CONSTRUCTING VISUALLY-BASED DIGITAL CONVERSATIONS IN EFL WITH VOICETHREAD

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Abstract

VoiceThread holds potential to provide students who rarely speak in class a means to create visually-based digital conversations. In light of this, pedagogical affordances of the tool are considered, along with efficacy behind VoiceThread development within English as a Foreign Language contexts. Instructional strategies, supported by examples, are presented. A means for in-service teachers to evaluate language production and learning outcomes emerge, along with techniques essential for monitoring, producing, and guiding effective VoiceThread development through inclusion of specifically developed resources.

Keywords: VoiceThread; digital conversations; visualization

1. Introduction

VoiceThread is an asynchronous online tool, and associated mobile application, that employs uploaded audio comments, a narrating tool, text balloons, and web-cam video annotation to support the online discussion of media artifacts. Media artifacts can consist of documents, images, presentations or videos. The site allows moderated feedback, which in turn allows both instructors and students to control the dissemination of feedback in terms of monitoring postings for inappropriate content. Most importantly, after creation VoiceThreads are immediately web-accessible and can be embedded into other websites including blogs, wikis, and course management systems like Moodle, thereby supporting student accessibility across a range of platforms (Pacansky-Brock, 2013). To date, VoiceThread has proved useful in a number of educational contexts from second language learning (Bush, 2009; Akasha, 2011; Pallos & Pallos, 2011; Sun, Yu, & Gao, 2013) and in literacy development (Smith & Dobson, 2009) as well as in use with adults and young learners alike (Gillis, Luthin, Parette, & Blum, 2012; Lewis, Burks, Shumack & Shumack, 2014).

2. Situating VoiceThread in the educational context

2.1. Pedagogical considerations

VoiceThread was not specifically designed as an educational application, resulting in the functionality of a number of features not always marrying with pedagogy. Yet, it is possible to match VoiceThread features with pedagogical affordances (Burden & Atkinson, 2008), including focusing learner attention on specifics via the zoom tool; formative feedback provision on media related content, emerging from asynchronous comments pertaining to thread artifact(s); learner communities visualizing and providing responses to cumulative postings, as users can post comments reflecting on other users comments; instant feedback from a potentially global audience, as the thread can be made viewable by anyone online; comment moderation allowing the thread to be managed and monitored for appropriateness; while providing an 'at once' visual overview of content rather than a long text-based thread, stems from capturing a full discussion on a single page. The VoiceThread context also affords students with an environment from which to work collaboratively to communicate and engage in learning, while teachers can utilize the tool for creation, discussion, assessment, or even in a flipped classroom context (Hughes, 2012; Nicholson, 2013; Moore, Gillet & Steele, 2014).

2.2 Types of educational VoiceThreads

VoiceThreads can be used to share information, start discussions, receive feedback or simply tell a story. Poelzer (2009) along with Elwood (2010) recognize the educational opportunities it can provide, together with strategies required for its effective use as a learning tool, particularly for the creation of digital storytelling projects; demonstrating knowledge gained in research/inquiry projects; documenting student progress over time, and sharing information with an authentic audience. Poelzer (2009) also views VoiceThread as extremely adaptable and useful for a multitude of purposes across a range of subjects/curriculums, as numerous subject areas can be integrated within a single VoiceThread. As Dyck (2007) points out, this can be used to develop storytelling and deep thinking skills as well as communication skills, or even used as a means to conduct assessment.

A number of different uses of VoiceThread by educators have emerged, including collaborative digital storytelling; discussion, suggestion, and opinion activities; problem-solving skill development tasks; peer review; keyword identification; image notation and captioning; revision work completion; book and movie review development; digital portfolio construction; as well as comic strip building (Pires, 2010).

Burden & Atkinson (2008) also identify a number of activities suitable for VoiceThread use, from stimulus, narrative, collaborative, conceptual, empathic, and representational such as video posting without sound, with learners commenting on what might be said; presenting the first half of a video clip, and then asking learners to predict what might happen next; or assigning different roles to students, and having them post comments assuming the perspectives of that role.

2.3. Potential for VoiceThread in the teaching of EFL

A number of possibilities exist for utilizing VoiceThread in the teaching of EFL. Students can participate in speaking and listening activities when recording or responding to VoiceThreads, teachers can set topic-based presentations or dialogue-based conversational tasks, classes can share projects with other classes allowing them to see what other students are studying and to provide comments on that group of learners who then respond in turn. Further, it allows students to have a window into their experiences and ideas, and allows stakeholders (administrators, teachers, parents, and even students themselves) to monitor the learning outcomes and educational product that emerges.

As the VoiceThread website itself states, 'participation is not optional'. This establishes VoiceThread as a tool that any EFL educator can immediately recognize to have the exciting potential to give an actual audible voice to those students who rarely, if ever, speak in class. It also provides a voice for those unwilling to speak out in front of peers, and if such students still feel too uncomfortable to actually verbalize their thoughts or responses in a foreign language they always retain the option to type comments. As such, if the focus of the lesson is on speaking and pronunciation, as it is many times the case in the EFL context, then the teacher may inform students they can use any option but the keyboard to comment. Leaving spoken comments on a VoiceThread can break down the affective filters that many learners carry with them into language classrooms (Hacker, 2010). On the other hand, if the focus is on reading and writing, students can limit their comments to writing and notation if deemed necessary.

In this respect, VoiceThread comes to provide English language learners with a number of opportunities to engage in online discussion while practicing speaking and writing skills asynchronously. This comes to support a multiple intelligence approach to learning and helps encourage participation and build learner confidence by providing time for students to reflect and construct responses before posting (Recchio-Demmin, 2009).

3. Instructional strategies – Nurturing VoiceThreads

After creating an active VoiceThread and providing a link or sending out invites to students, the thread will need to be nurtured. Three ways to do this as illustrated by Ferriter (2010) are related to the following elements: viewing and thinking about the VoiceThread; leaving a succinct spoken or written comment; and leaving an effective spoken or written comment that promotes future participation. Although these elements are necessary in any VoiceThread, some targeting is required for the EFL context as detailed below.

3.1. Viewing and thinking about the VoiceThread

Students will need to examine the content of the VoiceThread, listening to and reading each of the comments by previous users (if any). To encourage active listening, promote writing skills and develop thinking skills while stimulating interactive involvement in the language learning process, students should collect, connect, question and express.

- **Collect:** while viewing the VoiceThread for the first time students should collect their thoughts about the information presented, particularly anything that is interesting or new to them (including vocabulary or expressions) and write down this information in a point form.
- **Connect:** it is important to emphasize that students should attempt to connect the incoming information from the VoiceThread and associated comments with preexisting schema and build upon their existing language skills.
- **Question:** students should be encouraged to ask questions about the VoiceThread they are viewing. Is there anything that is confusing? Is there language or content that is unfamiliar?
- **Express:** Students might need help being creative with their language use and they need to be supported in their judgments.

3.2. Leaving a succinct spoken or written comment

For the EFL context, it may also be wise to provide students with a series of comments starting with set phrases, and setting a sentence or a word limit for their responses. Almost any conversation starter expression could be used to help students leave comments, particularly those from students current textbooks, even some idiomatic expressions could be introduced too. For example:

I remember a time …

I once heard ...

... on the other hand ...

I wouldn't be caught ...

3.3. Leaving an effective spoken or written comment

Learners of any sort, and perhaps even teachers, too, might also need some general advice regarding commenting and responding. This is especially true if the comments are to promote critical thinking, new language use as well as promote further participation and interactivity.

- **Repeat/rephrase:** Restate part of a previous comment, or what about the content that garners attention.
- **Detail:** Put thoughts into words or text, as concisely as possible - what exactly are your students thinking?
- **Elaborate:** Make an exact point, or complete the language learning objective, while attempting to use new expressions or vocabulary gained from the VoiceThread.
- **Create:** Spur the thinking of future commentators by providing a memorable finish to comments. One strategy might be ending comments with a rhetorical question or by leaving a quote as a summary. Comments need to be closed in a manner that helps to spur a conversation.

It is important to ensure that students are prepared to have other people respond to their comments in both a negative and positive manner. If learners receive a negative response, they first and foremost need to accept the criticism and not be offended. Help them learn to use any response as an opportunity to gain feedback, and an understanding of others' opinions and ideas, as a means to improve upon their language skills. Second, ensure that students take the time to properly organize their thoughts so that they can respond to any comments in a constructive manner. Time to compose responses is one of the biggest advantages afforded by asynchronous communication (Kent, 2017). Also, remember that the Internet and VoiceThreads are potentially open to the public, and can remain a matter of public record until the VoiceThread owner deletes the thread, so make sure students are responding appropriately and in ways conducive to their language learning.

4. Resources for applying VoiceThreads in EFL

After registering with the VoiceThread website, and having a contact list of students, instructors will need to create an active VoiceThread for use with classes. Initially, an issue

that maintains a focus on obtaining the desired outcome of a lesson is a good place to start. Otherwise, utilize the VoiceThread to promote discussion of a topic, or have it act as a turn-taking slideshow promoting a dialogue-based activity, a story, or student-generated narrative. Regardless, aim to build on established resources, and port existing classroom content to VoiceThreads. Also consider assisting students in developing and reflecting on the content they create, as well as develop a means to successfully evaluate the content that students produce. To this end, several handouts have been developed to assist in-service teachers in undertaking this process and to give a voice to students who do not speak out in the class.

4.1. Effectively implementing and evaluating VoiceThreads

In order to assist educators in effectively implementing and evaluating VoiceThreads, several handouts have been developed (see Appendix A through D). In the initial development of a VoiceThread it would be best to begin by preparing the necessary media or content for use, and to do this before planning what comments to provide alongside the presented content. This step would require developing initial comments that are short (1 to 3 sentences perhaps) as longer comments may discourage learners, particularly beginner EFL students who may reconsider their ability to leave a comment. Content would then need to be ordered so that scaffolded learning can be provided in a teacher-directed manner that still focuses on providing content that maintains a student-centered approach to the use and access of the material presented and contained within the VoiceThread. To be successful in this endeavor it will be important to focus on developing a VoiceThread based on well storyboarded material and comments that inspire learners to add media artifacts and respond to those already uploaded materials and comments so that the VoiceThread can grow. To this end, Appendix A contains a guide in construction of a VoiceThread for classroom or teaching purposes, and is designed primarily for instructor use. Alternatively, Appendix B houses a similar handout but oriented toward student use. This handout can then be augmented by that found in Appendix C, which can be used to prompt student thinking concerning the creation of their comments. The handout will enable learners to record items of interest, factors they agree or disagree with, things that changed their thinking, elements that challenged them, and, along with language learning outcomes (such as new vocabulary or expressions they were able to employ or pickup), they will be able to identify things they learned from engaging with a VoiceThread. Instructors would also be able to utilize such a handout when conducting formative assessment in order to gauge how the use of VoiceThreads has gone over with students. Finally, when it is time to evaluate student-created VoiceThreads, a rubric that takes

into account the two sides of student participation would be the most useful. That is, the creation, development, and end-product ultimately produced by the learner or their group, as well as the various comments made on other class members' VoiceThreads, would need to be the focus of assessment. The rubric found in Appendix D has been developed for this purpose. Alternatively, instructors may also rely on either building upon established VoiceThread resources, or porting existing classroom content to the VoiceThread context.

4.2. Porting existing content to VoiceThreads

Almost any classroom content can be ported to the VoiceThread context for use as a potential EFL learning activity. VoiceThread is particularly well-suited as a means from which students can introduce themselves using images, videos, text excerpts of favorite books or poems, as well as providing details of their hobbies, friends, families and pets. An extremely comprehensive resource, with exhaustive examples, is the Voicethread4education wiki, https://voicethread4education.wikispaces.com/ (Cassinelli, 2016). Hoskins Sakamoto's (2010) alphabet book is just one of many examples that uses Voicethread to present a photo for each letter, where young English language learners make the shapes with their bodies. Each image is paired with an audio comment where the student pronounces the letter and an associated English word. Such a 'book' can be exported and provided to students at the end of a class, so they each have a personal copy of the project, with parents provided with the link so that the material can be practiced at home for reinforcement. VoiceThreads containing images may also be set up to allow students to extract information from the photographs presented by asking wh- questions. To expand the deeper thinking skills of students, they can then be directed to focus on examining the images in more detail, and commenting on what influences may have impacted upon elements in the image, when it was taken, and how these relate to the world today. Such a process can assist in helping students gain language skills required to tell complex stories through the use of pictures and narration (Kent, 2016).

Other uses of VoiceThread might involve housing dialogue-based language learning activities to make students more motivated to work collaboratively in developing end products for presentation to peers and other stakeholders (Akasha, 2011; Bush, 2009). In teaching directions, images can be zoomed in on and panned around freely, allowing for various directions to be stated and followed with ease. An image of a map can be uploaded to the VoiceThread with a comment asking for directions. Students can then engage in a conversational turn-taking dialogue, which can then be extended to other topics where, for example, a picture of a restaurant can be uploaded with two students engaging in a

conversation as waiter and customer with images and comments added to suit the progression of the topic as the conversation evolves. This is particularly useful as many teaching situations demand that a pre-selected textbook must be used, and followed meticulously. In such cases, parts of the textbook could also be scanned and inserted into a VoiceThread so that students can then provide spoken answers to text-related questions. This technique could also be augmented so that students can complete any associated homework via a single VoiceThread, with the VoiceThread then serving as an assessment tool and a means of housing content for revision.

5. Conclusion

As an interactive tool that allows for collaborating, sharing, and commenting, VoiceThread has come to change the way information can be presented, disseminated and discussed online. Essentially, it has opened up new possibilities that provide EFL learners and their instructors with a means to engage in visually-based asynchronous conversations in a multitude of ways, while promising to provide language learners with alternate ways to share their voice and practice language output while engaging in meaningful, active, authentic, cooperative and intentional learning (Howland, Jonassen, & Marra, 2012).

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Appendix A. Incorporating and constructing a VoiceThread for integration into the classroom

Guide to the construction of a VoiceThread for classroom or teaching purposes.

VoiceThread Goal	Potential Media Artifacts	Model Comments	Notes
State the learning outcome or the intended direction of the VoiceThread below	List artifacts by type, and describe the rationale behind how each meets the intended direction of the VoiceThread and any desired learning outcome(s)	Type out some ideas for initial comments per slide, expand as necessary, and determine the best format	List any other ideas, or notes below as required
Intended Direction Explicitly express the educational focus or aim behind the VoiceThread here	**Documents** List all the artifacts required to create the VoiceThread **Document Rationale** List how each artifact meets the VoiceThread direction or a learning outcome(s)	**Slide 1 Comment Type** Voice, typed, uploaded audio, webcam, narration **Comment** Draft comments here	
Learning Outcome 1 State the primary learning objective here	**Images** List all the images necessary for the VoiceThread **Images Rationale** List how each image meets the VoiceThread direction or a learning outcome(s)	**Slide 2 Comment Type** Voice, typed, uploaded audio, webcam, narration **Comment** Draft comments here	
Learning Outcome 2 State the secondary, or any other, learning objective here	**Video** List all the video required for the VoiceThread **Videos Rationale** List how each video meets the VoiceThread direction or learning outcome(s)	**Slide 3** **Comment Type** Voice, typed, uploaded audio, webcam, narration **Comment** Draft comments here	

Appendix B. Student Handout #1

VoiceThread Title	Group Members:	
Slide 1		
Media Artifact **(choice of media and why)**	**Focus** **(aim/goal/learning outcome)**	**Comment** **(format and wording)**
Sketch an example (or paste one here) to reflect what will appear on this slide of your VoiceThread. Keep in mind the document, image, or video you select must match the comments you will make regarding it, and align with the focus or goal you are trying to communicate.	What are you trying to communicate or achieve with your VoiceThread – is there an intended learning outcome? What is the aim or goal of your VoiceThread?	What format will your comment take? (Consider voice-only, webcam, use of the notation tool). What comment will you leave on this slide? (Write out your comment here).
Slide 2		
Media Artifact **(choice of media and why)**	**Focus** **(aim/goal/learning outcome)**	**Comment** **(format and wording)**
Sketch an example (or paste one here) to reflect what will appear on this slide of your VoiceThread. Keep in mind the document, image, or video you select must match the comments you will make regarding it, and align with the focus or goal you are trying to communicate.	What are you trying to communicate or achieve with your VoiceThread – is there an intended learning outcome? What is the aim or goal of your VoiceThread?	What format will your comment take? (Consider voice-only, webcam, use of the notation tool). What comment will you leave on this slide? (Write out your comment here).

Appendix C. Student Handout #2

The following handout can be used to prompt students thinking on comments, or used in a follow-up lesson that centers around a discussion of the comments students found users left on their VoiceThreads. It can also serve as a means to evaluate how the use of VoiceThread has gone over with your students, and what areas could be potentially improved with future implementation. The handout can be used as is, but will likely need modification to meet the needs of your specific students and teaching context, particularly if you are working with young learners. In any case, the aim of the reflection handout is to enable learners to identify and record items of interest, factors they agreed or disagreed with, things that changed their thinking, elements that challenged them, and, along with language learning outcomes (such as new vocabulary or expressions they were able to employ or pickup), things they learned while engaging in VoiceThread use.

VoiceThread Title:	Student Name:	Student Number:
Reflection Questions	**Example (items or points)**	**Reason**
What comment(s) did you find interesting during the use of VoiceThread?	Write the comment(s) here	State what made the comment(s) particularly interesting
What comment(s) did you particularly agree with?	Write the comment(s) here	State why you agree with the comment(s)
What comment(s) did you particularly disagree with?	Write the comment(s) here	State why you disagree with the comment(s)
What comment(s) made you change the way you think?	Write the comment(s) here	State how your thinking has now changed
What was the most challenging aspect(s) of VoiceThread for you?	List the aspect(s) here	State why the aspect(s) was most challenging
What new vocabulary or expressions did you learn?	List the new vocabulary or expression(s) here	Write the meaning of the new vocabulary or expressions here
What other thing(s) did you learn when using VoiceThread?	List the other thing(s) you learned here	How did you learn the other thing(s) you listed?

Appendix D. VoiceThread Evaluation Rubric.

Assessment Item	Assessment Criteria	Score
VoiceThread		
Media	Selection of artifacts reflects topic, helps support viewpoint of content (sources credited where appropriate)	1 2 3 4 5
Content	Well researched and supported information provided relevant to topic in an organized fashion (sources credited where appropriate)	1 2 3 4 5
Thread Quality	Images are clear, video is not blurry, volume is loud enough so that the voice of speakers is consistently audible	1 2 3 4 5
Notation Tool	The tool is used to highlight when necessary, and is not used in a manner that is distracting	1 2 3 4 5
Collaboration (if appropriate)	Students/groups divided workload fairly, and undertook VoiceThread completion cooperatively	1 2 3 4 5
Language skills	Language use contributes to topic clarity, style and development, e.g. appropriate vocabulary selected, consistent spelling/grammar	1 2 3 4 5
Comments		
Focus	comments are directed to topic, stay on topic, and are more than a few words	1 2 3 4 5
Understanding	Comments show clear understanding of topic and others comments	1 2 3 4 5
Accuracy	Comments are accurate and contain no errors regarding the topic, clearly reflecting thought and preparation	1 2 3 4 5
Notation Tool	The tool is used to highlight points, and not for its own sake	1 2 3 4 5
Language Skills	No spelling or grammar inconsistency in text-based comments, spoken comments free of superfluous wording and are more spontaneous than scripted in appearance	1 2 3 4 5