

Old Wine in New Bottles or New Wine in Old Bottles?

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Abstract

The traditional view on foreign language learning emphasizes training and mastery of the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking (pronunciation). But as pointed out in Neri (2002)¹ that although it seems obvious that pronunciation should play an important role, the training of this skill is often neglected within traditional L2 classroom teaching. The most often cited reason for this is the number of students in each class and not enough time for a teacher to correct and train each individual, and that certain aspects of language learning simply lend themselves better to blackboard teaching than others. Vocabulary and grammar exercises are drills that can be done on the blackboard and still, in the large majority of cases, be beneficial to the entire class. Pronunciation on the other hand, often needs to be corrected from individual to individual, simply because the learner might not be aware of the mistakes that are being made, thereby having no chance to self-correct.

The problem of actual speech and communication training has essentially migrated to the newer more contemporary IT-based solutions and online learning platforms. Although these have, to a certain degree, alleviated the problem of not having enough time for the individual speaker by creating technological means for self-study and assessment, they are hardly utilizing the full technological potential for actual speech. The answer to the problem of speech and communication training seems straight forward – integration of automatic speech recognition (ASR) software in the applications. Unfortunately unrealistic expectations as to the capabilities of ASR systems seem to prevent teachers and users from employing their capabilities. As phrased by one columnist concerning windows XP in 2003, once your expectations are adjusted for present day reality, you might be impressed with how much you really can do by talking to your computer.²

At RFI we are currently working on transforming our oldest, but biggest, online learning flagship to date www.dansk.nu into a 21st century platform by expanding its current capabilities via the integration of an ASR system.

The present paper proposes to outline the benefits and limitations of ASR technology in speech and communication training as well as describing the idea behind expanding the platform as well as the accomplished work.

¹ Neri, Ambra. Cucchiari, C. Strik, H. Feedback in Computer Assisted Pronunciation Training: When technology meets pedagogy. Proceedings of CALL Conference "CALL professionals and the future of CALL research", Antwerp, Belgium, pp. 179-188, 2002.

² http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/setup/expert/moskowitz_02september23.msp