USING TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPETENCY

Janet Flewelling*

ORAL TESTING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS

One of the tasks faced by second/foreign language teachers is to evaluate the oral skills of their students. A key principle related to evaluation is that oral testing must be done orally, not through written tests. (Brown, 1987, Curtain and Pesola, 1988). This places a heavy burden on teachers who can have hundreds of students to evaluate in any given school year. At times, individual students can be evaluated in a whole class or group setting but for the best and fairest result, it should be done on an one-to-one basis. Given the large number of students foreign language teachers must evaluate, this would go against the evaluation principle which suggests that testing techniques should be practical (Brown, 1987). On the other hand, teachers who try to evaluate more than one student at a time (eg. asking a pair of students to converse with each other on a given topic while the teacher evaluates) face problems which can affect the end result: it is difficult for the evaluator to focus on the speech of both students equally at the same time, students can be disadvantaged in their efforts if one student is stronger or weaker than the other and frequently students feel uncomfortable being tested in the presence of a peer. (Hughs, 1989).

One way in which teachers can make the task of doing Oral evaluations easier for both themselves and for students is to test in a language lab setting. This allows teachers to evaluate an entire class of students at once and students often feel more relaxed responding to an inanimate machine than in front of a person. The additional advantage for teachers is that since responses are recorded, they can evaluate them at their convenience and responses can be replayed many times, allowing the instructor to focus on different aspects of the recorded material at different times. (Hughs, 1989 The result is a more accurate and fair mark As Borich comments, "using...audiotapes can enhance the validity of performance assessments when direct observation of performance is required". (Borich, 1996, p. 667).

Many foreign language teachers do not, however, have access to a language lab. This is, in fact, the case at the University of Windsor. Since I am responsible for testing the oral language skills of a large number of students each year, I was eager to find an alternative means of doing group testing. In conjunction with the University's Department of Instructional Development, a means for testing groups of students orally in a computer lab setting has been developed. The advantage of computerized oral testing is that, unlike language labs which are available in only a limited number of schools, teachers in virtually all school settings now have access

Dr. Janet Flewelling
Faculty of Education
University of Windsor
Windsor, Ontario, NOR lAO, Canada.
519-253-3000, #3800
flewell@server.uwindsor.ca

to computers which could be used for oral testing. Furthermore, teachers are being encouraged more and more to incorporate technology into their teaching programs. Computerized testing is one means of achieving this goal and Gronlund suggests that "as computers become more widely used in the classroom, we can expect computer-assisted testing...to play an increasingly important role". (Gronlund, 1998, p. 131).

THE SOFTWARE

The computer program developed for oral testing is capable of delivering pre-recorded French language instructions and questions to students. It also has graphic and video capability which makes it possible for teachers to include prompts for the students in the form of sound material, still pictures, moving pictures and written text. Thus questions may be tailored to appeal not only to aural learners but to visual learners as well. The software requires students to record their responses in a controlled format The program permits instructors to specify a time limit for responses which are then stored on the computer hard drive. Instructors are then able to retrieve the student responses on disk and mark them from any computer to which they have access. When evaluating the recordings, instructors are able to record their own comments and reactions to what the students have recorded in sidebars. Thus students, when listening to their marked recordings, are able to hear not only what they recorded but also their teacher's comments and corrections. This makes the feedback students receive meaningful and immediate, two factors which are of the utmost importance if students are to benefit from the evaluation (Gronlund, 1998). At the current time, the software is only available in PC format but a long term goal is to create a multi-platform application which would make the software available to users of all commonly-used computer systems.

There are many strengths associated with this software program:

- teachers may easily author in their own questions if they wish to tailor their questions to specific material taught in class;
- students tend to feel more relaxed responding to a machine than in front of a person;
- the software has visual as well as audio capability;
- teachers can mark the responses at their convenience, even at home if they have a computer there;
- teachers can play the same response as many times as they wish, thus allowing them to focus on different aspects of the student's speech at different times. The result is a fairer and more accurate assessment;
- teacher comments can be inserted into the recording so that students can play back not only their own answers but also the teacher's corrections
- the software can either be loaded onto a network and used by a group of students in a computer lab setting or it can be used on a single computer by one student at a time. This allows teachers who have access to a computer lab in their school to test a group of students at once or alternatively, they can give the disk to students individually and have them record their answers on a computer at the back of the classroom while the regular lesson is taught by the teacher;

- the volume of students' recorded work can be increased or decreased even after the recording has been completed according to the marker's preferences.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Computerized oral testing has been working extremely well for the past two years with my students at the University of Windsor and I am now interested in exploring how this technology could be used beyond this limited setting. Several French as a Second Language teachers in the Windsor area have expressed an interest in <u>using</u> the software in their classes to evaluate their students, In order to prepare them for working with the software and for authoring their own questions~ a video will be developed which will provide step-by-step instructions[1] In addition, a team of local teachers is currently developing a database of questions, activities and media assets that could be used to create units that would reflect the curriculum for French. Ready-made units based on commonly-taught themes for teachers who would like to use the software but who do not have the need or the inclination to author on their own material will also be created. Early in the new year, teachers will begin to pilot test the software. Their feedback will assist us in the refinement of the program and will indicate to us whether or not this software has further potential to educators. Ultimately, the software might be used in conjunction with commercial French or other foreign language teaching programs with test questions and activities preprogrammed to reflect material taught in each unit of the program. It is also entirely possible that it would be useful to teachers in other subject areas.

Feedback received to date suggests that foreign teachers will find this software a useful tool which will not only simplify the task of evaluating the oral competency of their students but will also make their evaluations more accurate and fair. Enquiries about the software should be directed to the author.

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