Self-Assessment with *TalkAbroad:* Bolstering Oral Proficiency Development of Pre-Service Language Teachers

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Abstract

This classroom practice article explores the integration of TalkAbroad, an online language conversation platform, in an undergraduate World Languages Education program to support pre-service language teachers' oral proficiency development. Two pre-service teachers, facing challenges like family responsibilities and limited study abroad opportunities, engaged in four 30-minute conversations on topics including media, future plans, current events, and cultural comparisons. Through structured post-conversation activities involving transcription, self-assessment, goal setting, and feedback, students exhibited increased self-awareness and confidence in their linguistic abilities. This article emphasizes the platform's positive impact on student learning and highlights TalkAbroad's potential to support language proficiency development, offering valuable insights for future language education practices.

Keywords: *pre-service teachers, oral proficiency, self-assessment, independent learning*

Introduction

Globally, research on pre-service language teachers'(PSTs) oral proficiency has consistently reported that those who fall below the threshold for teacher candidacy are less willing to actively participate in interactional classroom tasks at the educator preparation program (EPP) level (Aslan & Åžahin, 2020) and subsequently shy away from using the target language (TL) during classroom teaching once in the field (Bell & Borden, 2022). In the context of the US, a proficiency level

of Advanced Low (AL) or higher is required for language teacher licensure in more commonly taught languages including Spanish, French, and German. These requirements have been set forth by ACTFL and the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), the governing body for teacher preparation in the US (ACTFL/CAEP, 2013).

The ability to communicate at the AL level is important for several reasons. First, speakers at the AL sublevel are able to engage in informal and some formal conversations about topics like school, home, leisure, employment, and current events, and narrate and describe past, present, and future events in paragraph-length discourse, although often separately. While their speech may contain occasional errors and lack specificity in vocabulary, they can convey intended messages with sufficient accuracy and clarity, while performance deteriorates significantly when tackling more advanced tasks. Additionally, performance at this level must be sustained in order to receive an AL rating on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI; ACTFL, 2020).

Beyond the licensure requirements for PSTs that necessitate reaching the AL proficiency threshold, the rationale for possessing advanced proficiency has a profound impact on a teacher's ability to provide "target-language input in the classroom at a level necessary to develop students' interpretive skills or to guide students in interacting with others in interpersonal contexts," and those teachers who cannot reach at least AL "have difficulty serving effectively as a facilitator in helping students negotiate meaning with one another and to function spontaneously in the TL" (ACTFL, n.d., n.p.). In addition, research on teacher oral language proficiency has revealed that it plays a crucial role in teachers' sense of confidence and credibility while instructing in the TL (Kamhi-Stein, 2009; Murdoch, 1994). Furthermore, research findings on language proficiency and self-confidence validate the significance of proficiency in the TL as the foundation for teachers' beliefs about their own effectiveness (Digap, 2016; Yilmaz, 2011).

However, nearly 50% of PSTs are unable to attain the proficiency level recommended by ACTFL/CAEP as assessed by the OPI by the end of their EPPs (Glisan et al., 2013; Kissau, 2014; Kissau et al., 2019). Although PSTs are also assessed in reading and writing, oral proficiency assessments remain a challenge for many of them (Weyers, 2010). Contrary to other subject areas that are mastered through academic study, language proficiency evolves and develops gradually. Furthermore, achieving an AL proficiency level can be an ambitious aspiration for language majors, especially if they are unable to participate in a substantial study abroad program (Rifkin, 2003). In sum, more program-level support needs to be available to help PSTs achieve their oral proficiency goals.

In our program, it is important to us to support our students' linguistic development to be able to enter the field with confidence and necessary linguistic skills to deliver effective instruction in the TL. In collaboration with the language department at our institution, we have adopted a culture of proficiency mindset to enhance the content area expertise of PSTs (Brooks & Darhower, 2014). The culture of proficiency framework emphasizes the necessity for PSTs to engage in a number of diverse learning and practice-based opportunities, as these experiences

play a vital role in shaping both their overall pedagogical and content knowledge in teacher education (Klemenz et al., 2019; Swanson, 2013). For this reason, we opted to integrate TalkAbroad to provide additional language practice for struggling students. We included opportunities for choosing the most useful strategies for a particular task, planning, monitoring, regulation, and self-evaluation of learning, as a way for PSTs to develop conscious habits and practices toward language proficiency, as these metacognitive strategies are well-documented as effective approaches to advance language acquisition (Anderson, 2004; Schraw et al., 2006).

The Teaching Context

This classroom innovation took place with two PSTs in an undergraduate EPP at a doctoral-level university in the Southwestern United States. Our small program supports roughly 10 students per year in several languages. Approximately half of those students are unable to engage in a significant study abroad experience (e.g., more than a month), if at all, and we have had several students who struggle to achieve the required proficiency level needed to complete their certification programs.

TalkAbroad (https://www.talkabroad.com/), an online platform that connects users with trained conversation partners to provide language practice and meaningful cultural exchange, was implemented during the Spring 2023 semester. TalkAbroad is a tool utilized by language educators worldwide and allows teachers to create targeted assignments, include instructions for the conversation partner, and provide recording capabilities for student playback, reflection, transcription work, and self-assessment. In addition to TalkAbroad's features, its effectiveness in creating opportunities for noticing language features, positive engagement during language learning, and building second language confidence are well-documented in research (Hetrovicz, 2021; Kessler et al. 2023; Sama & Wu, 2018)

Two students participated as they responded to a free opportunity (paid for by a small grant in the college) presented to them through email. Student A had retired from the military and returned to school to complete his undergraduate degree in Spanish Education. With an obligation to work to support his family, he was unable to study abroad during his program. Student B was a French Education major who studied abroad for one semester but was still unable to pass her oral proficiency interview at AL.

The Language Activities

I created four 30-minute language conversation activities from topics generated from our prior conversations on the TalkAbroad platform. The first topic, media, tasked the students to introduce themselves to their conversation partner and get to know some basic information about each other. They were prompted to ask about some of their favorite shows/movies to watch, the platforms used to stream media, and their favorite forms of media. The idea for this part of the conversation was to establish some things in common with their partner. For the first conversation, I gave the students some sample questions they might ask, such as

- What are the top 10 movies/shows in your community/country?

- Ask your partner about the 10 most popular shows in their community/country.
- Compare their responses with yours.
- What are some of the differences and similarities between your lists?
- Take and give a few recommendations to watch something completely new to you.
- What influence have different cultures and communities had on the media consumed worldwide in the past?
- How do you think these trends might change in the future?

The second conversation focused on talking about future plans, a topic that is often discussed during the OPI as the interviewer probes the interviewee at the Advanced level. However, this time, I did not provide the students with sample questions. Instead, they were asked to create their own to encourage a more personalized experience and allow for spontaneous interaction. The third topic, current events, addressed the fact that students stressed that they struggled to discuss current events, partially due to the specialized vocabulary involved. The final conversation asked the students to compare and contrast their cultures with their conversation partners. This topic was chosen by the students to better understand the cultural products, practices, and perspectives of real people (not from a textbook). Finally, for each of the topics, I provided instructions in the TL to orient and guide the conversations. The instructions included information about how long the students had studied the language, guidelines for equitable turns at talk, and details about the topic.

Post-Conversation Activities

After completing each conversation, the students completed a linguistic analysis, transcribing a segment of their speech during the conversation verbatim, including utterances, phrases, and complete sentences. Once they completed the transcriptions, they underlined phrases (incomplete sentences), added an * for complete sentences, marked an X over words like "um," added a # symbol for each complete question, and added a $ symbol for well-connected sentences. Then, they tallied the number for each symbol and recorded it on a grid to identify patterns in their communication. Next, I asked the students to use an AAPPL oral proficiency rubric to self-assess their performance based on the findings from their transcriptions. The rubric contained specific can-do statements at each of the sublevels and specific strategies for improvement.

After each conversation, the students used the self-rated assessment rubrics to describe in more detail what they did to earn the score and set specific goals based on the strategies listed in the rubric to work toward moving up another sublevel. It was important that the students target specific strategies described for the next level up in the goal-setting stage of the post-conversation activities in order to be able to effectively implement them in the next conversations. Finally, I provided each of the students with feedback on their self-assessments and goals to complete the conversation cycle.

Reflection

Upon completion of the semester using TalkAbroad with my students, I engaged in a self-reflection process to consider my own learning and modeling about

the practice of self-assessment and reflection with my students. Through the lens of my students' experiences with the platform and an analysis of their responses on the self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting, I was able to evaluate the implementation of TalkAbroad, its impact on the students' learning, and the impact on our undergraduate EPP.

Reflection on the Implementation of TalkAbroad

Overall, the TalkAbroad platform was easy to use over the course of the semester in which it was implemented. The platform's layout, detailed instructions, and space for targeted information for both the student and conversation partner made it easy to set up the assignments and copy them into each of the language sections created for the students. In addition, the platform provided students with a step-by-step guide to set up an account, view potential partner profiles, and schedule conversations. The playback feature allowed students to review and reflect on their conversations, and I was able to view them as well, which permitted additional in-depth feedback for students.

Impact on Student Learning

Despite the small cohort of two students who participated in this innovative practice, student self-awareness and perceived language growth over the series of the four TalkAbroad conversations were evident in their self-reflections. For example, both students described their linguistic performance during the first conversation as "poor." Specifically, they mentioned the number of times they used "um" and "uh" as transition or filler words. Student A expressed difficulty in giving himself a rating at all, as he did not feel he could count any of his utterances as complete sentences due to his overuse of filler words in English. Both students indicated a feeling of disappointment at their fluency and performance at the close of the first task.

However, both students were able to identify specific strategies they could work on during the conversations that followed, and the self-reflections demonstrated how they implemented them with success. For instance, Student B set a goal to ask more questions of her partner during the second conversation, and her transcription and reflection indicated an effort to do so. Additionally, at the close of the final conversation, the breadth and depth of the students' transcriptions increased substantially, as did their self-reported confidence in speaking with their conversation partners. The students wrote about how the repeated language experiences helped them alleviate the fear of making mistakes while speaking and encouraged them to keep communicating.

Finally, the students appreciated and interacted with the feedback that was given to them throughout. For Student A, whose conversations took place in Spanish, I was able to provide targeted suggestions, such as to substitute the word "um" during communication by offering words like "eh" or "*este*" instead. I explained how these filler words in Spanish could serve as pauses to gather his thoughts in the same way he was using them in English but might help him polish his speech and stay in the TL throughout the conversation. Intentional engage-

ment in dialogic feedback with my students throughout the activities served as emotional and relational support, maintained an open feedback loop, and provided opportunities for students to express themselves (Steen-Utheim & Wittek, 2017).

Impact on Our EPP

Given the positive feedback from the students involved in this innovative practice, we concluded that the additional time and effort to utilize, engage, and converse using TalkAbroad was well worth it. Our students expressed appreciation and increased confidence through the opportunity to work with the education faculty as a continuation of their proficiency development outside of their regular language coursework. While we will not know immediately whether this work will impact student scores on the OPI going forward, we feel that TalkAbroad facilitated student ownership and autonomy in their learning, which may contribute to lifelong learning and work toward developing and maintaining their oral proficiency over time.

From an EPP perspective, we plan to implement similar opportunities into earlier courses for our students, as they understand how the language acquisition process works, including the time and effort required to develop AL proficiency, an aspect of teacher preparation we begin discussing with them from the start of the program (ACTFL/CAEP, 2013). Finally, with the success of the TalkAbroad implementation, we are motivated to explore additional opportunities that could be integrated into our course sequence as supplementary experiences toward building a culture of proficiency throughout students' time in our program (Brooks & Darhower, 2014).

Future Pedagogical Directions

Language conversation platforms such as TalkAbroad can be adapted and implemented for a variety of purposes across languages and EPPs. However, to maximize their effectiveness, it is important to consider these factors prior to adopting similar approaches:

1. Talk with your students: What specifically do students need or want in terms of linguistic development? What interests do they have? Discussing these questions directly with students prior to developing language tasks may facilitate a deeper connection to the topics of conversation and the assessment and reflection work throughout.
2. Determine the number of conversations: While four conversations were incorporated into the current semester-long innovation, student and program constraints may require a careful evaluation of cost, time, and necessity for the number of conversations selected during the semester.
3. Create extension and follow-up opportunities for students: Engaging in conversations, self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting can be a first step in promoting a lifelong learning plan for TL development among students and language programs. Additionally, looping back with students to check-in with their progress and connecting students with additional

language experiences could be a way to build and sustain a culture of proficiency in language programs.

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