances of mobile technologies for EAP oral assessment but also about their impact on students and their learning contexts. Keeping these issues in view, an exploratory study was conducted which addressed the following research questions:

What affordances does Talkback® offer to EAP oral assessment?
What is the student's experience of using Talkback® for EAP oral practice and assessment?
What are pedagogical implications for EAP programmes?

The local context

The study reported here took place at The Open University, UK (OUUK), which offers higher education through an open and distance learning (ODL) mode. It is the largest university in Europe and is well-known for providing education at a large scale. Within the university, the Department of Languages offers a number of language modules in various languages (e.g., German, Spanish). EAP is one of the modules offered to students. Given the open and distance mode of teaching, EAP students (currently about 2,000) do not have any face-to-face contact with their tutors or fellow students. As a result, these students lack opportunities to practise oral skills in EAP unlike their counterparts in traditional universities. Similarly, they have limited resources for practising listening skills which may be a reflection of the general trend in higher education where the main mode of demonstrating student performance is through writing (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Shrestha & Coffin, 2012). However, both listening and speaking skills are essential for academic and professional purposes (for a review of research, see Lynch, 2011). There was, therefore, a need for addressing this problem in a cost-effective way in an ODL context. Given the OUUK's pioneering role in using educational technologies, an immediate option was to explore any potential technologies for a solution. How this was done is explained in the next section.

Methodologies employed

EAP student needs

The OUUK offers a credit-bearing EAP module (30 points) to students. As noted above, students' oral practice in this module is extremely limited. This issue had emerged persistently in an annual end of the module student survey. Of course, this module includes some oral practice and assessment which is, however, not interactive. It concentrates on a non-interactive oral skill, namely presentations. This focus on oral presentations raised questions about the claim the module could make about students' oral skills in EAP. Additionally, these students who move on to study other subjects required interactive oral skills. Therefore, a pilot project called 'Interactive Oral Assessment' was developed to explore how mobile technologies could enable students to develop more interactive oral skills in EAP.

The Interactive Oral Assessment project

Objectives

The main objective of this pilot project was to trial Learnosity's voice response system known as Talkback® for use in the formative and summative assessment of listening and speaking skills in French and EAP. However, this chapter will report on the EAP data only. The project ran for six weeks in the autumn of 2010.
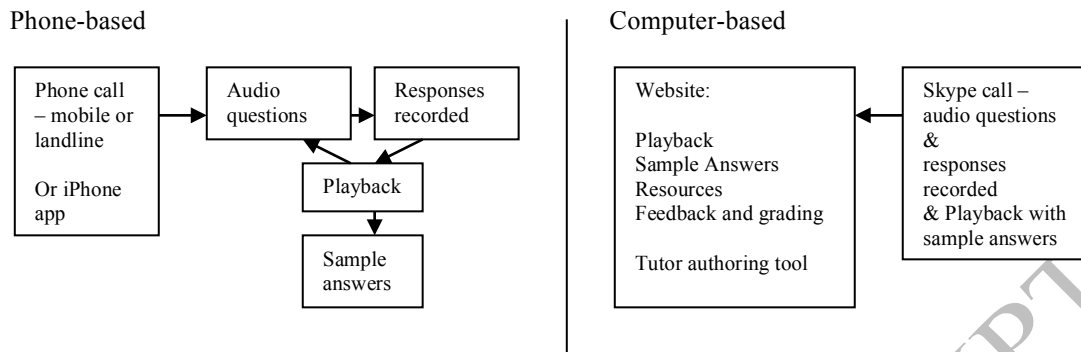
Learnosity's Talkback®

Learnosity is a company which specialises in providing simple user-friendly ICT tools to educational institutions for the practice and assessment of languages. Talkback® is one of the tools they offer. It is a tool designed for the practice and assessment of listening and speaking skills.

Talkback® is an interactive voice response system that works through a simple phone call. It is akin to what is used in telephone banking and other services. A series of audio questions, which together make up an activity, prompts students to respond orally. There is no visual support nor are there any text prompts.

Answers to the questions for each activity are recorded and can be played back straightaway on the phone via the phone review. The phone review lets students listen to the series of questions, each followed by the student's answers themselves, followed by recorded sample answers where appropriate. Additionally, students can review their activities online via a dedicated website and access other related resources such as the transcription of prompts where given.

Figure 1 Using Talkback® on the phone and/or computer

Phone-based

| Phone call – mobile or landline | Audio questions | Responses recorded |

Or iPhone app

Playback

Sample answers

Computer-based

Website:

Playback
Sample Answers
Resources
Feedback and grading

Tutor authoring tool

Skype call – audio questions & responses recorded & Playback with sample answers

However, Talkback® is not just a practice tool. It allows tutors to access their students' activities online via the same dedicated website so that they can comment and grade their students' work. Feedback is immediate and students can then access their results and teachers' comments via the same website.

Additionally, Talkback® has a simple authoring tool which allows teachers to create questions and activities. Teachers can record questions by using the tool's recording facility or if they prefer by uploading pre-recorded MP3 or WAV files.

On the IOA project, activities could be accessed in a variety of ways (see Figure 2):
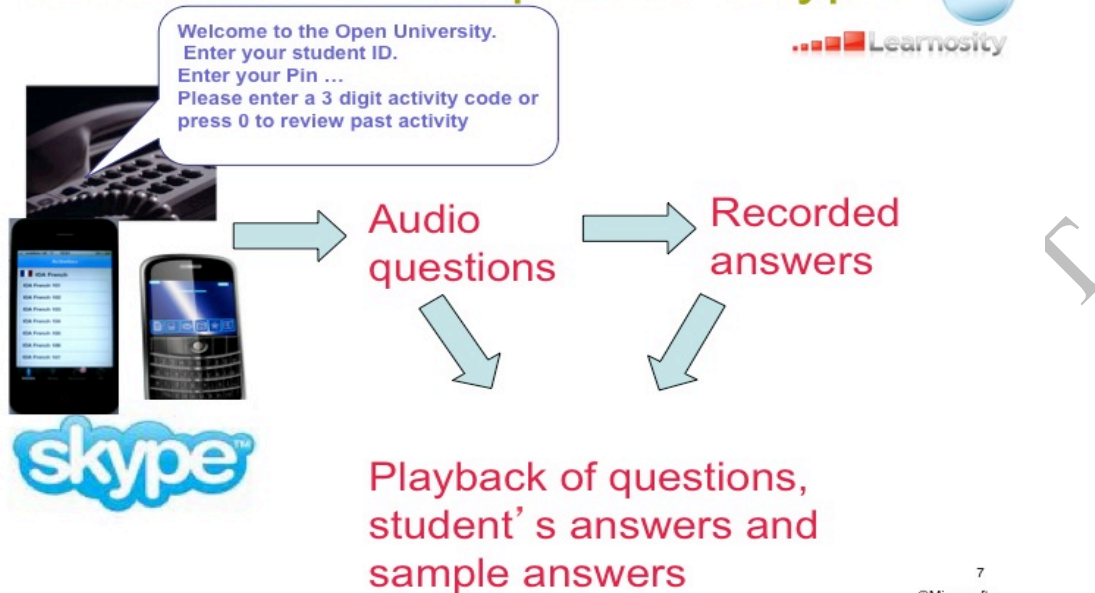
- a landline or mobile phone through a lo-call (low cost) 0330 number

- Skype VOIP (through a contact name and so free of charge)

- 'OU Voice' the iPhone/ iPod Application designed by Learnosity and available in the iTunes shop free of charge

Figure 2: Different options for using Talkback®

Students were provided with a unique Student ID and password (PIN) to key in, in order to access activities on the phone or online. Once 'in', students had access to the activities by entering the relevant activity code to the activities created for them by the project team. Students could attempt the activities as many times as they wanted. Tutors on the project were given a unique username and password to access their students' activities online via the same dedicated website used by students.

A VLE workspace (see Figure 3 below) was created hosting information resources for students such as the module guide, an overview document showing all activities per week on the pilot, overview documents for the assignments, other materials used in preparation for some activities and a link to the IOA Learnosity website (giving access to the activities online for teachers and students). A forum on the website allowed students to communicate with the project team and with each other.

Figure 3 The VLE sites
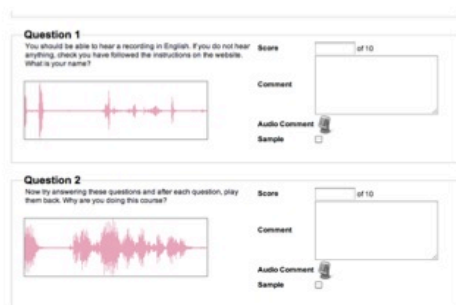
The design of the EAP oral materials

The design of the EAP materials was informed by a language in context model developed within Systemic Functional Linuistics (e.g., Coffin, Donohue, & North, 2009). This model views language as a meaning-making resource for a social purpose in a sociocultural context. As such, in this project, key language features and functions in an academic context were considered. A wide range of activities were designed accordingly. These activities were developed to reflect the reality of academic study in higher education. Therefore, they focused on how language is used in university seminars and workshops. A particular focus was on a number of speech functions that are common in such seminars and workshops. They are listed below:

- Describing one's cultural/ educational/ linguistic background

- Asking and answering questions

- Asking for clarification

- Explaining/ Giving reasons

- Agreeing

- Disagreeing

- Interrupting

- Giving opinions

- Introducing a presentation

- Summarising key points

- Persuading (through the main part of the presentation)

- Drawing conclusions in a presentation

Each week, the activities concentrated on at least two of the functions listed above. In total, students were expected to spend up to four hours practising EAP listening and speaking skills. Whilst the activities in the first three weeks allowed students to practise seminar and discussion skills, the last two weeks helped them to enhance their academic presentation skills.

Most of the activities had questions that required some preparation. For this purpose, a summary of the activities for each week was posted on the VLE workspace. Activities that needed preparation relied on various sources of information. These included reading texts, and accessing videos and audios provided on the workspace .

In addition to the practice activities, there were two assignments. Assignment 1 assessed the skills covered in weeks 1 and 2 activities (e.g., Asking for clarification, Explaining/ Giving reasons). The maximum mark for this assignment was 40. Here is an example of a task given in Assignment 1:

In preparation for a seminar on online learning with children, your teacher asks:

"Maybe some of you have got children or have regular contact with children but even if you haven't, can you think of some opportunities and challenges for children when learning online?"

Respond to your tutor.

Assignment 2 tested skills practised in weeks 3, 4 and 5 and the maximum mark was 60. The main purpose of Assignment 2 was to assess oral academic presentation skills. The marking criteria were different for each assignment given the nature of the response required for each. They are given in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: Marking criteria for mini oral responses (academic discussions)

Marks	Marking criteria
	Relevance of information/ response as required by the question • Is the response relevant to the question? • Is the task requirement fulfilled?

Marks	Marking criteria
	Cohesion and fluency • Are the ideas linked together well (e.g., use of linking words, conjunctions, etc.)? • Are the sentences sequenced logically? • Does the speaker speak at a normal rate of speech (i.e., no hesitation) continuously?
	Appropriate style • Does the speaker use a range of subject-related vocabulary? • Does the speaker show an appropriate relationship with the listener? • Does the speaker use any evaluative language (e.g., attitudes towards the listener, topic/ issue)?
	Grammatical accuracy • Does the speaker use a range of recognised sentence patterns in English accurately? • Are the verb tenses formed correctly? • Is the communication impeded by any grammatical inaccuracies?
	Pronunciation • Is the pronunciation intelligible? • Is an appropriate tone used?

Table 2: Marking criteria for oral academic presentation

| Marks	Marking criteria
	Relevance of information as required by the task • Are the content and issues in the presentation relevant to the task? • Are technical terms defined where necessary? • Are relevant sources used to support a point/ claim?
	Cohesion, organisation and fluency • Are the ideas linked together well (e.g., use of linking words, conjunctions, etc.)? • Are there phases/ stages of the presentation (i.e., beginning, middle and end) clearly indicated? • Are the sentences sequenced logically? • Does the speaker speak at a normal rate of speech (i.e., no hesitation) continuously?
	Appropriate style • Does the speaker use a range of subject-related vocabulary? • Does the speaker show an appropriate relationship with the listener? • Does the speaker use any evaluative language (e.g., speaker's view on the issue or topic)?

	Grammatical accuracy • Does the speaker use a range of recognised sentence patterns in English accurately? • Are the verb tenses formed correctly? • Is the communication impeded by any grammatical inaccuracies?
	Pronunciation • Is the pronunciation intelligible? • Is an appropriate tone used?

Participants, data collection and analysis methods

The participants for this project were recruited from an EAP module. These students were approached by following the university's standard ethical guidelines and process. The project was advertised on the EAP module website at the beginning of September 2010. The advertising message explained what the pilot consisted of and what was expected of participants. Students were invited to register their interest via an electronic registration form or by email by 30 September. In addition, the message stated that participants would be selected on a first come, first served basis. In total 20 students registered for participation but nine of them visited the workspace and never started the activities despite further reminders by emails and phone calls. This left 11 students participating in the project. While 11 students completed Phase 1 (i.e., week 1), 10 students completed Phases 2, 3 and 5 and only six students finished Phase 4 (see Figure 4 below). It is not known why only six students completed Phase 4.

The graph below shows the number of the participants responding to the questionnaire in the 5 phases of the project.

Figure 4 Bar chart showing the number of participants responding to the questionnaire for each phase of the project
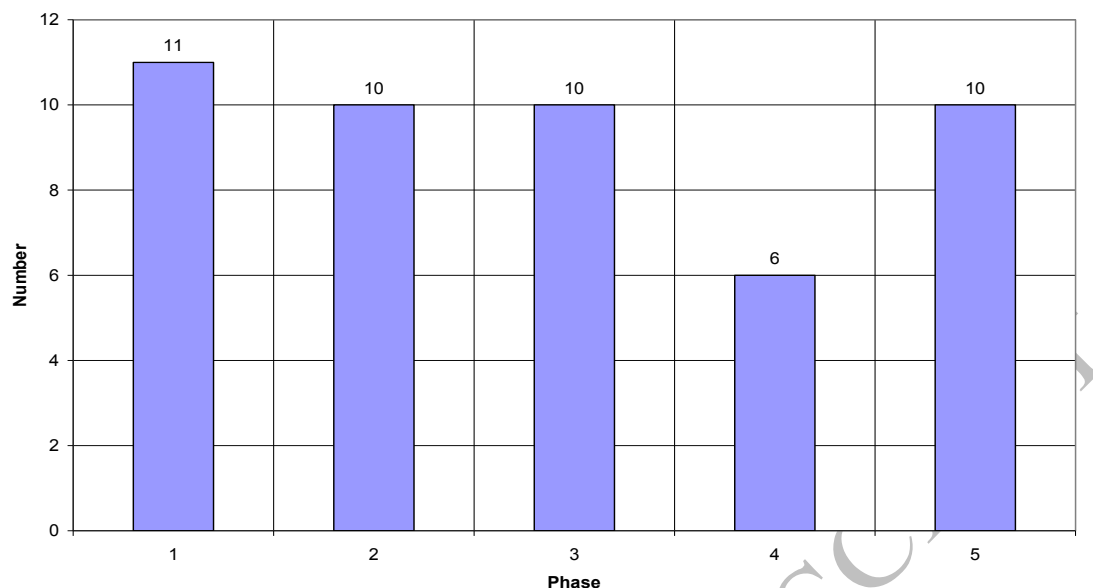
The data was collected from the participants in four different ways: (1) a weekly online questionnaire for each phase/week of the project was sent to students. Questionnaires in Phase 1 included a section on 'getting started' with the module and the tool. Phases 3 and 5 included a section on the assignments and Phase 5 included a section on the overall experience of the project. Questions focused on the preferences of participants regarding the mode of access of the activities (Skype, landline, mobile etc.), the context, the workload and frequency of use as well as the functionality of the tool and the pedagogical aspect of working with such a tool for practice and assessment. (2) An interview with one participant after the pilot had finished and a preliminary analysis of the data collected by the online questionnaires had taken place. (3) Students were asked to record feedback on Talkback® after each activity was completed. (4) The VLE forum on the workspace as well as the dedicated email address which provided additional feedback or gave participants the possibility to address queries and suggestions.

Once the data were collected, the survey data were statistically analysed. Given the small number of participants, the statistical data were manually analysed. In order to complement the statistical data, the open-ended comments and the interview data were examined.

Findings

In this section, we report the findings based on the various data sets. The findings are presented in the themes that emerged from the data collected.

Context and modes of access

All participants mentioned that they carried out the activities at home. Most of these participants reviewed the activities online on their home computer. During phases 1, 2 and 4, only one participant reviewed the activities on a work computer. On the other hand, some participants did not review the activities online at all: 3 in phase 1, 2 in phases 2 and 5, and 1 in phases 3 and 4. It is not clear why these students did not review the activities. The interview data (1 participant only) suggest that Talkback® allows students to do the activities 'anytime' but not 'anywhere'.

Figure 5 (below) shows the result for the preference of a technology for accessing the activities. Almost the same number of the students chose to use Skype and a landline phone, except during the second week.

Figure 5 Table showing which technology was used to access the activities. Note that participants could use more than one technology per phase (N= 7 – 9)
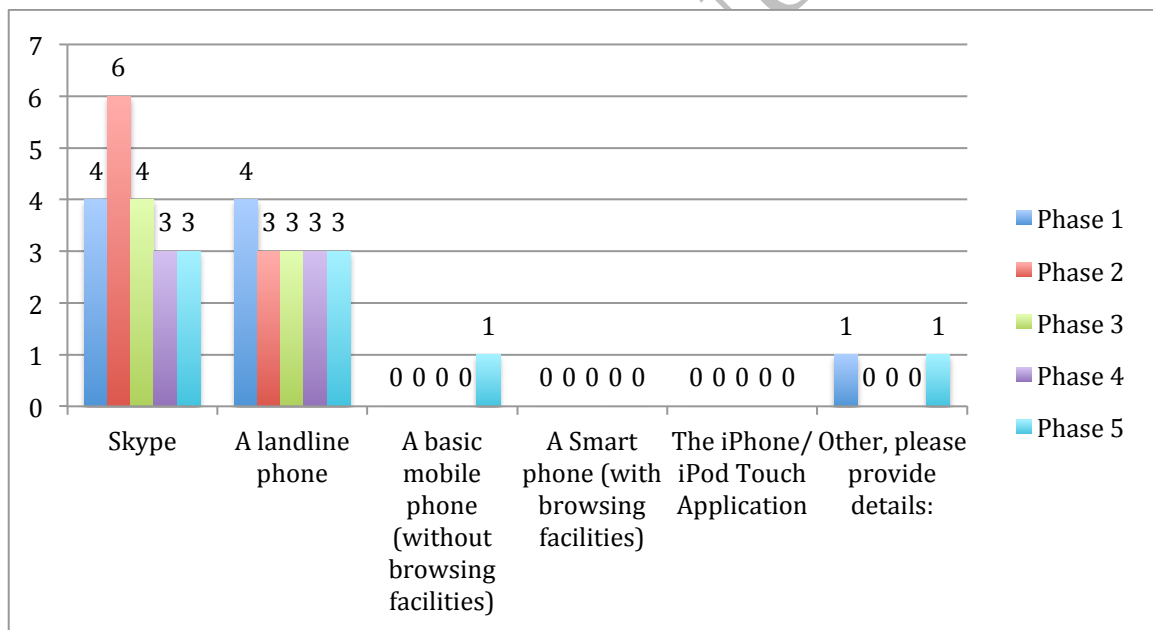
Functionality and technical issues

Most participants found starting the first two activities either 'very easy' or 'easy'. Only two participants reported that they found this 'not easy at all'. Almost all participants reported that they had no problem accessing the activities via Talkback®. However, there were one participant in phase 1 and two in phase 5 who indicated that they had a difficulty. They did not provide

further information as to why except that they found it hard to access some of the sample answers.

Considering the functional aspect of accessing Talkback® through various media, nearly all participants found it 'very easy' or 'easy'. Likewise, reviewing the activities on the phone or online, all the participants reported it to be either 'very useful' or 'useful'. In phase 5, however, one or two participants found it difficult. The participants stated that the possibility to attempt an activity more than once was an advantage. For example, a participant said 'It is always good to repeat activities' and another said 'You could listen to your answer. If you made mistakes, you could attempt it again'.

As mentioned earlier, most students did the activities via Skype and a landline. Most of the students reported that it was either 'very easy' or 'easy' to access the assignment results and feedback. Only one student indicated that it was 'difficult' for Assignment 1 while, for Assignment 2, one said it was 'not easy' and the other 'difficult'.

The participants mentioned that initially there were some technical issues (e.g., the use of Skype, recording, etc.) but it was mainly during Assignment 1. None of the students had any technical problem for their Assignment 2.

Workload and frequency

The time spent per week carrying out the activities varied greatly depending on students' circumstances and whether there was an assignment or not. However, at least five students spent between 1 and 3 hours in phases 1 and 2 while four students took four hours or more for Phase 3 which included Assignment 1. It appears that on average it may have taken up to three hours to complete the activities in each phase although the expectation was that it would take up to four hours for each phase. Likewise, the average time spent on any one session seems to be up to 30 minutes although it varied each week.

Activity types and preferences

The participants had access to a weekly planner which detailed the activity number and the type of activity. In addition, the planner indicated if the students needed to prepare for the activities in question. As mentioned earlier, the EAP oral activities were designed on the basis of the speech functions that students may encounter in an academic context in higher education. In order to reflect these speech functions, the following types of activities were designed:

- Short dialogues

- Listen and respond to a situation (e.g., seminar)

- Listen and respond to prompts

- Giving opinions

- Summarising information

- Mini academic presentations

The weekly questionnaire asked the students to state what they preferred from among the activities each week. On the basis of their responses, it appears that they like listening activities which integrate multi-media materials such as audio and video as source materials. Some students also liked the short academic presentation.

The students reported that they completed the activities in a chronological order. Nonetheless, the majority of them did not use the weekly planner to choose the activity. Those who utilised the planner explained that due to the new technology, they decided to use the planner.

The assignments (content, length and feedback)

The participants were asked to comment on the content and length of the assignments. When asked about the difficulty level of the assignments, most of the participants stated that they were at the appropriate level. Some of them mentioned a recording issue for the second assignment which was a presentation and required a reasonably longer time than the first one did. They were also asked to indicate which part of the assignment was easy or difficult. Most of them reported that the beginning questions in each assignment were easier while the later ones were more challenging. This confirms the intention of the principle on which the assignments were designed. Likewise, most students thought that the length of the assignments was 'about right'. The table below summarises the result.

Table 4 Results of categorisation of participants' answers to: 'What is your opinion on the length of the assignment?' for phase 3 and phase 5

	Phase 3			Phase 5		
	Too short	About right	Too long	Too short	About right	Too long
No.	1	6	0	2	5	0
%	14%	86%	0%	29%	71%	0%

Additionally, the participants reported on the assignment feedback, marks and student performance. Figure 6 summarises their perception of the assignments feedback and marks regarding their layout and readability. As can be seen in the figure, most of the participants thought they were either 'very clear and easy to understand' or 'clear and fairly easy to understand'.

Figure 6 Bar chart showing participants' views of the way the marks and feedback were organised in terms of layout and readability
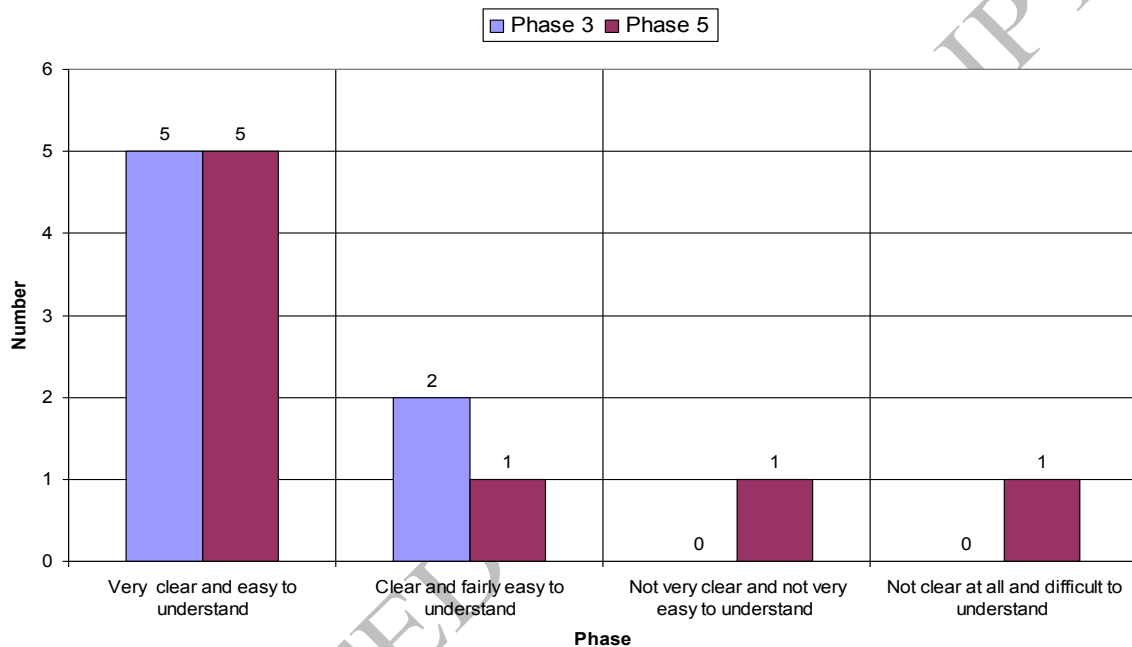

Similarly, almost all the participants (except two for Assignment 2) found the audio feedback on the assignment either 'very good' or 'good'. This indicates the positive value of the audio feedback provided via Talkback®.

Perceptions on overall impact of the project

The overall experience of the participants seemed to be overwhelmingly positive as seven out of eight respondents stated that the project met their expectations. A number of survey questions were asked to explore the overall experience further.

At the beginning of the project, the participants were asked for their reason for participating in the pilot. Their main reasons were: to improve pronunciation, to improve academic discussion skills and to practise academic presentation skills. Some students also indicated 'to improve listening skills' and 'to explore new technology' as their reasons. Figure 7 summarises the result.

Figure 7 Reasons for participating in the pilot (N=11).
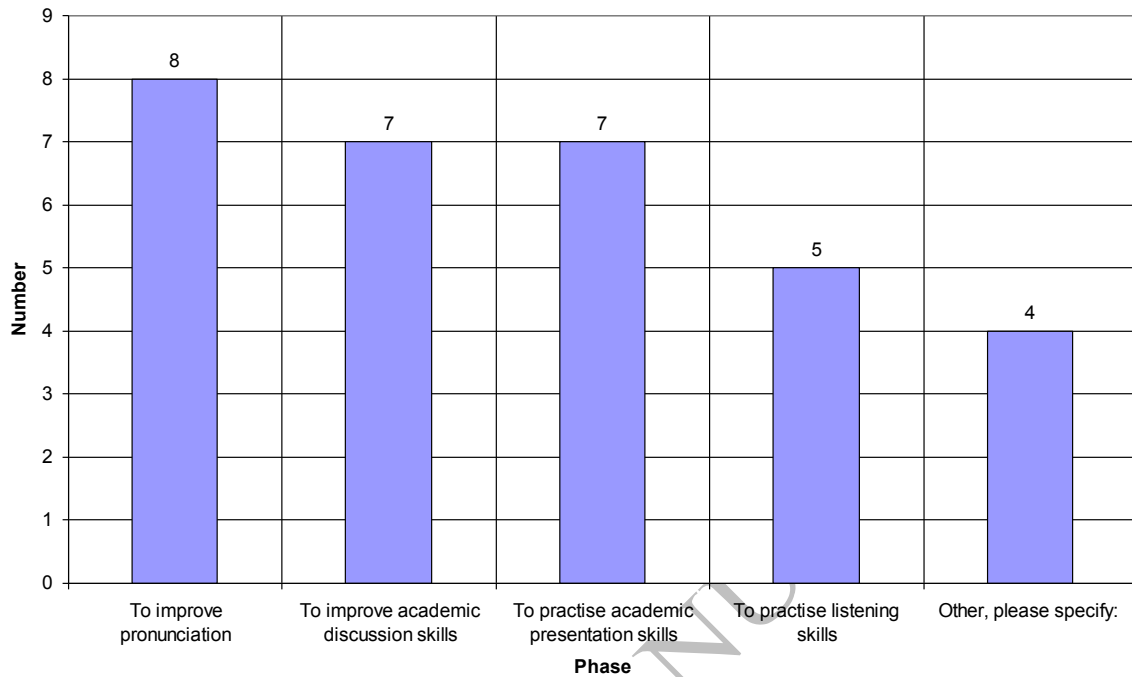
At the end of the project, these participants were asked about their achievement. As Figure 8 shows, this project helped them improve additional aspects of listening and speaking in EAP. The most common four aspects were: 'confidence', 'respond quickly orally', 'respond more appropriately orally' and 'academic presentation skills'. However, there was one participant who was 'frustrated' with the project. The participant was not available for the interview to explore why they felt frustrated.

Figure 8 Bar chart showing number of participants who thought the pilot had improved specific skills and abilities (number of participants responding to this question = 8)
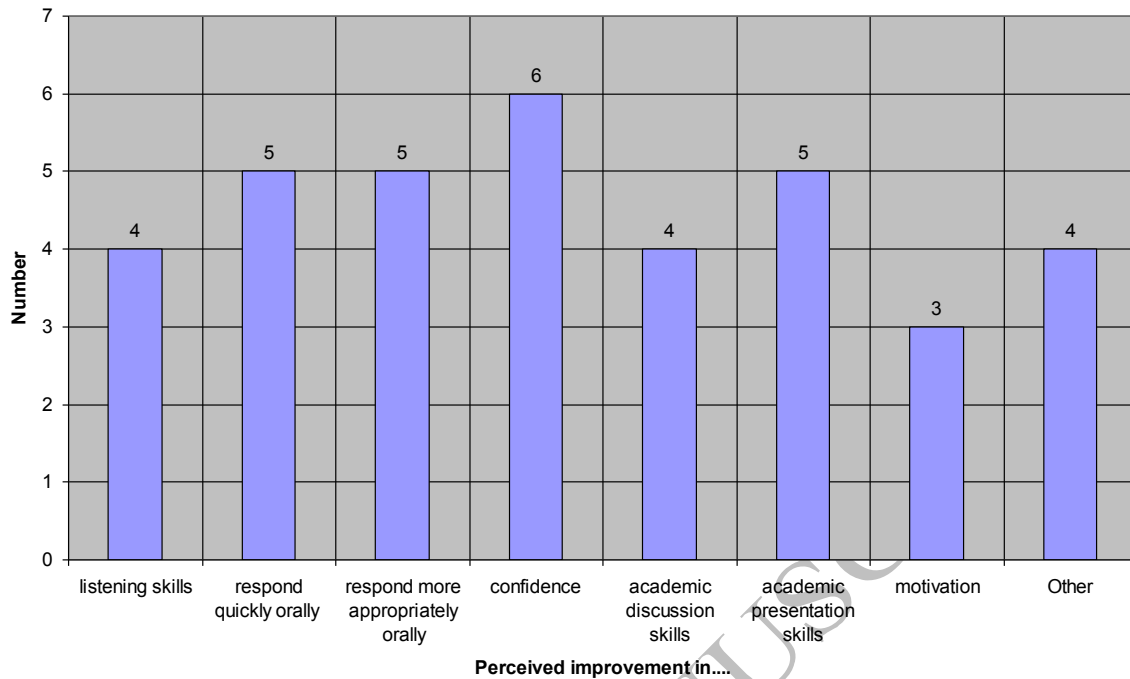
The participants were also asked to rate the overall usefulness of Talkback® for speaking practice. Almost all the participants said that it was either 'extremely useful', 'very useful' or 'useful'. Only one participant said 'I don't know'. This result suggests that Talkback® is a useful tool for EAP listening and speaking practice. This is reflected in one of the participants' comment: 'It was a very nice addition to L185 [EAP module]. It could have benefitted from a bit more background knowledge, but maybe that comes when it is embedded into a course proper.'

Another question focused on the advantage of Talkback® over other media such as CD ROMs. Most students thought that Talkback® creates an authentic situation where one interacts, as suggested by these quotes:

> 'Talkback® allow to listen, to record, to review or to rerecord activities in very easy way. It also allow to do activities anywhere and in any time (access to the computer is not necessary), and submitting assignments is easier without any worries about appropriate recording tool and appropriate file.' The perception of being 'live' was also mentioned: 'I am just now doing French, and working with recorded language from a CD is even more "artificial" than is the phone situation. One advantage is clearly the psychology of direct interaction that is created by using the phone.',

> 'I am currently doing the French introductory course. The CD is more like an exercise; the phone is more interactive, more like real life.' (Interview)

The participants did not consider Talkback® having any disadvantage compared to other tools except that it was not integrated with a course in the pilot. Likewise, six out of eight participants said that they would be happy to carry out their speaking assignments via Talkback®. Seven of them also said that they would recommend the module to their friends. Some of the explanations for their recommendations are given below:

> 'This module helps to develop many useful skills which can be transferred to the work place, academic studies and every day communication.',
>
> 'It would help a lot non native speaker who do not have the possibility to practise their English',
>
> 'I would recommend the module to anyone, who wants speaking training. It can help to get over shyness and any other feelings that may make speaking difficult and it got me a lot of training and thinking. It also was a nice addition to the EAP course. On its own, however, it would benefit from a bit more theoretical and example input - as I have commented before.'

Discussion and lessons learned

The findings reported above suggest that Learnosity's Talkback® offers opportunities to EAP students in an ODL context to practise oral skills. These skills can also be assessed by using the same tool. However, the findings also reveal a number of aspects that need considering if the tool is to be integrated into an EAP module.

It is important to recognise the type of EAP tasks that can be used with Talkback® as this tool is generally used for shorter tasks such as pronunciation (see Demouy & Kukulska‑Hulme, 2010). It is widely accepted that such tasks are dependent on the purpose and the context of language use (Hyland, 2007). In this respect, we took the view that speaking is a social activity based on a situation (Luoma, 2004). In order to reflect this view, EAP assessment tasks focused on communicative functions for the purpose of academic study rather than general communication skills as noted previously. This meant designing activities that students encounter in academic seminars and workshops in higher education. Likewise, it is common to provide preparation materials in advance of such workshops and seminars. Therefore, activities focusing on seminar discussion skills accompanied reading texts, and audio and video materials. The students had to read, listen to or watch these sources as appropriate prior to the activity. In our view, this aspect of the activity design is an extension of Talkback® which was primarily for short interactions rather than an extended one, as stated earlier. While some students found it difficult to juggle various sources for the activity, some others enjoyed doing so without any difficulty. This may

indicate the continuous challenge we face while designing listening and speaking materials for EAP in open and distance education.

Talkback® was designed to provide short interaction opportunities to students. Thus, presentation tasks may be at odds with it. Students, however, liked them when visual support or more scaffolding was offered. It is not clear yet whether it helped to anchor the task in a more realistic and meaningful situation and therefore, more in-depth analysis is required, but this aspect certainly needs to be looked at more carefully, especially if Talkback® is considered for use with other subjects such as Health or Business.

Talkback®'s flexibility makes the tool available from almost anywhere and at any time for students, offering the potential to switch from one platform to another depending on circumstances or locations. So, for instance, it allows students to prioritise landline access at times of high internet traffic or when the only PC in the home is not available. On the project, it gave a few students the choice to do their assignments on the phone as the sound quality was better for them there than on their PC. This also means making the EAP oral tasks suitable for such flexibility.

Unlike the other tools students are used to (e.g., CDs, DVD-ROMs, other web-based interactive tools, etc.), Talkback® does not offer students the possibility to rely on a transcription of the questions when doing the activities, nor does it allow students to pause to check a word in a dictionary for instance. Though transcriptions of questions were provided (except for assignments) and students could access these via the online review once they had attempted an activity, for several reasons the transcription of sample answers was not made available despite several students asking for them. However, providing transcription of activities at a given point, perhaps once students have completed a set of activities might enhance the learning experience and help students reflect on the progress they have made or consider redoing some activities in view of systematic errors. However, the timing of the release of transcription needs to be considered carefully as it will impact on how students will interact with the tool.

A pause facility or an option to repeat the question before answering is not available with Talkback®. Some students felt these options would be useful. The facility to repeat questions already exists in Talkback® but is only available when an answer has been given and the student has indicated that s/he wants to record a new answer. The tool prioritises the immediacy of the response and perhaps so makes it less likely for students to access this repeat facility as they will have already given an answer and might move on to the next question. Adding those two facilities

would actually change Talkback® quite drastically and make it more similar to other existing tools.

Unlike other tools, Talkback® records all responses whether an activity has been completed or not. When a question is answered, the answer is recorded and immediately accessible to the student or their tutor. Students can access their answers immediately after having done the activity on the same platform (phone, Skype, iTunes App). When a sample answer has been provided, they can compare what they have done with it. Both tutors and students can review activities online and as seen before look at the transcription of the questions. This immediate access to generic feedback or answer can be paired with immediate personalised feedback on each answered question by tutors. Nevertheless, a quick response from the tutor is only possible if EAP tasks are short and quick.

From a formative assessment point of view in EAP, Talkback® offers tutors an opportunity to assess their students' specific oral skills and by the same token provide formative feedback on a particular aspect of speaking (e.g., asking for clarification by asking appropriate questions). Such focused feedback is considered effective (Nicol, 2010) as it helps to enhance students' emerging abilities (Shrestha & Coffin, 2012).

The participants pointed out that the tool played a part in their perceived improvement and confidence. For instance, a student remarked that 'Talkback® is much more immediate and pushes a learner to remember more, rather than rely on referring back to dictionaries or verb tables'. Another pointed out that 'it made listening back a more realistic experience' and several insisted on the fact that it helps them to 'respond quicker and get confidence in speaking'. Indeed, confidence is essential to improve EAP oral communication skills (Crosling & Ward, 2002). In the absence of face-to-face immediacy, Talkback® helps ODL students to build their confidence given a semi-authentic environment it creates (i.e., talking to someone at the other end of a phone line/ Skype).

It needs to be noted that one technological tool such as Talkback® alone cannot meet needs of EAP students. Therefore, it is important to recognise how it can be integrated with other tools already in use. For example, if an EAP module uses a VLE site such as Moodle, it is essential to consider how other module materials such as written texts, and multimedia materials can be enhanced by introducing Talkback®.

Though Talkback® has the advantage of offering a variety of access modes and therefore gives users the possibility of switching from one to another if technological glitches occur, one should

keep in mind that any technology will come with its share of issues whether it is due to the user's equipment, an unreliable internet connection or simply a power cut. There were syncing issues with the iPhone OU voice App which was tested and under development during the project and these will need to be ironed out and properly tested should the App be offered as a way into the activities.

It is worth noting that this pilot study had a small sample of participants. Therefore, findings from this study cannot generalised and have to be treated cautiously. A further study with a larger sample is desirable.

Conclusion and global implications

The result of this pilot study indicated that the project met most of the EAP students' expectations in terms of practising EAP listening and speaking skills in an open and distance learning context. The match between the technological tool, the content and the format was highlighted by numerous comments and results have shown that students perceived that they had improved in skills and confidence. This clearly shows how highly students rate the opportunities to practise listening and speaking skills more intensively and it might be worth investigating how Talkback® can be integrated into mainstream EAP modules which are offered through a VLE site.

The results also demonstrated that the students saw the potential of integrating Talkback® with other technological tools and materials within a distance learning setting where opportunities for oral interaction with a tutor or peers in the target context were few and far between. They commented how flexible and easy to use it was. They envisaged ways of how this tool could contribute to allowing more personalised and meaningful feedback, how it could enhance interaction with 'real' people when it happened. They saw the potential for more realistic, authentic and meaningful tasks leading to better communicative skills and they enjoyed doing their assignments via the tool.

Opportunities for practising oral skills in EAP offered by Talkback® may not be limited to open and distance learning EAP students. For example, in a traditional face-to-face university, there is a tendency to focus on students' written performance despite the fact that students have to participate in seminars and discussions (Lynch, 2011). Participating in such academic activities can be extremely challenging, particularly to those students who have to operate in English as a second language or a lingua franca (Evans & Morrison, 2011). Spoken skills are often ignored or are limited to presentations even though oral communication is essential for academic communication. Thus, tools like Talkback® and associated mobile technologies can address this

kind of gap as students can practise their EAP oral skills outside their regular on-campus EAP sessions.

However, any EAP practitioner or their institution wanting to integrate tools like Talkback® and mobile technologies into their EAP programmes need to make a number of considerations. As suggested by this pilot study, the simple phone and online interface seemed to have posed a few problems to students. For example, some participants thought they needed more instructions on how to get started. So more visual support might very well be needed at the outset to explain how the tool works and what mobile applications the tool can be used with.

Another important point to remember is that given Talkback®'s unique functionality, it would be problematic to use it for assessment only. It needs to be used for practice throughout a module or course. Once used for practice, it would then be logical to use it for assessment, thus providing students plenty of opportunities to 'play' with the technology. Once the technology becomes 'normalised' in students' learning, the tool as a sociocultural tool may pose less threat to the actual learning process (Bax, 2011), which otherwise can cause challenges.

The design of activities using mobile technologies for EAP oral skills deserves careful consideration as well. Activities should be designed with the specificity of the tool in mind, such as various access modes (e.g., ordinary landline, Skype, mobile apps, etc.), potential for quick feedback which may be generic and personalised. As noted previously, shorter interactive activities work better with interactive tools like Talkback®. Longer activities may be demotivating to students.

Technologies such as Talkback® offer options to provide transcriptions of tasks used in the module. It is important to make an informed decision as to whether to provide such transcriptions or not and at what given time in the module. For example, if you make the transcription of a task available from the beginning, the whole purpose of the task may be defeated. On the other hand, if it is provided very late, students may not be able to use it as reference, for example, to check what they heard was correct or not. This is particularly important if students have limited opportunities to hear English language outside their module or course.

Talkback® offers an option for students to make their answers available to all students within the website where the tool is hosted. This facility helps students to engage in collaborative learning and if it is a skill to be promoted through the EAP module then it should be considered. At the moment the tool allows the tutor to make an answer available to all students.

Currently, there does not exist any practitioner-led mobile technology enhanced EAP assessment unless provided by large commercial organisations (e.g., Educational Testing Services and Pearson). Talkback® or Learnosity's tools appear to be attractive options for assessment designed by teachers which are more context-sensitive and responsive to needs of EAP students than those by commercial providers. Therefore, EAP providers may be find Talkback® an attractive cost-effective solution.

Given that the tutor can constantly update EAP oral assessment and practice materials and recycle them, Talkback® resources can be shared among not only the EAP tutors in one institution but also with those working in other institutions if student needs are similar. This also helps to reduce the cost of the tool.

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