

## Promoting Speaking Skills in Online Environments



### *Promoviendo Habilidades del Habla en Ambientes Online*

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#### **Abstract.**

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**Introduction.** The use of digital technologies as a means of instruction has transformed the way languages are learned and taught. Easier access to information, as well, makes it simpler for learners to develop reading, listening, and writing skills. However, for speaking to develop it is still necessary to think of a speaker and a listener who can both interact with each other. Currently, and as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, speaking scenarios have moved – even more so – from face-to-face environments to other spaces such as video conferencing rooms, audio messages on chat apps, video calls, among others. **Objective.** To establish activities that promote development of speaking in online educational settings. **Methodology.** This article presents a review of state-of-the-art literature illustrating how speaking could be promoted and enhanced by resorting to online environments, considering what are described as best practices. **Results.** Activities and ideas that could be adapted to different levels of performance, in different learning environments, are presented. **Conclusion.** Taking advantage of technology and the different tools in which, it is present is without a doubt, one to the best ways in which language learning encounters a supporting

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means. The advent of more developed resources has allowed for improved and, in some cases, novel strategies for application in the EFL class.

**Keywords:** Language learning, Online learning, Skills development, Speaking

## Resumen

**Introducción.** El uso de tecnologías digitales como medio de instrucción ha transformado la forma en que se aprenden y enseñan los idiomas. El acceso más fácil a la información también hace que sea más sencillo para los estudiantes desarrollar habilidades de lectura, comprensión auditiva y escritura. Sin embargo, para que el habla se desarrolle es necesario pensar en un hablante y un oyente que puedan interactuar entre sí. Actualmente, y como resultado directo de la pandemia COVID-19, los escenarios de habla se han movido - aún más - de los entornos presenciales a otros espacios como salas de videoconferencia, mensajes de audio en aplicaciones de chat, videollamadas, entre otros. **Objetivo.** Establecer actividades que promuevan el desarrollo del habla en ambientes de educación en línea. **Metodología.** Este artículo presenta una revisión de literatura actualizada que ilustra cómo se puede promover y mejorar el habla recurriendo a entornos en línea, considerando lo que se describen como mejores prácticas. **Resultados.** Se presentan actividades e ideas que podrían adaptarse a diferentes niveles de desempeño, en diferentes entornos de aprendizaje. **Conclusión.** Aprovechar la tecnología y las diferentes herramientas en las que está presente es, sin duda, una de las mejores maneras en que el aprendizaje de idiomas encuentra un medio de apoyo. El advenimiento de recursos más desarrollados ha permitido mejorar y, en algunos casos, generar nuevas estrategias de aplicación en la clase EFL.

**Palabras claves:** Aprendizaje de idiomas, Aprendizaje en línea, Desarrollo de habilidades, Habla

## Introduction

For more than a decade, technology-based interventions have proven to be helpful in language learning and teaching (Rodrigues & Vethamani, 2015). Wang & Vásquez (2012) assert that Web 2.0 technologies help to foster favorable language learning environments. With this in mind, it is no surprise that specific settings such as chat rooms, social networks, and other platforms that allow for video conferencing have become ever more necessary, and important, at a moment when social distancing has presented new challenges for language teachers: how could we make sure that our students really develop their language skills? In what way would students best improve their speaking ability – something that may better occur through face-to-face interaction?

According to Cong-Lem (2018), the more traditional language class has now a strength in blended learning; activities do not necessarily happen in the classroom and learners have opportunities “to learn and practice the target language through collaborative learning with their peers or creating their own projects”. Sun & Yang (2015) propose the idea that the use of platforms such as YouTube and Facebook may well aid English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students to polish their public speaking skills, based both on individual and collaborative work.

In addition to the technological aspect at discussion, another important matter is that dealing with students’ motivation to speak in English. Ihsan (2016) claims that offering students of a language the opportunity of being more involved in their own speaking tasks would increase their motivation to try and speak. This is especially true when topics set for discussion cover those which students are genuinely interested in and happen more spontaneously due to a type of interaction in environments that, somehow, allow students to feel more at ease. In their work, Talaván & Lertola (2016) describe a process in which active audio-description resulted in an interesting process that, aided by a web platform, made students get more involved in the proposed speaking tasks.

Romaña Correa (2015) presents a very interesting example of the use of Skype, in which a group of students participated in conference calls that covered different topics. After this, small groups of up to four students got involved in a round of questions which the researcher provided in advance. This experience also resulted, in a few cases, in short debates on the selected topic. This practical, more pedagogical use of a video call platform demonstrates the potential of such tools in the learning of a new language. Yeh, Tseng, & Chen (2019) discuss the use of videoblogs – videos recorded by the vlogger, on a given topic that are uploaded onto a web platform. In this proposal, after recording their own entries, students received feedback from their peers. This feedback was meant to offer guidance for a new, better version of the initial entry. This experiment reinforces the collaborative work criterion.

The application of game-based activities on a mobile system was analyzed by Hwang, Shih, Ma, Shadiev, & Chen (2016). In this proposal, students were exposed to vocabulary and text that, in the way of a game, were intended to help them to improve their speaking ability. The use of the mobile system was praised by the participants. Results showed an improvement in speaking, which could be enhanced further by designing game-like activities with more challenging activities. In similar lines, Rankin, McNeal, Shute & Gooch (2008) propose the idea of gamification, emphasizing that serious games offer “enjoyable experiences for the player as the player develops or improves her skill set as a result of game play” so that they can apply the abilities acquired through games to real life situations. In another study, Yen, Hou, & Chang (2015) worked on an EFL instructional course which integrated Facebook, for asynchronous online discussion, and Skype for synchronous online discussion. Both platforms served as communication tools for students to get involved in role-playing based

learning activities. Peer-to-peer and self-correction were identified among the participants, which was interesting from a self-awareness point of view.

With more attention to the use of vlogging, in this case on Instagram, Wulandari (2019) establishes that good results were observed after students were asked to record videos and upload them for their classmates to comment on. Students' responses to those comments had to be responded to in the form of a new vlog entry. Over a period, this activity allowed the researcher to gauge performance before and after the intervention, which resulted in development of speaking but also reading and writing.

Considering the inherent communicative characteristic of the speaking act itself, and the opportunity presented by online environments, intercultural communication deserves important attention as well. Basharina (2009) claims that global online environments pose a great opportunity to enhance development of intercultural communicative competence. This is especially true when students get to share their own cultural traits, and start comparing, reflecting on, and asking each other about their cultures. As Wu, Hsieh, & Yang (2017) established, online learning communities facilitate meaningful and positive collaboration patterns which, consequently, lead to students enhanced oral proficiency. Also, Wu, Yen & Marek (2011) state that interaction resulting from work on online environments presents interesting prospects for authentic collaboration, which results in more motivated learners who get to develop cross-cultural connections.

The above examples serve as an interesting basis for the forthcoming results section. There are noteworthy strategies and activities that could be implemented in online environments so that students' speaking ability develops to a command of the language that allows them to communicate with ease, without fear of making mistakes, and more importantly, making themselves understood.

## Methodology

For this literature review, articles submitted to different high-quality journals and digital publications have been analyzed, with the objective of capitalizing upon the experiences of different research results and proposed interventions in EFL and ESL settings. First, articles were analyzed according to the **technological tool used or implemented**. In this group, emphasis was given to research on **social networks, vlogging platforms, and video conferencing resources**. A second, smaller group, included articles on a broader scope of technology use for speaking purposes, i.e., articles that deal with **computer assisted language learning (CALL)**. After careful consideration, following are a group of suggested activities that could be adapted to different levels of proficiency in the English language class, which has mostly moved to digital platforms, for both synchronous and asynchronous activities. Additionally, documents dealing with the opportunities created for intercultural

communication on online environments were also considered. This is especially important given the fact that intercultural communication is also a great way for students to develop oral proficiency.

## Results

This section introduces a set of strategies and activities which English language teachers and students could apply to develop their speaking skills. As most classes have had to transition to online environments, they are reasonably easy to apply and assess. Instructors' creativity is key in the implementation process. Also, students' preference for the use of social networks is a new asset that is to be considered advantageous.

### **Debating on current affairs via different video conferencing platforms**

Depending on students' level, selection of topics to debate on – especially those that appeal to them – is a good strategy for development of speaking. Platforms such as Zoom allow for a good range of control over students' order of participation. When it comes to assessment, the video recording capability is of great help for the teacher. Students could be involved more deeply if they are given roles: moderator, speakers, and examiners – thus, contributing to peer assessment and collaborative work.

### **Roleplaying**

Perhaps, one of the most interesting and entertaining type of activity, roleplaying in online settings opens a broad space for creativity on part of learners. Depending on the situation and context given, even audio chat messages – WhatsApp, Telegram – could become a great space for exchange of scripted or non-scripted ideas. A crucial aspect in this type of activity is the moderation/control of certain vocabulary and expressions that may not be suitable for all audiences. Regulations on how this activity should take place are to be clearly deployed in advance. Nonetheless, the results could show how much students perform better when given a *different role* – one that may help them to excel in speaking, and that is different from their everyday life.

### **Vlogging**

In this case, platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Facebook could become useful. Asking students to, for example, present a day in their lives in a set amount of time, could allow them to use more specific vocabulary and phrases for the given task. Asking their classmates to comment on the video entries, and then requesting an improved version is a strategy that allows for deeper involvement of students in their own work. Regulations should be clear in the sense of what and how to assess classmates' work. The feeling of commitment, that should be reinforced all through the activity, may result in stunning ways of presenting, making it even more attractive for students so that they discover that they are good at public speaking.

### **You decide the topic**

This activity may be more suitable for higher levels. Students should be informed in advance that they will have the opportunity of proposing a topic for open discussion during the lesson. This activity may appeal to students who sometimes have a hidden like or hobby, or even an ability that during face-to-face lessons they are not comfortable sharing. As this is a more at-the-moment-of-speaking activity – without much rehearsal involved – students could resort to online dictionaries or automatic translators, which could also offer opportunities for the teacher and classmates to recommend better ways to say or rephrase an expression which could result vague or unintelligible. Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype and other video conferencing platforms could be used of this purpose.

### **News briefing**

With the amount of fake news that are disseminated on social networks – and the web itself – asking students to send audio messages on accurate, real news could be an interesting experience. To prove if the news is real, students should *cite* their sources, making it clear that they are not to simply read and produce the audio, but to rephrase it with their own, more familiar words. Different apps, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or even social networks – a closed group destined to do so – could well serve this purpose.

### **Conclusions**

- Taking advantage of technology and the different tools in which, it is present is without a doubt, one to the best ways in which language learning encounters a supporting means. The advent of more developed resources has allowed for improved and, in some cases, novel strategies for application in the EFL class.
- In the case of specific development of skills, speaking is no stranger to the different possibilities; students have access to several applications and platforms which are easy to use. These include WhatsApp, Telegram, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and social networks, Facebook, and Instagram to name a few, and most popular. Teachers, of course, must implement well devised activities, considering different audiences, and performance level.
- Undoubtedly, teachers' creativity and approach to the use of technology to promote speaking skills in online environments are essential for the implementation of different types of interventions. A more guidance role on part of instructors empowers students to be more convinced and willing to make their opinions heard, when speaking. Assessment, which should happen from a communicative approach, is also a process which does help to offer feedback in a more rewarding way to students' efforts. Collaborative work, as well, is an important element to consider all through the process. Consequently, and especially at present, more attention should be given to research on the efficient use of technology and online settings, for the development of language skills.

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