

## Talking to your Web Page: Speaking Practice Online

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### 1. Speaking is necessary

An interactionist theory of second language acquisition has as a central tenant that output is necessary. Models such as that of Gass (1997) claim that producing output requires greater attention to structure than processing input does. When listening or reading, learners can focus on meaning, often using lexical information or even nonlinguistic cues like pictures, body language, or facial expressions to help gather the meaning of what they're reading or hearing. The formal structure of the language is not central to comprehending input. However, producing oral or written language requires that the learner use the structural rules of the language. In order to express one's meaning accurately, it is necessary to use the rules of the target language. The task of producing output thus requires greater attention to the structure of the target language, and helps the learner to build an interlanguage in a way that receptive tasks do not.

This position, that output is as important as is input, builds on research by Swain (1985, 1993). Swain looked at the language output of students in an immersion setting. She found that these students, who were flooded with the target language in a variety of contexts and content, had excellent comprehension ability. However, their writing and even their speaking were far below their comprehension ability.

This research leads us away from the claims from the 1970s and 1980s, notably that of Krashen (1985), that flooding learners with comprehensible input will lead naturally to speaking competence as a matter of course. Rather, it seems to be the case that learners will improve the skills that they practice. The more they listen, the better they will get at listening. Unfortunately, reception and production seem to be modular. Good listening skills do not automatically cause good speaking skills. If we want our students to be better speakers, they need to get more speaking practice.

### 2. Students don't get enough speaking practice

Why aren't our students better speakers? Classroom research suggests that this is because they don't speak enough during class. The study of patterns of classroom interactions dates back to 1970. In a groundbreaking study of the dynamics between students and instructors, Flanders (1970) showed that there is speaking during 70% of class time, and 70% of the speaking is done by teachers. That means that teachers talk for half of class time. If there are 25 students in a class, that leaves an average of just 1 minute per each student to speak in the course of a 50 minute class period.

Even if strategies like group work, which have been shown to afford students more speaking practice in class (Long and Porter 1985), are employed, there are still fewer opportunities for individual students to talk.

Some instructors give students audio homework. Students record themselves onto cassette tape, and turn the tapes in as their homework. While this method does give students more speaking practice, and it is effective, the managing this kind of assignment is cumbersome. Technology can provide a way to administer and manage speaking assignments in a more practical way.

### 3. Technology can provide opportunities for speaking practice

Audio Portfolios is a program developed at the Language Learning Center at Michigan State University. The purpose of the program was to replace audio cassettes with a web-based computer program. Pedagogically, the program was not designed to break any new ground, although some interesting possibilities for research are emerging involving student affect. The program makes use of new streaming technology to make recording audio from within a web page easy and transparent to the users. In this way, audio homework assignments are easier to manage.

A client-server architecture allows students to access the software from anywhere, but their work is saved on a central server. Both students and instructors access the program using a web browser. A computer with a broadband connection, and a web browser with the Flash plugin are all that are needed to access the program. The program can detect the users's speakers and microphone to capture and play back sound. In addition, if the user's computer has a web cam, the program can detect it as well, and capture video of the student speaking as well.

Instructors using the program have reported very good results so far. Students enjoy using the program. And every minute that they spend speaking to the web page is another minute of structured output, which is necessary for language acquisition.

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