

Going beyond the conversation in the language classroom: VoiceThread

Ferit Kılıçkaya, Middle East Technical University, Faculty of Education, Dept. of Foreign Language Education, Ankara, Turkey, ferit.kilickaya@gmail.com, kilickay@metu.edu.tr

Abstract

This paper discusses *VoiceThread*, which is one of the few Web 2.0 tools that allow teachers and students to record materials, some of which are text and audio comments on uploaded texts images, presentations, and videos. *VoiceThread* can be used as an asynchronous communication which users can plan presentations and contribute to these presentations with comments as both in text and voice form. *VoiceThread* has many advantages and features, especially for language classrooms. It offers various activities to include four skills. Moreover, users can write their comments in different ways - using voice with a microphone, text, audio file, or video with a webcam and read and listen to other users' comments in various forms.

Keywords: VoiceThread, digital conversation, language, classroom

INTRODUCTION

As Warschauer and Meskill (2000) suggest, every type of language teaching uses its own tools and techniques to help learners. With the introduction of Grammar-translation method, the blackboard came into use in language classrooms. Later, it was replaced by the overhead projector. In the 1970s and 80s, university language classes used the audio-lingual method with audio cassettes that would make learners perform the repetitious drills (Bax, 2003). Throughout the 1970s and much of the 1980s, the most prominent form of CALL was drill-and-practice programs (Jonassen, 1996). In 1980s and 1990s, a new type of language teaching method emphasizing communicative language teaching came into use. In this method, interaction and meaningful activities were the key aims for learners to gain (Richards & Rodgers, 2002). With this method, new computer software was designed and used to provide learners with meaningful communication activities which might be used outside the classroom. Later, how technology should be integrated into curriculum became the concern for the researchers and teachers paying attention to advantages and disadvantages of this new system (Warschauer & Meskill). In the 2000s, computer software, the Internet and multimedia applications appropriate to the language classroom were integrated, thereby exposing the students to "a common lab experience" (Stroud, 1998).

Nowadays, computers and the Internet are integrated to expose learners to language use in authentic environments and communication in the target language, no doubt, is the main aim of modern language instruction. In other words, the ability to speak in a foreign language is at the very heart of being able to use a foreign language. Although reading a language is often among the main aim of quite a few language learners, the classroom practices include not only producing the language, but also interact with others using target forms in order to accomplish both teaching objectives and personal goals. Facebook, Youtube and Skype are among the various tools that provide internet-mediated communication, sharing and collaboration tools. These tools help the contemporary classroom be open to the whole world and invite the world to the classroom. While doing this, rather than dealing with email and discussion forums based on written text, users or language learners can now enjoy communicating and collaborating with their peers in their classroom, students in other countries or across continents in the medium of video clips and voice-image interactions (Bodomo, 2010). One of these web-based tools is *VoiceThread*, an asynchronous conversation place.

VOICETHREAD

VoiceThread, available at <http://www.voicethread.com> and developed at the University of North Carolina, is an asynchronous conversation web-based tool that provides its users with the

opportunity to add voice annotation to various media such as a document, a slide presentation and a video. Learners or teachers can add comments in a variety of ways by means of microphone, webcam, keyboard, or even a telephone. It is a web-based application that runs inside any web browser without using and installing any kind of software (Figure 1). It provides teachers and learners with a place allowing group conversations and collaboration using any given media such as images, videos or documents.

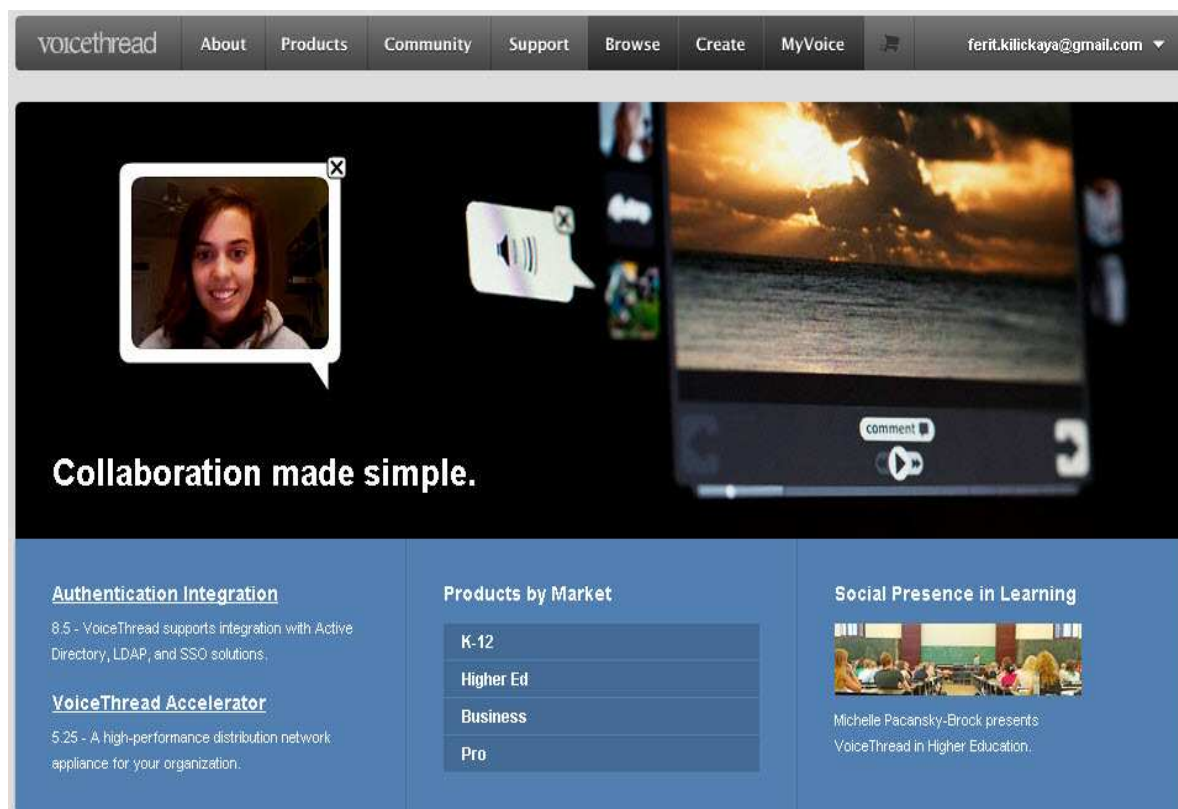


Figure 1: The Homepage of VoiceThread

However, these conversations are not live. Teachers or learners can leave comments and suggestions when it is convenient for them. From this perspective, *VoiceThread* can be seen as the advanced forms of blogs, taking text-based communication to a higher level through video and audio comments and providing a place where learners can practice speaking as well as sharing ideas and collaboration with other learners.

HOW VOICETHREAD WORKS

Uploading images, documents, and videos

Having registered a free account and logged in, users can create threads or topics instantly using the button "Create". Any kind of media such as images, documents or videos can be uploaded from users' computer, webcam, and websites or media sources on the Internet such as Facebook or Flickr (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Uploading images, docs, and videos

Commenting on the uploaded file

Teachers can leave the first comment describing the task and talk about what is expected from his/her learners. Then, learners and teachers can leave questions, comments or assessment of any given material uploaded as a thread (Figure 3). Comments can be made in various forms with which they feel more comfortable.



Figure 3: Commenting on the uploaded file

Sharing the thread

Having uploaded the given material and identified the task, teachers can share it with his/her students (Figure 4). The best way to do it is to have students sign up for free account at *VoiceThread* using their email accounts, add them as contacts and invite them to the one of the threads that have been prepared. It will be very useful to first introduce VoiceThread to learners, discussing its basic features together by means of a demonstration in class. Moreover, since creating threads and commenting can take time and needs careful planning, learners should be provided ample time to plan, edit and write their ideas before any comment is made or published.

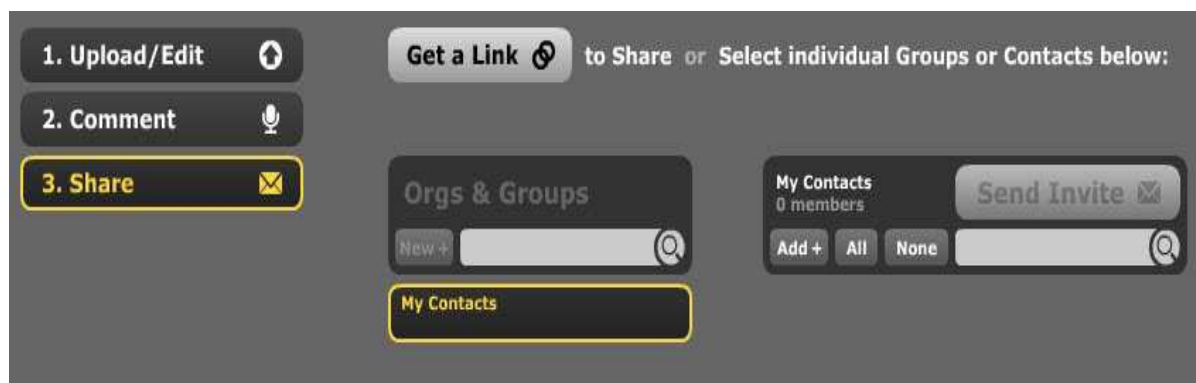


Figure 4: Sharing and Adding contacts to the uploaded thread

POSSIBLE USES IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Considering its easy use and its features, *VoiceThread* has the potential to be used in especially language-oriented activities such as speaking. Moreover, from different aspects of SLA theories, *VoiceThread* can be seen as a valuable resource. As the Comprehensive Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981) values negotiating meaning, *VoiceThread* can be used to provide learners with comprehensible input in either written or spoken form and the opportunity to negotiate meaning with each other, their instructor, creating comprehensible output. Taking constructivism into consideration, learners, with the help of other learners and their instructors, *VoiceThread* can be used as a place where learners have the opportunity to build knowledge in an active and socially interactive process. Furthermore, as *VoiceThread* combines visual modes (graphics and videos) as well as verbal modes (text- and/or audio-based communication) into one multimodal medium, learners are introduced to various choices which learners can select according to their own needs and learning styles (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

Possible benefits

VoiceThread offers several benefits for learners and language teachers as well, as summarized below:

- The commenting feature is particularly beneficial for language classes. Learners can be provided with feedback not only from by their peers but also their teachers. This probably will enhance learners' motivation for language practice (Kern, 1995). Moreover, *VoiceThread* can provide the opportunity for the development and practice of language skills (Chun, 1994).
- *VoiceThread* allows learners who would rather be silent or feel hesitant to participate in class discussions due to the social atmosphere in the language classroom to feel more comfortable and secure with sharing their ideas. This allows more frequent opportunity for learners to express their ideas without the constraints of classroom time (Kern, 1995).
- Teachers can also use *VoiceThread* as an effective assessment tool. They can later view and check how learners have contributed to discussions and write down the areas in which learners frequently misuse target language such as pronunciation or structures.
- *VoiceThread* also lends itself to group work for class projects on any subject.
- The different commenting styles in the forms of audio, text and video encourage learners to contribute to discussions in the way they feel more comfortable.

Possible uses

Taking language learning into consideration, *VoiceThread* can be used in various ways, some of which are outlined below:

- Teachers can use any given media to promote discussion among learners. This can be about a particular story or novel that has been assigned in or outside the classroom.

- Teachers can use comic strips or graphic novels, which are appealing to all age groups to encourage critical thinking.
- Topics or structures can be explained through some visual elements.
- Teachers can use videos from other websites on cultures, and these videos can be used to discuss various cultures, together with differences and similarities. Moreover, current news or events in the world, together with the videos and pictures, can be benefited to discuss various problems that the people in the world face.
- Learners can also create projects in groups using *VoiceThread* on any given topic. This will also enhance sense of community in the classroom, helping learners appreciate the value of collaboration.

Limitations and possible problems

- VoiceThread has very advanced features in different profiles such as education, business and pro. However, it is required to pay for these features. Free use is limited to certain features and audio/webcam recording is limited to 30 minutes. Moreover, creating user accounts without requiring learners to register is not available for free use.
- Archival movie export later use is only available in paid profiles. Certain amount of money is required for achieving and downloading the saved threads, i.e. 10 for \$10 for a single educator.

CONCLUSION

VoiceThread is one of the few Web 2.0 tools that allow adding voice annotation to various materials. Although it does not include a feature providing live conversations as in other tools such as WiZiQ (Kılıçkaya, 2008), the several ways it provides to comment such as using webcam, voice, or text makes *VoiceThread* unique especially for language classrooms. Considering its advantages and features, *VoiceThread* really lends itself to activities and projects aiming to provide opportunities for the development and practice of language skills.

REFERENCES

- Bax, S. (2003). CALL-past, present and future. *System*, 31(1), 13-28.
- Bodomo, A. B. (2010). *Computer-mediated communication for linguistics and literacy: Technology and natural language education*. New York: IGI Global.
- Chun, D. (1994). Using computer networking to facilitate the acquisition of interactive competence. *System*, 22(1), 17-31.
- Jonassen, D. (1996). *Computers in the classroom: Mindtools for critical thinking*. USA: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Kern, R. G. (1995). Restructuring classroom interaction with networked computers: Effects on quantity and characteristics of language production. *Modern Language Journal*, 79(4), 457-476.
- Kılıçkaya, F. (2008). WiZiQ: Anyone can teach & learn online, 12(3). Retrieved June 10, 2010, from <http://tesl-ej.org/ej47/m1.pdf>
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2001) *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*. London: Arnold.
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2002). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stroud, M. D. (1998). *Incorporating technology into the foreign language classroom*. Retrieved June 10, 2010, from <http://www.trinity.edu/mstroud/technology/call.html>

Warchauer, M., & Meskill, C. (2000). Technology and second language learning. In J. Rosenthal (Ed.), *Handbook of undergraduate second language education* (pp. 303-318). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.