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APLING 589

2/23/11

Mini Project I: Listening and Speaking

**Context**

This activity was designed with an ESL speaking and listening course in mind. Based on the content of the video, the target learners are high intermediate or advanced college students. The intention is to not only develop linguistic competence while utilizing their critical thinking skills in the second language, but also to enrich their understanding of a different culture. In order to supplement in-class learning, we chose to create a VoiceThread in order to help the students practice listening and speaking skills at home over the course of the semester.

**Learning Objective**

The ultimate goal of using VoiceThread is to help the students to practice speaking and interacting in their second language outside of the classroom. Students will also be able to listen to an unfamiliar speaker of the target language so that they can further practice their listening skills. In the process, they will learn about traditions in the target culture. In our demonstration we will talk about the widely celebrated American holiday, St. Patrick’s Day, as an example. Students will discuss and analyze the different aspects of this cultural holiday. They will also make comparisons between their own cultural holidays or traditions and those that exist in the target culture.

**Technical Prerequisites**

For this activity, basic computer skills and access to a computer are necessary. Teachers and learners must also have a VoiceThread account, which can be set up for free with any email address. Some institutions, like The Pennsylvania State University, have accounts that can be used by students and teachers to upload more content than a free account will allow. Some familiarity with VoiceThread is required, but due to the simple and intuitive setup for those already familiar with popular multimedia sites with similar setups, such as Youtube, this issue can be resolved with a quick overview and an in-class practice session before the students use the website outside of class. The use of VoiceThread for this particular activity will require a microphone so that the students will be able to make audio comments to practice their speaking skills. However, this should not cause any problems for the students because most recent laptops and other personal computers come with built-in microphones and webcams. Even if the student is unable to find or borrow a computer with these features, a headset may be purchased on Amazon.com for under $10, and a simple microphone (without headphones) costs under $5, meaning that it would not be difficult for a student or an instructor to buy.

**Task Description**

Before the assignment is given to students to complete at home, they will have been introduced to VoiceThread and its uses. They also will have gone over any relevant vocabulary. Outside of the classroom, as homework, they will receive a link to the instructor’s VoiceThread via email. Their instructions will be to sign in to their account and to view the video and the subsequent picture slide. Four questions (written in text) will appear on the VoiceThread before the video begins playing in the first slide, as a prompt. The students will be asked by the instructor beforehand and directed by the prompt to respond to at least three of the questions posted on the first slide using their microphones. The students may also choose to make a video comment if they prefer. They will also have the option to replay the video as many times as is necessary. On the second slide, students will be prompted to respond to another student’s comment, or to ask questions to clarify something that they do not understand from the first slide. The responses to the video will be due first, and then after a certain amount of time (in our handout we specified three days) the comments to other students’ responses will be due. In this way, students will have the opportunity to interact with the prompt as well as with other students in the VoiceThread.

**Theory fit**

The Interaction Hypothesis is one of the theories guiding our choice of technology. Long’s Interaction Hypothesis discusses the importance of Comprehensible Input in the acquisition of a language. Swain’s Comprehensible Output adds the importance of producing comprehensible utterances in acquiring a language. The VoiceThread activity contains Comprehensible Input in the use of the video with audio, and the students must produce Comprehensible Output in the form of questions.

Some aspects of Sociocultural Theory (SCT) also impacted our decisions about technology use. SCT discusses the critical nature of Interaction in the construction of meaning. To this end, it was important to us that the activity we created and the technology used allowed for interaction between the students, even if this interaction was done through the computer. In our activity, students must respond via audio to each others’ comments. Through the use of VoiceThread, the students are also able to receive mediation through the video, and possibly their classmates. The students may view the video as many times as they desire, which supports/scaffolds their understanding of the content. As they listen to and respond to their classmates, they may be able to better understand the material as well.

**Sustainability of technology use & encouragement of learners’ language learning strategies**

Through the use of VoiceThread, students may learn to become more self-directed in their language learning. Students choose how many times to watch and listen to the video, how many classmates’ comments to listen and respond to, and how much and what exactly they will comment on. In addition, students will learn how to analyze and incorporate new vocabulary and cultural concepts. They will also develop a deeper cultural understanding of the topic.

We would intend to use VoiceThread to have similar cultural discussions throughout the course, most likely about once a month. In this way, the technology would be sustainable throughout the course for both the teacher and the students. However, although the teacher might use this technology in future teaching, it seems unlikely that the students would use VoiceThread in their everyday lives outside of class. Although people may use VoiceThread to discuss pictures or videos with friends and family, it seems to be a more likely tool for class teaching and learning.

**Evaluation of task design and implementation**

In order to evaluate the task design and implementation, the first question would be whether the technology worked as intended. Other questions to be asked include the following: Was the outcome worth the time/effort required of the teacher to create VoiceThread tasks?; Was the outcome worth the time/effort required by students to learn how to use the technology?; Did students learn about the cultural topic?; Did students successfully practice listening and speaking within the context?; Did students engage in critical thinking about the video topic?; and finally, did students enjoy the task and find it useful?

In order to answer these questions, the instructor could share their views on the success of the task/technology. To obtain the students’ views, a survey may be used in which students share their opinions on the questions asked above.

**Vocabulary Items**:

* dead of winter – the middle of winter
* Emerald Isle – another name for Ireland
* blarney – nonsense; flattering fiction
* Maewyn Succat – St. Patrick’s given name
* Confesso – the name of St. Patrick’s autobiography
* monastery – a place where monks and other religious people live and worship
* paganism – a term used to refer to folk religions, generally those with multiple gods
* shamrock – a small green plant with 3 or 4 heart-shaped leaves; clover
* Holy Trinity – the 3 holy beings in Catholicism – God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit
* reprieve – a temporary break or relief
* penance – voluntary self-punishment to atone (be excused) for sins
* hoist – to lift or raise
* vices – bad habits

**Informal Lesson Plan Handout**

Before completing this activity, you will need a VoiceThread account.

1. Check your email for a message from your instructor with a link to the APLING 589 group on the VoiceThread website.
2. Sign into VoiceThread using your PSU account. Under the heading “Groups” you will find a category called APLING 589. Click on it.
3. Click on the VoiceThread entitled “History of St. Patrick’s Day” and watch the video on the first slide.
4. On the video slide, make an audio/video comment answering three of the four questions posted in the text prompt that appears before the video. You may replay the video as many times as you want.
5. Click the right arrow on the video slide in order to go to the second slide. There you will be prompted to create an audio/video response to another student’s comment from the first slide, or to ask a question about something in the video that you did not understand. Make sure you state whose comment you are responding to at the beginning of your own comment.

\*The audio responses to the questions from the first slide will be due first. Three days later, responses to other students’ comments (on the second slide) will be due.