**A Tool for Online Conversation During COVID**

The traditional way to have world language students practice the target language outside of class is to set up a conversation table where they can speak informally, sometimes during a lunch hour or when scheduling allows for everyone to meet. This has long been a common practice at many colleges and universities, especially where students live on campus.

However, even before the pandemic, conversation tables presented logistical issues for students with job responsibilities or who commuted to school. However, COVID-19 has made physical conversation tables impossible.

VoiceThread to the rescue. This tool is not new—it’s actually been around since 2005—but its use by world language educators has never been more important than now because it allows students to safely interact with one another outside of the classroom, essentially providing an online conversation table.

On VoiceThread, my students are still talking to me and to their classmates, they’re simply doing so whenever their schedule permits and they don’t even need access to a computer. The VoiceThread app is available as a free download, so students can watch the slides, listen to the questions I post as well as their peers’ answers to them, and record their own answers and questions right on a smartphone. They can listen to everyone’s comments and give feedback to anyone. They can also listen to themselves after they have posted a comment and work on their pronunciation throughout the semester.

This tool also allows me to listen to each and every student individually and to relisten to their comments before giving them feedback on their pronunciation. Time constraints can make this level of attention and feedback very challenging in the classroom.

I attended a workshop on teaching languages using VoiceThread (voicethread.com/workshops) and learned how to create a “bitmoji” of myself and show my students my daily activities: getting up in the morning, brushing my teeth, getting dressed, going to the gym, working in my office, leaving work, going to the supermarket, making dinner for my family, etc., creating a story of my routine that allows my students to see me in different situations.

After I post my slides with comments, I ask my students to talk about their daily routines—using reflexive verbs in Spanish. If they forget to add the reflexive pronoun (me despierto versus despierto, a common error for English speakers), they can correct themselves and re-record their comment.

I can also post pictures of different items of clothing if that is the vocabulary topic of the chapter we are covering in class and ask my students a simple question, such as ¿Qué ropa llevas en verano? What clothing do you wear in the summertime? They answer by naming the articles of clothing in the pictures that they wear and they can add a question or comment for other students, enhancing the conversation.

Tools like VoiceThread have always been advantageous for students who are anxious about speaking in front of others, allowing them to practice without being as concerned about making mistakes in front of their peers. They can record,
erase, and re-record their answers as many
times as they like.

It is very helpful for some students to not have to produce responses immediately, allowing them time to process and think through the material; VoiceThread allows them to get comfortable with hearing themselves and their responses, and even correct themselves and think about their responses a little longer. This increases their awareness and confidence in replying to questions in the target language.

I have also found that VoiceThread can actually humanize the online experience.

This has always been a concern when teaching world languages remotely: “How are we going to learn Spanish from talking to a computer?” VoiceThread has helped me maintain my personality and identity as a language educator in the absence of face to face, in person interaction with my students.

There is not one, perfect formula for a successful conversation table, be it physical or virtual. The fact that students can download VoiceThread onto their phones and meet outside of the classroom at any time of day or night and communicate in an asynchronous manner with either me and/or their peers is the perfect solution when gatherings in person are not a safe option.

It allows me to create slides about the topics I want my students to discuss and it allows my students to practice the language by commenting on those slides and interacting with one another. Best of all, I am able to continuously assess my students individually and give them feedback from a remote location.

VoiceThread is one of the tools that I have found that works for me and for my students during these challenging times.

FROM THE EDITOR: With many schools across the nation serving at least some students remotely, this TechWatch section has been curated to help support distance learning.

ONLINE Teaching Tools

- **Google Tour Creator**
  - [avrgoogle.com/tourcreator](avrgoogle.com/tourcreator)
  - With travel on hold, go abroad virtually! Google Tour Creator allows teachers and students to build immersive, 360° tours from scratch using Google Street View or their own 360° photos. There are also tour templates available to build on. Designed to work with Google Cardboard and Expeditions. Embed buttons in your tour’s ‘scenes’ that students click on to learn more about that place. When the tour is finished, consider publishing it publicly to Google’s library of 3D content, Poly, so that others can experience it as well.

- **Voice Record**
  - [apps.apple.com/gb/app/voice-record-pro/id546983235](apps.apple.com/gb/app/voice-record-pro/id546983235)
  - The Voice Record app allows teachers to record students when they are doing oral exercises or exams and then email the track to them. It is also possible to edit a recording and provide the student with feedback on specific parts of the audio, or to use the annotated recordings as examples for the rest of the class. Voice Record helps students focus on pronunciation and self-assess their speaking skills.

ONLINE Content

- **Streema**
  - [streema.com](streema.com)
  - A free online tuner that allows you to discover, share, and listen to more than 70,000 radio stations and watch more than 10,000 TV stations with your students. Using the Streema directory, choose news, talk programs, sports, or music. Browse radio stations and TV stations by region: North America, Central America, South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, Oceania. Mobile radio is also available.

- **World Language Resources**
  - [sites.google.com/site/maineworldlanguages](sites.google.com/site/maineworldlanguages)
  - This site was developed as part of a federally funded grant to identify open educational resources for World Language teachers in Maine, but we can all take advantage of it! It is a list of links to more than a hundred Open Educational Resources in World Languages ranging from access to 19th Century French Paintings to easy ways to create engaging webquests. Not every link will be of value, but there is some excellent content embedded in this wide-ranging list. Well worth scrolling through.