

Self-Training in Reading Aloud Through ICT

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Abstract

Within the current state of affairs regarding the incorporation of the Spanish university to the Bologna process, this paper aims at being a previous step of a more ambitious project in which technologies will play a very relevant role in self-training to improve the four skills involved in foreign language learning. In this case, we present an experience carried out last academic year (2009-2010) when serious pronunciation problems were detected in the 33% of a group of students (first course of Foreign Languages Teaching). To cater for individual needs, a special self-training reading programme was developed through free samples of screen readers such as Readplease and audio files from the Internet to provide our students with suitable tools to improve their reading aloud, pronunciation and oral abilities.

After applying our special self-training reading programme, which mainly consisted of two stages: introduction and perfection through ICT, we came to the conclusion that screen readers and audio files, used as web based resources, could be useful and motivating supporting tools for self-training reading aloud among other communicative skills.

Samples of best practice will be presented in order to show how the use of digital reading tools can contribute to improve learners' overall productive competencies and promote autonomy.

1. Introduction

Nowadays Bologna agreement is present in most of the European university backgrounds. With the incorporation of new university programs, we face new challenges and different difficulties have to be solved. As a direct result of it, more practical instruction is being demanded in opposition to theory based teaching approaches. However, in certain cases, the number of the students in a group makes this rather difficult, especially for foreign languages students. In the attempt to cater for our students' needs in the Faculty of Teacher Training in Cáceres, Spain, we developed different strategies to help our students to fulfill the minimum language standard required. Some of such strategies were supported by ICT tools, use of technology which places teachers in the role of mediator who helps each student to achieve his / her individual needs.

In this paper we are going to expose a study carried out with university students to improve the skill of reading aloud and pronunciation. The theoretical framework lying behind this will be firstly presented, whereas the case of study will be developed step by step. Finally, the conclusions derived from this study and the future lines of the current research will be conveniently drawn.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Learning according to Bologna

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages[1] offers clear standards to achieve at the different stages of learning making possible an international and global assessment which

fosters everyone's mobility and enrich the process of learning itself. According to this framework, learners and users of any language need to draw upon a series of linguistic competences.

When learning any foreign language, it is assumed that the four main skills should be developed equally: listening, speaking, reading and writing, García Sánchez M. E. & Vicente Pérez M. J. (1999). [2]. However, in a classroom background we find students whose four language skills are not developed in the same level and it is the teacher's responsibility to help them with the progression of these four skills, focusing on the weakest ones detected in each student.

As it is recommended in Bologna agreement the subjects should be mainly practical, fostering communication when dealing with foreign languages. We normally associate listening and speaking as oral skills forgetting that reading aloud may contribute to achieve a good pronunciation, which is the main goal of this paper.

2.2. Learning through ICT

In this context, technology may help us in the improvement of our students' oral abilities and it may offer us useful self-study tools. According to Warschaver and Healey (1998)[3], CALL "Computer Assisted Language Learning" on its first stage was known as Behaviouristic CALL which was focused mainly on drills and grammar exercises. The computer was used as a mechanical tutor able to reproduce repetitive language. In the 1980s a communicative CALL was developed, encouraging users to produce a more natural language. Jones & Fortescue (1987)[4] agreed that Communicative CALL corresponded to cognitive theories which underlined that learning was a process of discovery, expression and development. However, many teachers moved slightly towards a socio-cognitive view of communicative teaching, emphasizing the use of language in authentic social context. Then an integrative CALL was developed, being this a mixture of the previous ones. As Warschaver (1998) mentions, the main aim of integrative CALL is not only the integration of various skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) but also the incorporation of technology into the language learning process. The technology of integrated CALL is the multimedia networked computer, which can be used as an endless source of learning resources, some of them audio-oral, by both teachers and students. This is the approach we have chosen to provide our study with a specific technological background.

Nowadays, the use of technology has been extended to all the services related to information and Communication, what is known as ICT "Information and Communication Technologies". These are tools, supports and channels which process, store, synthesize, recover and present information in a varied way. We currently associate the term ICT to the use of computers, Internet and mobile devices. The use of ICT represents an important change in society and in education as well as in individual relationships and in the way of spreading information or generating knowledge. In an educational background teachers may use ICT resources in different ways, on the other hand, ICT can help the teachers to create their own material fulfilling their students' needs as a group and on the other hand, they can use ICT as resources to improve the students' language abilities, offering self-study methods which will let the teachers cater for individual needs, Dudley-Evans (1998) [5].

In our specific study we used ICT for pronunciation training through speech technology applications. Godwin-Jones (2000) [6] has reviewed the evolution of these applications from tapes and CDs to speech recognition and speech synthesis. Speech recognition programs such as IBM's ViaVoice or Dragon System's Naturally Speaking are designed for regular consumers and they are aimed at native speakers but are not useful for struggling beginners or intermediate language learners, Godwin-Jones (opus cit) However, we also count on language learning software such as: Syracuse Language Systems, TriplePlay, Stanford Research Institute's Echos among others. All these software incorporate speech recognition using voice input what simulates a real communication.

Speech synthesis means a step forward in the EFL class through ICT Reyes & Villanueva (2005) [7]. Screen readers are software products that use speech synthesis to make the text on the screen accessible to the visually impaired. We propose to apply this tool to the EFL class. Screen readers like Talkany or Readplease may be easily downloaded in free versions from the Internet, installed in any computer and used by the students or the teachers whenever needed. Through these screen readers we will provide our students with tools to check the pronunciation of words, to record their own voices, to train speed and compare themselves to native speakers. Through this we intend to encourage them to undertake their own self-study method to improve their speech output and their confidence at the same time.

3. A Case of Study

This experience took place at the Faculty of Teacher Training in Cáceres, Spain with students of the 1st course of Foreign Languages during the academic year 2009 -2010. With the purpose of finding out our students' level of English, a placement test was carried out and we detected that, among other lacks, 15 students out of 45 had serious difficulties in reading aloud. A special self-training reading program was designed to cater for individual needs and help those students presenting weak pronunciation. As we were dealing with problems detected in a small group of students, the procedure had to be individual so that we could go on with the general contents of the subject, which was Foreign Language English I, without delaying the progression of the rest of the group.

Our specific self-training reading aloud program consisted of different steps as it is depicted bellow:

1st step: selection of authentic material

The 15 students were given a text to work with, Chapter 1 of Alice in Wonderland. Before the training period, all the students were recorded reading aloud. This way we counted on the individual starting point analysis the pronunciation of the words, intonation and speed.

They were also provided with a calendar in which they had to record their practice during a month. Every time they practised the text, the students had to mark their calendar with a tick. That is how we recorded the students' practice.

2nd step: ICT support

The students were guided to download a free version of readplease so that they could have screen reader software in their personal computers. With this software they had the chance of listening to any text typed on their screens as many times as they wished and the texts could be listened to at different speeds and with different voices and different accents.

3rd step: typing texts

Then each student had to type the given text, Chapter 1 of Alice in Wonderland, in his or her computer and they had to listen to it as many times as each one needed to master it. We found out that during one month some of the students listened to it once a week, others twice and the rest more than twice a week.

4th step: ICT samples

After a month of free self-training, the students were recorded again reading aloud their selected text. Therefore we had reading samples which could be compared with the previous samples taken before the training period. To carry out this task we used an Olympus Digital Voice Recorded which allows us to record the students reading aloud and then the audio files can be transferred to the computers since the software is compatible with Microsoft Windows.

After analyzing the reading samples taken after the training period, we noticed a great improvement in our students' pronunciation but we still found that they could improve phonic features such as:

intonation, tone, rhythm and speed. Then we decided to include a 5th step which will be exposed as follows.

5th step: authentic audio file

We searched on the Internet for real audio files of Alice in Wonderland and we found the whole story read aloud by a native speaker. Then we provided our students with the web address where they could download the audio file of the selected text and they installed it in their computers. Most of the students downloaded a copy in their mp4 so that they could have access at any time and place.

4. Results

After the 4th step of our study, we noticed that most of the students had basically improved their pronunciation. Of course this improvement was directly related to the amount of practice each one had undertaken. The more they worked on it, the better yielding they got.

We worked on a scale of ten points to mark our students’ outputs. Their pronunciation, intonation and speed were assessed and they were given a specific mark. As it can be seen in figure 1, those students who listened to the text more than twice a week got the best oral outputs.

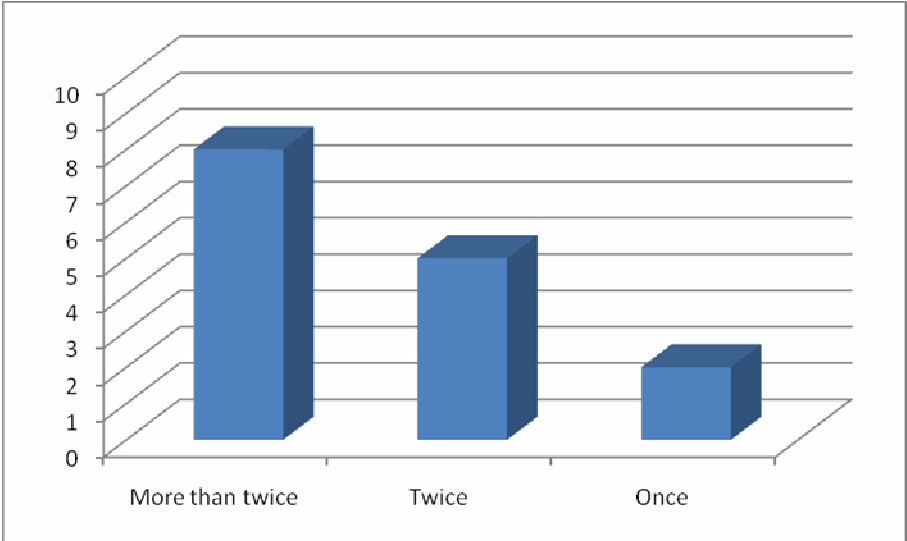


Fig. 1: Improvement of the students after using readplease

We found that the 54% of the students had listened to the text more than twice a week and they got higher marks than the rest. A 33% of the students practised the text twice a week, showing a relative improvement in their reading aloud and the 13% of the students listened to the text just once a week. This last group is the one whose progression is not so considerable but we can say that in all the cases we noticed improvement in greater or lesser proportions.

After the 5th step of our study we also noticed that the improvement was directly related to the individual practice. But as we can see in figure 2 the students improved their reading aloud in this specific material considerably, which makes us think that we should provide our students with authentic audio files when reading to be successful at this particular skill.

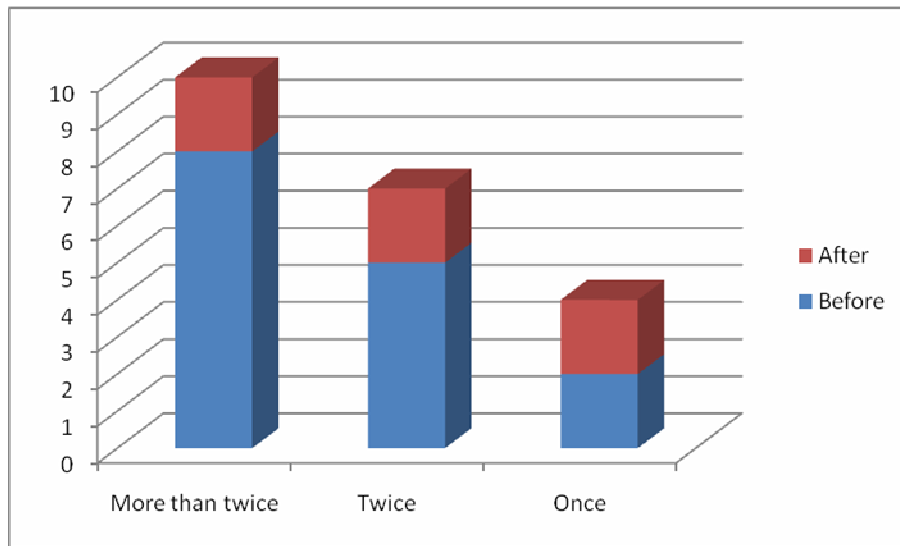


Fig. 2: Improvement of the students after using authentic audio files

Again we have the same direct relationship between practice and improvement. Those students who practised more than twice a week by means of authentic audio files got the highest marks

We noticed that the use of authentic audio files helped the students to acquire not only a good pronunciation but also suprasegmental features such as intonation, rhythm and speed when reading aloud.

5. Conclusions

We finally conclude that the use of ICT may be essential tools to help our students to improve their weak skills at university levels. It is rather difficult to offer a good program of a subject at this level when you find quite heterogeneous groups with different levels of English. At this stage we believe that the teacher has to play the role of mediator and fulfill the individual needs according to his or her possibilities.

Nowadays, ICT offers us the means to guide our students using as many authentic materials as possible Levy , M. (1997) [8]. We think that teachers have to encourage students to explore the possibilities offered by the Internet to learn and keep their English alive, which is essential for EFL teachers.

Our students showed great improvement in reading aloud the material selected but we also taught them how to approach unknown new texts in the future because we provided them with different tools which can be used with any written text. That is why we think that Internet and mobile devices such as mp4 or iPods can be real useful in the process of learning a foreign language mainly to foster communicative skills.

We think that university teachers have a lot to do regarding technology in the context of teaching foreign languages to get the most of ICT and provide individual training as well as general one to cater for the needs of each student without forgetting the progression of the whole group. We know this is a great challenge we face but with permanent research in this direction, the responsibility of learning will be on the students' shoulders.

We still have a long way ahead on what ICT can do for us regarding not only oral communication but the four basic skills and we are also able to foresee pros and cons. The pros are that nowadays

university students are familiar with technology and it is something accessible for them and a challenging learning methodology. They even could use different software to improve their own weak language abilities. On the cons side, we can mention, for example, the difficulty of finding free software in the Internet and the updating of the programs. In this sense, the teachers have the responsibility of solving and implementing all the problems detected in collaboration with computer technicians or computer departments inside the university in a multidisciplinary way. In spite of all this we are hopeful and believe in a near technological future when we will manage to overcome the current limitations and encourage university students to undertake a self-study process to offer them individual as well as general teaching.

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