



Telephone Language Learning

Steven Donahue tests an innovative language learning strategy using the common

The Language Problem

The soul and sinew of language is its spoken form. Yet, English as Second Language (ESL) students might as well learn Cockney from the Queen of England as attempt to study English in Miami. It is not an exaggeration to say that learning to speak English in Miami-Dade County, where the proportion of foreign-born hovers at 61 percent, greater than any other city in the Nation, most resembles a Spanish-speaking and French-Creole immersion laboratory. Language contact with native speakers of English is becoming increasingly uncommon.

Compounding the problem of learning a second language, according to the Census bureau, nearly 68 percent of Miamians speak a language other than English at home.

There has got to be a better way to teach aspiring English learners the spoken language.

And the better way has involved using the common telephone, linked to a sophisticated Web-system hosted by BeVocal (www.bevocal.com) which is beginning to provide authentic language learning for the legions of foreign students at Miami Dade College's English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program. The telephone language learning system has seen improved speech and writing output by EAP students in trial tests this past semester at the College.

With the automated telephone language learning system, authentic listening and speaking can help take the place of the lack of interaction with native role models. Moreover, increased verbal power spills over positively into related disciplines: writing, grammar, accent reduction, vocabulary building, and even reading. Finally, the work load of language teachers is lessened because many of the students' interactions are evaluated automatically on the Web, once the student hangs up the phone after a lesson.

The Telephone to the Rescue

At Miami Dade College, scores of students have begun to use a revolutionary invention which enables students to use any telephone to call in homework and other assignments which tie into written and oral fluency. The core of the system is hosted by BeVocal, a California firm, which provides voice application solutions with a rich library of functions that are optimized for performance and usability.

The telephone language learning system is called Write-By-Phone and consists of 11 activities (opposite page) covering a spectrum of language learning from dictation of single words to free responses for writing and speech topics. Activities involve both listening and actual voice output. The Web is an integral part of the phone system, and allows stu-

dents to pre-view assignments, and get post results, which are then emailed to them (See figure illustrations and samples page 30).

Users call a toll free number, enter an individual PIN, select a lesson and assignment, and interact with that assignment over the telephone. Responses are converted to audio files and emailed to the students, posted to a Web site, and then analyzed with an audio to text converting program to assess the accuracy of the responses.

The Speaking-Writing Link

"Writing — the art of communicating thoughts to the mind — is the great invention of the world..." — Abraham Lincoln

Homer and Jesus may have never put a word to paper or papyrus. For Plato, the technology of the written word made for marked deterioration communication skills, rather than a new form of thinking: "the stimulus of external marks that are alien to themselves."

Plato's "marks," are the narrowest definition of literacy. Literacy skills consist of the ability to think, listen, speak, and read and write effectively. Although many questions remain about the complex processes in the acquisition of language and literacy skills, few question that oral language, reading, and writing are essential parts of an integrated language system (Lerner, 1997).



telephone and automatic speech recognition

Using the BeVocal hosted system, for writing assignments, first students' audio files were converted to text using an automated system (Figure 3). This was done either automatically on the Web, or using a desktop program on the instructor's computer.

Once the audio writing samples were converted to text, they were processed using an automatic essay evaluation program called California Electronic Writer (Figure 4). Thus, the entire system, whether evaluating Dictation, Multiplication Table results, or phoned-in writing has been automated.

Many students who first dictated their essays and paragraphs showed remarkable improvement. This demonstrates the inextricable link between verbal skills and writing proficiency. Moreover, in comparing pre-drafts of student compositions, it was apparent that many grammatical, spelling, and usage errors were eliminated when the students were asked to orally dictate their own writing. At the end of the semester, students evaluated the experience in their own words (page 30).

The Learning Revolution

While Miami Dade College's English as an Academic Program (EAP) offers the fullest second language learning program in the United States with six levels for speech, grammar, writing, reading and accent reduc-

tion—once students leave the classroom, they are back in an environment of Spanish or French-Creole immersion. This is a herculean task for teachers trying to impart a new language on students during limited class time.

Few doubt that there is a rapid convergence of technology occurring now. Technology breakthroughs, such as offered by BeVocal coupled with the ubiquitous telephone can break the cruel time constraints of the second language classroom. Advanced thinkers such as Dr. Terry O'Banion have called for a new learning paradigm in American colleges to overcome "the time-bound, place-bound, efficiency-bound, and role-bound models" of the traditional classroom. And telephone language learning seems to be doing just that at Miami Dade College for all subjects from A to Z. **X**

References

- For a complete explanation, please see www.californiaelectronicwriter.org/moodle*
- BeVocal <http://www.bevocal.com/corporateweb/default.htm>
- Lerner, J. (1997). *Learning disabilities: Theories, diagnosis, and teaching strategies* (7th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- O'Banion, Terry. *A Learning College for the 21st Century*. (Phoenix: American Council on Education/Oryx Press, 1997).

Phone Activities

1 DICTATION

Dictation is a powerful way to improve and evaluate your pronunciation of English

2 TONGUE TWISTERS

Tongue Twisters are an effective way to improve and evaluate your pronunciation of English

3 ALPHABET

This activity will assess your knowledge and production of the English Alphabet

4 KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge will test you on ten questions that most people should know

5 OPPOSITES

Opposites will test your ability to come up with the opposite of the word you hear

6 MULTIPLICATION TABLES

Multiplication is useful to improve and evaluate your ability to do the times table from four times four all the way to twelve times twelve

7 COMPARATIVES & SUPERLATIVES

Comparatives and Superlatives are a good method to build up your vocabulary

8 VERBS

The Irregular Verbs are a powerful way to improve and evaluate your production of Irregular verbs

9 SPELLING

Spelling is an efficient way to improve and evaluate your pronunciation of English

10 WRITING

Write By Phone allows for your spoken paragraph or essay to be automatically evaluated by the computer, using advanced artificial intelligence systems

11 SPEECH

Make up to 16 speeches over the telephone, from the simple, such as saying your name clearly, to describing a complex object in detail

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1. CALL THIS TOLL FREE NUMBER : 1-800-734-1509
2. PUNCH IN OR SAY YOUR KEY (IF ASKED) NUMBER THEN, Your PIN
3. SELECT AN LESSON SPEAK CLEARLY.
 - REMAIN SILENT TO REPEAT
 - PRESS HASH KEY # WHEN FINISHED OR WAIT.

Lesson	Results
LESSON 1 DICTATION	70%
LESSON 2 TONGUE TWISTERS	80%
LESSON 3 ALPHABET	90%
LESSON 4 KNOWLEDGE	50%
LESSON 5 OPPOSITES	77%
LESSON 6 MULTIPLICATION TABLES	99%
LESSON 7 COMPARATIVES AND SUPERLATIVES	89%
LESSON 8 IRREGULAR VERBS	90%
LESSON 9 SPELLING	77%
LESSON 10 WRITE BY PHONE	68%
LESSON 11 SPEECH	See Teacher
	See Teacher

Figure 2 (above) Email Results Figure 3 (below) Audio to text

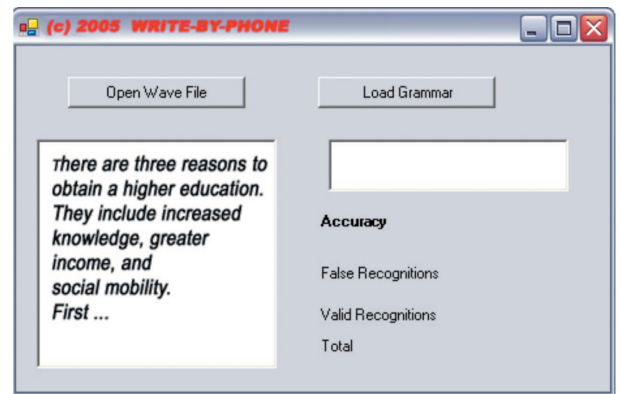
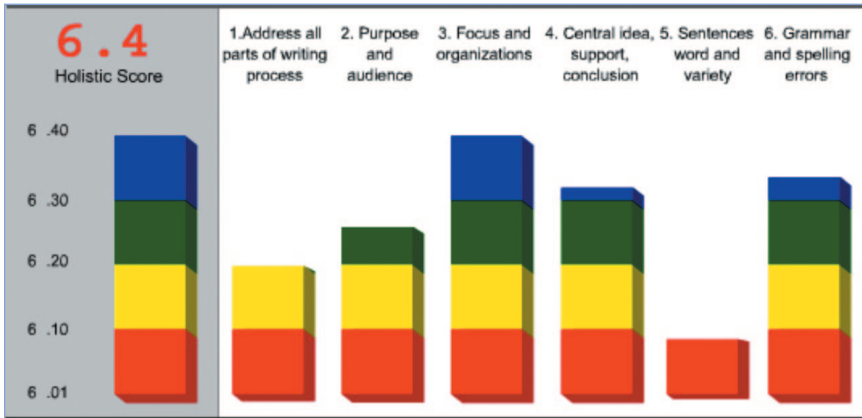


Figure 4 (left) Automatic essay evaluation program called California Electronic Writer



Student Opinions on Effectiveness

How could the system be improved or expanded to give you a better experience?

Student Opinions on Enhancements to System

Did the system help you make better speeches or did the exercises help you with written English? Please explain.

■ Yes, the system helped me with my spoken English. I heard the correct pronunciation of hundreds of words and I had the opportunity of repeating the words. Also, it has a very good combination of tongue twisters that help me to develop and exercise the movements of my mouth speaking a second language.

- I like the system because it helps me a lot. When I'm using the system to do my exercise it allows me to see the way I pronounce or over pronounce the word well or bad. I also like the system because it makes me a better speaker.
- Yes, because the challenge to talk by phone made me get more prepared and practice more.
- Yes. 100 percent for me. I think during this period since I start level 5th, I have learned many things that I didn't know before. I feel comfortable with the new vocabulary & with the handouts that Prof. Donahue has provide me; specially the CD.

- We need more vocabulary, especially in the verbs.
- I think a little more time per speech would be great.
- The system is good for speech class and the only way to improve is that we need to have more opportunities to speak in front of the class.
- It can be improved using a system with feedback that corrects our speech mistakes.
- Sometimes the words or speeches are pronounced too fast. It would be nice if the pronunciation were clearer. Overall it is an excellent program it has helped me a lot!
- I think the phone system is a good experience but it could be improved if I can hear myself at the end of the taping.
- Give more time to speak.
- By the spelling pronunciation give me a better vocabulary.