



Speak App!

TOOLS FOR ORAL COMMUNICATION
IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Analysis: expert interviews with language teachers on effective oral communication in foreign languages

Erasmus+-Project

Speak App!

Adult Education Tools for Oral Communication in Foreign Languages

Author: Judith Fritz, Postgraduate Center, University of Vienna (judith.fritz@univie.ac.at)

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Analysis: Expert interviews with language teachers and educators

1. Introduction:

The project “Speak App” aims to develop educator’s competence on how to provide high quality training about oral communication techniques in foreign languages. The results of the research phase – both the respective national research based on problem centred expert interviews with language teachers as well as the desk research under a more general European perspective – serves as foundation for the development of innovative online tools.

In order to assess specifically how oral communication in a foreign language can be facilitated, with special focus on the supportive use of ICT, we conducted expert interviews with language teachers. By interviewing teachers that are supposed to efficiently work with the products devised by our project, we ascertained how an online course/web application could support the learning process of communicating in a foreign language. Additionally, interviewing language teachers provided us with first-hand knowledge of teaching a foreign language as professional practice. The analysis of their experiences helps us to define the key features of the web application.

The interviews focused on the following topics:

- Main needs, obstacles and barriers that discourage adult learners from being verbally active in the learning process of a foreign language
- Potential ideas, suggestions or successful approaches that can help mitigate such issues
- Experiences in the provision of oral communication trainings in foreign languages in an virtual environment

2. Methodology and data basis

Method of collecting data: Expert interview

Each project partner conducted four expert interviews on national level with teachers/educators teaching German, English, Portuguese and Spanish according to the method of expert interviews devised by Bogner et al (2018). Expert interviews are a standard qualitative research method that is situated in the qualitative paradigm. Expert interviews are carried out in different fields of political and social research and generally aim at uncovering different types of knowledge the interviewee possess.

Especially in the exploratory phase of a project interviewing experts is regarded as an efficient and concentrated method of generating data. “Conducting expert interviews can serve to shorten time-consuming data-producing processes, particularly if the experts are the key to practical insider knowledge and are interviewed as surrogates for a wider circle of players” (Bogner et al 2018, p. 653). Expert interviews are often not the only method of data collection within a specific study but are combined with other qualitative methods.

In the present project, expert interviews served to establish initial orientation in the field, helped us to gather initial information about the context of the project and gave us insight into the challenges of language teachers (and potentially of language learners too).

Gläser and Laudel offer the following definition of experts: “Experts are people who have special knowledge about social facts, and expert interviews are the way of gaining access to this knowledge” (Gläser/Laudel, 2004, p.10).

Bogner et al differentiate between three forms of knowledge relevant to the interview:

- Technical knowledge: expert’s knowledge can be distinguished from everyday knowledge and comprises facts and information about operations, rules, application routines etc.
- Process knowledge: knowledge based on practical experience and comprises information about sequences of actions, interaction routines, organizational constellations etc.
- Interpretative knowledge: entails subjective perceptions, rules, interpretations, normative positions etc. related to the research topic

(Bogner et al 2018, p. 655).

In the project “Speak App! Adult Education Tools for Oral Communication in Foreign Languages”, the interviews had an informational focus and aimed primarily on learning/teaching as a process. Interviewees are a source of information and were addressed to provide the interviewer with facts and experience concerning the research questions.

According to the research design, expert interviews as a method of face-to-face interview followed a semi-structured format: defined topics formed the basis for questioning, yet interviewer’s sequencing of questions was participant-led. The interviews were characterized both by episodes of narration on the part of the interview partner as well as more dialogical episodes that aimed at understanding her/his views. Generally, the interviewers tried to create an atmosphere for open communication in which the interview partner felt enticed to share her/his experiences and ideas. (Roulston/Choi 2018)

The interview guide aimed at generating personal accounts, which focused mainly on the topic of improving oral communication skills in a foreign language.

The interview guide involved a list of questions and topics that are likely to elicit descriptions that answer the research questions posed. In order to maintain a flowing course of the conversation the sequence of the questions might be changed. Start with broader questions in the beginning before moving to more specific questions and formulate open, rather than closed questions. Potential follow-up topics are suggested in the interview guide in case participants should not mention those.

In the interview guide four main questions were listed that should be posed to all interviewees exactly in the way they were worded in the guide. Moreover, for each general topic the guide offered optional sub-questions. They gave the interviewers an idea what to ask in order to stimulate conversation.

The four main questions:

1. First, I would like to get a feel for your field of work and your everyday working experiences as a language teacher. Please tell me a little bit about your experiences as language teacher, your field of work and who your students are.
2. I am very much interested in your personal experience of teaching a foreign language. Can you tell me about successful approaches to make students talk?
3. What do you think are the main barriers for students to speak in a foreign language?

4. In our project, we are interested in how information and communications technology (ICT) can be used to support the improvement of oral skills in foreign languages.

Method of analysis: Qualitative content analysis

The interviews were analysed according to the method of qualitative content analysis. In a first step, the interviews were clustered in topics. Main themes and codes were developed to describe the interview material. In a second step, the interviews were analysed comparatively, identifying similarities and differences and deriving conclusions.

Data basis

The selection of experts followed the following criteria:

- active involvement in the teaching of students in the respective language
- academic education in the field of language teaching
- experience of at least 5 years of teaching
- xperience in using blended learning formats or ICT-enhanced teaching methods

In total, we conducted 12 expert interviews with language teachers of Portuguese, Spanish, German and English in the period from February to July 2018. The interviews ranged from six to 67 minutes. All interviews were recorded and notes were taken during the interview. All partners transcribed main passages of the interviews in their national languages and subsequently translated the quotes in English. Per interview, we transcribed at least one statement for each main question. The selection of statement followed the criteria of relevance, answer to our research questions and conciseness/depth.

Table 1: Interviews conducted with language teachers

Inter view No.	Duratio n	Nationality	Gen der	Age	Type of Institution	Years of Exper ience	Language (Teaching)	Target Group
01	20:05	Spanish	F	n.a.	Language School	27	German	Adult learners
02	08:00	Spanish	F	36	Business Company	10	English/French	Adult learners/ children
03	11:37	Spanish	M	24	Self-employed	3	Portuguese	Adult learners
04	06:00	Spanish	F	n.a.	University	13	Spanish	Adult learners
05	30:00	Portuguese	F	33	Secondary School	6	Spanish	Teenagers
06	15:00	Portuguese	F	38	University	12	German	Adult learners
07	30:00	Portuguese	F	33	University	26	English	Senior learners
08	43:00	Portuguese	M	44	Public Education	19	Portuguese	Adult learners
09	38:10	Austrian	F	52	University	9	German as a foreign language	Adult learners
10	67:47	Portuguese	M	48	Self-employed	18	Portuguese and German as a foreign language	Adult learners
11	45:45	British	M	32	Self-employed	10	English	Adult learners
12	n.a.	Spanish	F	52	Self-employed	5	Spanish	Adult learners

3. Arguments and Findings

In the following, we will present the main findings of analysing the interviews with language teachers in Spain, Portugal, Austria and Great Brittan. The analysis focuses on three overreaching research questions:

- How can adult learners improve oral communication skills in a foreign language?
- How can language teachers support the verbal communication of their students?
- How do ICT-based online tools have to be constructed that language teachers as well as learners benefit from the project?

Thus, first we will describe main needs, obstacles and barriers, perceived by teachers, that discourage adult learners from being verbally active in the learning process of a foreign language. This leads up to potential ideas and suggestions or successful approaches that can help mitigate such issues. Lastly, we will present teachers' experiences in the provision of oral communication trainings in foreign languages in a virtual environment.

Perceived barriers of students to communicate orally

All interviewees agreed that it is a major challenge to make students talk. This is the case in traditional classroom learning, but even more in an ICT-based learning environment. The content analysis suggests differing between three different kinds of barriers:

1. Structural barriers

- Oral expression is often underrepresented in the curricula
- Students lack interpersonal interaction to exercise the foreign language
- Many students are not familiar with the language they want to learn because they have no contact to the foreign language in their daily life
- Differences between the course language and the everyday language in terms of dialect or fast spoken speech

2. Barriers in the range of skills

- Listening comprehension
- Pronunciation
- Vocabulary
- Lacking knowledge about how to produce a sound (anatomically)
- Fluency

3. Interpersonal/emotional barriers

- The most commonly addressed barrier is fear. Students often feel unsecure, they are afraid of speaking, they feel embarrassed; so they simply avoid to speak and they don't dare to interact verbally
- Students are less self-confident
- Students misjudge themselves
- Many students have little language learning experience; they do not know how to learn

Didactic approaches to make students talk

Based on the analysis of barriers, we discussed with our interviewees didactic approaches to enhance students' active oral participation. The range of answers, tips and tricks were manifold. The analysis shows two different teaching strategies to make students talk:

1. Interpersonal approaches

On the one hand, our interviewees suggested didactic approaches to hinder those barriers, which are defined as interpersonal/emotional barriers. In a nutshell, all of these strategies suggested aim to create a good classroom atmosphere and increase students' motivation.

- Choose topics of the students' interest
- Have initial sessions to get to know your students and their interests and establish an informal relationship
- Try to raise the intrinsic motivation of the students. Mediate the meaningfulness of the imparted knowledge
- Choose an appropriate teaching approach to meet the needs of the target group. Elder learners have different needs than learners in their early twenties
- Encourage your students. Give them the feeling that it is fine the way they try
- Work with positive feedback
- Help students not to feel embarrassed; create a trustful atmosphere
- If students are stressed or afraid of making mistakes, they will have much less self-confidence in oral communication; Try to reduce this barrier

2. Practical approaches

On the other hand, our interviewees suggested practical approaches and exercises to raise active oral participation. They recommended the following tips and tricks:

- Establish contact with native speakers, for example via skype or to integrate a native conversation assistant in your training
- Use various authentic materials such as newspapers, cultural agendas, brochures
- Use new technologies such as Skype or YouTube to integrate audio-visual materials
- Work with open learning settings, such as role play, pair work, group discussion
- Students benefit from intensive lexical preparation: teach them phrases after contexts, give students time to prepare discussions, record them and ask them for self-evaluation;
- Let students record vocabulary on their mobile phones and listen to their audio files

ICT-assisted teaching and learning: Experiences

Finally, we discussed with our interviewees the question whether an online tool can stimulate oral skills effectively. The integration of ICT-tools is a topic of great importance for the teachers interviewed. Many of them see great potential in the integration of digital technologies in their teaching and gained already experience in technology enhanced language learning.

At the same time, some of our interviewees were sceptical whether oral communication can stimulate oral communication without interpersonal contact. The main doubt concerned the assumption that oral communication needs interpersonal interaction. They stressed that it is very challenging to train oral communication in a foreign language asynchronously. In this respect, a single virtual learning environment without personal contact (not a blended learning setting) is controversial among the teachers we interviewed.

Beyond that, our interviewees indicated as another risk factor that the integration of e-learning components needs a lot of motivation from both, from teachers as well as from students.

Nevertheless, many of our interviewees stated that they already integrated ICT-tools in their teaching. Asked what tools and functions they use, teachers identified three key tools:

- **Platforms (as Moodle)**
 - To share information, references and resources (such as grammar explanations and exercises, links, working material, etc.)
 - To upload and download material
 - To convey assessments

- **Multimedia tools**
 - To share virtual resources such as audio and video files
 - For recordings
 - Audio functions for students to record themselves
 - Animated tools for pronunciation (for example animations to see how to produce sounds; animations of the place of articulation)
 - Audio files with pronunciation exercises (for example they use tools to play audio records in different paces: slow pronunciation, medium speed and realistic speed)

- **Communication tools**
 - Video conferences
 - Group conversation
 - Individual interaction

Lastly, we asked teachers what the perfect ICT-enhanced learning environment would contain and they listed the following functions (in addition to the functions already used):

- ❖ Usability/User-friendliness
- ❖ Classification by levels
- ❖ User-oriented selection of materials
- ❖ Availability of a digital board/electronic whiteboard

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