Using digital tools to enhance English Listening Comprehension of New Zealand Migrant Learners

Student: Barbara Song-Smart
Tutor: Una Cunningham

This essay investigates the potentials of incorporating five digital tools in the English listening comprehension training. It illustrates some of the features and functions of individual tools, and examines and demonstrates how they can be used in listening comprehension training to enhance the outcome or improve the enjoyment of learning.

My adult learner has trouble understanding people in everyday conversations and New Zealand television programs. We worked on her listening strategies in a three month intensive listening workshop, with unsatisfactory outcome. She was enthusiastic about learning the listening strategies, however was unable to apply them in real life conversations.

Both VoiceThread and Bubbly are practical tools for learners to prepare, record, review and share audio materials that learners have produced. They give learners an online platform to peer-review and self-review their speeches. Learners are said to make better language output in this asynchronous learning environment. Second Life and Podcasts give learners rich language input, and create an authentic language immersive environment. The text to speech feature on Voki turns texts to fluent, accurate speeches. Learners can listen to and clarify pronunciations that they are not sure about. The Avatars on Voki makes learning fun and interesting.

Students' online collaboration is strongly featured in recent CALL literatures. Many of the digital tools introduced here cater for online collaboration, VoiceThread, Bubbly, Voki. This prompts me to think about restructuring the setup of our lessons, which has been one on one. We should consider enrolling her in a language learning group locally or online so she can collaborate and socialise with other learners.

Doing this assignment has also directed my attention to the value of language output in listening training. When learners record their own speeches, they listen to their spoken language critically. This will bring their attention to the pronunciations, intonations and fluency. This in turn helps them with their listening comprehension. I am going to build in a component in our lessons where my learner records prepared speeches on an asynchronous learning environment such as VoiceThread or Bubbly, where she could keep a voice journal about her learning experiences.
I have included three screen recordings, VoiceThread, Bubbly and Voki to help illustrate the use of digital tools in enhancing listening comprehension. You can view these videos by clicking on the link situated next to the subtitles.

**VoiceThread** [http://screencast.com/t/ctp9KYlCoi](http://screencast.com/t/ctp9KYlCoi)

VoiceThread is an asynchronous online discussion platform that allows users to share and view opinions in texts, audios and videos. Users generally start a project by uploading something as straightforward as a JPG file. Alternatively, the users could upload multimedia files. The second step is to add narratives or comments to the files uploaded. The comments can also be in texts, audios or videos. The last step is to share the project by obtaining an embed code. The embed code can be sent to other users via emails or be shared on social medias. Depending on the setting of the project, nearly everyone or group members with editing permission could comment as described in step two. The content of the project is available to nearly everyone worldwide to read, listen to or view.

The teacher could start a discussion project on VoiceThread inviting the migrant language learners to talk about the different listening scenarios and difficulties they have encountered in everyday life. When learners share stories and ideas on online discussion platforms such as VoiceThread they project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry (Rourke, Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 1999). Most learners feel a sense of community when they participate in group discussions in asynchronous learning environments (Arnold & Ducate, 2006).

After the migrant learners have shared their stories, the teacher can build in some class discussions where the migrants and teacher brainstorm listening strategies together. Most learners do not like to be taught listening strategies, they would rather develop their own strategies that suit their learning styles from extensive listening (Alm, 2013). To sum up the unit of learning on developing listening strategies, the teacher could post the list of strategies created by the class to a class blog. The class could come back to the list periodically, refine and add to it. The learners have a sense of ownership to the strategies that they developed as a group, and will be able apply these strategies more readily. (Norbrook & Scott, 2003).

Teachers could cultivate the digital storytelling feature of VoiceThread by running a series of online group discussions on topics that migrants are interested in, job hunting, travelling, gardening or comparing the differences between dishes in their home countries and New Zealand food. Set up the tasks to encourage learners to listen to and comment on each other's shared experiences. Making online activities part of the assessment or homework can motivate the learners to make interactions with other learners online a priority in their learning (Hauck & Warneck, 2011).

The multimedia features of VoiceThread will help migrant learners to develop their listening skills, because they can use visual and contextual clues to help with their
listening comprehension (Kim, 2014). For instance, when a migrant learner shared some pictures of an ethnic dish with an audio narrative, it will help other migrant learners who listen to it to get a better idea of the dish.

**Podcast:**

Podcast has become a popular way of listening to digital audio and video broadcasts, because it gives the listeners more time flexibilities compare to the old fashion radio where they need to tune in at certain time of the day if they do not want to miss the broadcasts. Listeners can search and download Podcast as MP3 files that are of interest to them from iTune and enjoy them on mobile devices such as Smartphones, MP3 players and iPad. They can also live stream the podcasts where internet access is available. Once the listeners are subscribed to a broadcast channel, they will receive regular updates from the channel they have subscribed to. This saves listeners’ time looking for listening materials, rather they are ‘pushed’ to the listeners.

Podcasts can be explored as autonomous learning resources because it’s cost effective and portable. Podcasting technology makes listening to English more flexible for the learners. They can practise their listening skills at a time and location that suite them, because the migrant learners can listen to podcasts on their mobile devices, such as Smartphones, iPads (Stockwell, 2013). They can build their listening into their daily routine seamlessly (Alm, 2013). They can plug-in their headphones and listen to an episode of the 6-Minute English from BBC learning English that they downloaded earlier when commuting from and to schools. Learners can spend ten minutes listening to an update of the Rugby World Cup news while they check their social media and email at home. Nearly all Podcasts are free, and there is a wealth of English learning programs on iTune Podcast waiting to be discovered. A lot of the English learning Podcasts complete with worksheets and transcripts.

Podcast offers language learners rich and current authentic listening materials available in a wide variety of topics. Authentic materials are texts produced by native speakers for native speakers (Nunan 1999; Underwood 1989). The Podcast materials can range from the fishing and farming industry of the country where the target language is spoken to the popular reality talent show that are taking place in the country. These podcasts give the migrant learners an insight to the cultural background of the target language they are learning. This can be helpful for migrants who are living in isolated social environment before they are confident enough to reach out to the local communities. Teachers shouldn’t assume, however, that the learners know how to search for suitable Podcast listening materials. Learners need guidance in choosing listening materials appropriate to their level, otherwise they risk being overwhelmed by the vast pool of resources available online (Huang, 2015). Teachers should give the class a list of recommended Podcast Channels that are suitable for language learners. The ESL New Zealand News at [http://eslnews.org.nz/](http://eslnews.org.nz/) is a website that migrants can visit to download audio files of daily news read in a slower speed for the migrants. Learners
do not have to manipulate the speed of the speech using Audacity and once they follow the website they will get updated news readings everyday. Using current affairs as listening materials for migrant learners helps them with their comprehension, because they may have prior knowledge of the stories before they listen to them. People around them would have been discussing the stories or they might have read about the stories on the news papers.

**Bubbly:** @ Bubbly.Net [http://screencast.com/t/w6BNlsH9Fl](http://screencast.com/t/w6BNlsH9Fl)

Bubbly works as a social media that allows its users to update status and comment on other people’s status with voices. It functions similarly to Facebook. Once the users are signed in they could click on the microphone icon on the top right hand corner of the the screen and record a voice message. The users can preview the voice message and proceed to post it if they are satisfied with the audio, or discard it and record another one. They can embellish the voice message with a short text description and upload a picture that explains or represent what the message is about. Bubbly users can share their voice message update by obtaining a link by clicking on the left bottom corner of the message, and post the link via emails or social medias. They can also show appreciation of the status or comments by clicking on the heart shaped button. Should the users wish to get updates from friends or learning groups, they just have to click the ‘follow’ button on those users' home page.

Bubbly can be used as a voice blog for migrant learners to present and monitor their language learning progress. Researcher shows that when language learners share what they have learnt in an asynchronous Computer –Mediated Communication (CMC) environment, they conceptualise their understanding of the reading or listening materials (Huang, 2015; ). Teachers can set a task for the language learners post a voice status on Bubbly once a week about what they have listened to on Podcast. Learners are going to collect relevant information from their listening materials, prepare their speech, record and evaluate their voice message. This process deepens their understanding of the listening materials.

Language teachers can show migrant language learners how to follow each other on Bubbly and listen to, comment on what other learners have been listening to. Researches show that Peer-review motivates learners to create works of high standard because they know their work will be viewed or listened to by an audience (Alm, 2013; Huang, 2015). In Alm’s research (2013) about using Podcast as authentic listening materials, the learners are interested in what others are listening to, and they quite often find some interesting topics from their classmates’ blogs and would down load and listen to those Podcast themselves. When learners share, reflect and comment on each other’s listening activities they project themselves socially and affectively into a Community of Inquiry (CoL) (Garrison, Anderson and Archers, 2000), where learners embark on a journey of discovering interesting listening materials and discussing listening strategies as a group online.
Online security and privacy is a standout issue of Bubbly. Unlike a wiki page or traditional class blog site where people can only gain access with passwords, Bubbly is open to the public, anyone can listen to, comment on the voice status. It does not offer its users the option of creating a private learning group either, where only group members can view and comment on the content.

**Second Life:**
Second Life is a 3D virtual world where people can sigh in and socialise with each other as Avatars, 3D virtual characters. Avatars can visit (In SL language, ‘Teleporting’ ) groups, islands, theme parks and parties with a click of the button. Avatars can take on any forms as desired by the users, from the more realistic human appearance to adorable animals. They communicate with each other via voice chat or typing texts in the chat box. Avatars can gather personal possessions with ‘Linden Currency’, the virtual money in Second Life. They can also obtain or build props, such as a water raft or cushions. Second Life has gained popularities with 2L learners in the last decade because it is free to sign up and they can talk to native language speakers as well as exchange learning experiences with 2L learners around the world.

Second Life can create a relaxing language environment for the learners to practise communicative language and listening comprehension. Researches show that language learners experience less language anxiety on Second Life because they do not feel judged by their teachers in the virtual world, therefore they are willing to take more language risks and participate in language communications with more enthusiasm (Childress & Braswell, 2006; Reinders & Wattana, 2015). The masked identities are said to be another factor that helps learners to feel more at ease communicating with others using target language (Love, Ross & Wilhelm, 2009; Shaffer et al., 2004; Reinders & Wattana, 2014; Rankin, McNeal, Shute & Gooch, 2008; Shih & Yang, 2008). Teachers can set a task for a group of students to organise a party on Second Life. Learners can learn to how to navigate around various islands to purchase party items, decorate the venue and send invitations by making inquiries with other residents on Second Life. By completing these authentic tasks they get to use the target language to solve problems and focus on meanings (Thomas, 2013). There is a fundamental difference between the synchronous communication on Second Life and real-life commutations, Avatars in Second Life can communicate with others with both voice and text chats. The text chat gives language learners more time to reflect on the language input and output (Childress & Braswell, 2006). In the Second Life language learning community, it is often observed that the learners would type key words and phrases in the text chat whilst he is talking, to help others to understand him better. When the conversation has gone to a grinding hold a few typed key words can really help pushing the conversations forward. Teachers’ role is to observe the students’ interactions with other Avatars in Second Life, and to give the learners guidance in how to use appropriate communicative skills to complete the tasks.
Language learners can practise their listening by eavesdropping native speakers’ conversations in Second Life. Learners can teleport to markets or art galleries, or parties to simply listen in to native speakers talk. It is not as socially awkward to join a conversation as a silent participant in Virtual Worlds. Reinders & Wattana (2014) reported that the language acquisition was more evident when language learners observe others’ game play in digital game–based language learning environment.

Learning a Second Language in Second Life is not without its problems. There are Troll who would visit a learning community and behave inappropriately that disrupt the normal activities in the community (BrokenSyeon, 2015). They often can find the loopholes to avoid being blocked by the community security team.

Voki: http://screencast.com/t/BPeqbuWm
People can sign up to Voki and create their own talking Avatars. It is a fun way of voicing one’s opinions online, because the users can mix and match the appearances and voices to custom made their Avatars. They can look completely different to how the users look in reality. There are a number of ways to give the Avatars their voices, text-to-speech, record with microphone and upload an existing audio file from the computer. Once a speaking Avatar is created, there are many ways for the users to share it. They can share the Avatar directly onto social medias, or obtain a permalink, or email the link to friends by typing in the email addresses on the Voki website.

Teachers can set up interactive games in class that motivate the learners to listen to speeches carefully and critically. Learners find that learning is more interesting when it happens in a game like situation and in a familiar context (Hwang, Shih, Ma, Shadiev & Chen, 2015). First, two groups of learners will each describe five words with the help of talking Avatars using text-to-speech. Each Avatar describes one word, for example, ‘This is a Mythical creature with the body of a snake, and wings of a bat. It can breathe fire and fly. It was featured in the first challenge that Harry Potter faced in the Triwizard tournament!’ Group A will send their Avatars with the word descriptions to group B, who will listen to these word descriptions as a team and try to guess the words in a given time frame. For each word description Group B decoded they score a point. Once their time is up, the teacher will count the words they have decoded and aware the points. Group B can then send their word-game Avatars to Group A, who will decode the word descriptions. The team that tries to decode the words can listen to the word description repeatedly. The Avatars will talk in the same speed and intonations every time, more consistently than the human beings can. The listeners can familiarise themselves with the listening materials in a short period of time efficiently. When they listen to the speeches repeatedly they are exposed to accurate and fluent language input (Cunningham, 2015). This helps the learners to establish how certain words or phrases are pronounced. The listeners have more control of how they want to listen to the Avatar by pausing and playing the speech. The competitive nature in a game situation will motivate the learners to
employ appropriate language skills, in this case listening skills to win the games (Lai, Ruhui & Zhao, 2013).

Reference:

BrokenSyeon, English Tutor on Meow Meow, Second Life (Personal communication, Sep 27, 2015)

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