

Teaching Tips

Voice e-mail

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In the many years that I have been teaching speaking courses, I have progressed from getting students to talk one-on-one to recordings on audio-cassette to voice mail messages on my telephone to the new gadget on the block: voice e-mail. Horizon Wimba (<http://www.horizonwimba.com>) offers Voice Tools, which may be used in a variety of situations, such as in online courses, through WebCT, as a link on a web site, podcasting, etc. I don't teach distance learning classes, so my main application of this tool is as voice e-mail. Students access the voice e-mail application through a link on my web site, already automatically configured to send to my e-mail address. They may record their voice at a computer station through a microphone, listen to their own message, and then send or re-record depending on whether they are satisfied or not.

I use voice e-mail in different ways. The first is to ask students to read assigned passages aloud. I mark up the printed transcript as I listen, using phonetic symbols and notations for intonation, linking, stress, and pausing. The second type of assignment is a student-generated narrative, such as an elaborate, humorous excuse for missing class, usually targeting a grammar topic, such as past tense. I write down comments about pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and content on a score sheet as I listen. Students bring these notations and comments when we have a class session in the language lab. They understand what to focus on and can select the appropriate practice exercises in the lab's pronunciation program.

A second application of the tool is voice authoring, which allows an instructor to record a passage, such as a lecture or a set of instructions, for students to listen and respond to by voice e-mail.

Instructors can also leave audio links on a web page using this tool. Voice discussion, which allows streams of dialog, is another feature of the program.

Voice e-mail has several advantages over the methods I used before. I can store student voice e-mails in a folder in my e-mail until I want to listen to them, and I can pause, begin again, or listen again whenever I want to. This takes care of one of the most serious problems I had with telephone voice mail: the frequent interruptions I had, both at home and in my office, while listening to student recordings. Students find the application easy to use. Our language lab computers are all equipped with headphones, but it only costs about \$20 for a cheap headphone set for home use. Access is easy, either through a link on a web page or through WebCT. Best of all, voice e-mail definitely relegates to the distant past those experiences carting around tote bags of audiocassette tapes that would spill out and dismember themselves at the slightest provocation.

A major issue is the cost of a site license. Horizon Wimba allows institutions to "try out" the program for a limited time, such as one year. A site license ends up being based on an institution's FTE, however, so the larger you are, the more you will have to pay, and it can cost thousands of dollars. The trick will be to get faculty outside language departments, and especially in distance learning, to get interested in a new dimension to their craft.

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