

## Chapter 76

# Measuring Language Learners' Speaking Proficiency in a Second Language Using Economical Digital Tools

**Peter B. Swanson**  
Georgia State University, USA

### ABSTRACT

*Rising costs, combined with an increasing lack of flexibility of commercial course management technology tools such as uLearn and Blackboard, have prompted educators to consider other options. New advances in free and open source software, webware, and hardware are becoming attractive alternatives for educators and school systems due to decreased funding. These innovative digital tools hold promise to help educators overcome a variety of impediments to teaching and learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as fostering student motivation. In the context of second/foreign language learning, the author seeks to present various technologies to P-16 educators that can be used for student oral language assessment. The author provides an overview of the obstacles language teachers must overcome in order to teach more effectively, as well as a synopsis of various options with which language instructors may not be familiar. Afterwards, findings from empirical research comparing the use of digital technology for the measurement of student speaking proficiency to the more conventional face-to-face method are presented. Student and instructor perceptions of using free and open source software are discussed, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of challenges that can appear when changes in assessment methods take place as well as avenues for future research.*

### INTRODUCTION

Creating and nurturing student motivation to acquire a new language can be a challenging endeavor, particularly when instructors must overcome a myriad of obstacles that tend to decrease

instructional time in the classroom. Institutional hindrances such as large classes, complex work schedules, and perceptions that teachers lack voice in the creation of school policy can serve to complicate daily instructional practices (Futernick, 2007). Furthermore, the high stakes testing

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-7230-7.ch076

requirements inherent in *No Child Left Behind* have become overwhelming to many teachers as they lose valuable instructional time due to working around testing schedules and administering the exams (Zellmer, Frontier, & Pheifer, 2006) that have nothing to do with the teaching of a new language. Moreover, classroom time and academic focus can be compromised by sports and other extracurricular activities (Goldman, 1991).

While teachers regardless of discipline must cope with such impediments to teaching and learning, new strategies to take advantage of every minute in the classroom for instructional purposes need to be identified in order to enhance student achievement. In the context of second/foreign language (S/FL) teaching, instructors face these same challenges while struggling with a second quandary, the array of methods in which proficiency can be assessed. Swanson, Early, and Baumann (2011) find that at its core, S/FL instruction in the communicative classroom is dedicated to the ideals and the practice of developing second-language proficiency as conceptualized by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language's (ACTFL) three modes of communication: the Interpersonal, the Interpretive, and the Presentational (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006). Formerly conceptualized as the four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), the three modes of communication are three parts of a common goal, communication, rather than placing focus on any one isolated skill. While proficiency in listening reading, and writing are measured typically through objective testing methods such as multiple choice and true/false items, the assessment of students' ability to speak in the target language has continually presented numerous challenges, which include the development of useful and flexible rubrics (Foster, Tonkyn, & Wigglesworth, 2000) and the time expended in individual learner assessment (Flewelling, 2002).

Furthermore, unlike reading and writing assessments, oral assessments which are traditionally

conducted in the classroom during instructional time, fail to leave an assessment artifact that is archivable in nature. Such a lack of what can constitute a body of evidence toward language proficiency hinders overall performance evaluation because such an artifact could be used to measure similarities and/or differences in learner progress towards proficiency goals. Additionally, the artifact can materially support assessment outcomes, and can be presented as concrete evidence of linguistic and cultural proficiency to stakeholders and third-party program evaluators or accreditation bodies. In an effort to address these concerns, language laboratories have been transformed to accommodate digital recordings that can facilitate whole-class concurrent, archival recordings (Flewelling, 2002; Gilgen, 2004). Such advances in the teaching and learning of languages have spawned a body of research centered on the multiple uses of emerging technologies and their potential uses within the context of oral proficiency and assessment (Chan, 2003; Kvavik, 2005; Volle, 2005; Zhao, 2005). This chapter is guided by my research with several colleagues on the integration of digital tools for oral language assessment (Early & Swanson, 2008; Swanson & Early, 2008; Swanson, Early, & Baumann, 2011; Swanson & Schlig, 2010).

## **BACKGROUND**

While younger teachers are more likely to have grown up in a technology-rich environment, and therefore may be more comfortable integrating technology in the classroom, many of these novice educators suffer the same problem as their veteran counterparts — a lack of time and resources to develop technologically rich lessons (Pierson & Cozart, 2005; Early & Swanson, 2008). Additionally, teachers tend to teach the way that they were taught (Ball, 1990; Vrasidas & McIsaac, 2007; Wright, Wilson, Gordon, & Stallworth, 2002). Even with an abundance of available software,

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