It has been disappointing in the past when my students were able to answer my questions correctly and identify new vocabulary and grammar constructions but couldn’t produce quality creative writing or speak independently. I started searching for ways to get students more engaged in their own learning.

I asked a middle school Arabic teacher in another school if our students could be pen pals. Not only did she welcome the idea, but she also introduced me to an interesting tool that she was implementing in her school: Voicethread (www.voicethread.com). And the magic began.

Voicethread is a web-based, collaborative, multimedia tool formatted as a slideshow that can include images, documents, and/or videos. This allows students to interpret what they see and exchange comments in different ways—as text, audio files, and/or videos. Students may work individually and as a group. The teacher and students must all register prior to the lesson, and group accounts can be created for specific classes.

My first Voicethread project was with my non-heritage Intermediate low level students. The story starter prompt was an image of a girl sitting at a desk surrounded by her classmates. I explained to the students that they had to add their comments in both written and audio formats. Then I invited them to continue the story by adding further images to represent the rest of the story, with the setting, plot, and characters based on their preexisting knowledge of the topic.

Initially, the project was done during class with students working on written comments. Ultimately, students worked on recorded comments at home at their own pace. They contributed by typing and recording comments for others to hear and react to.

My next Voicethread project was a digital pen pal exchange with another school. The main goal was to get my students to interact authentically with a real audience. I asked them to choose photos representing their school and host country. I explained that students in another school wanted to know about them, their school, their friends, and where they live. I asked them to write and speak using the same framework that I had provided earlier. I was pleased to see the students stepping out of their comfort zones to produce real language. Instead of just using the structures and vocabulary that we saw in class, students started connecting their ideas with transition words; real conversations and authentic writing was being produced.

For my heritage students at the advanced level, we started with a common project about social relationships. Students were asked to comment in writing, via audio, and in audio-visual modes by creating their own voicethreads. This allowed them to take the lead in an online and interactive discussion not only...
with their classmates but with our pen pal students, as well. They were able to show their understanding of different topics and subjects in innovative ways.

I then asked my students to assess their skills and the Voicethread program, and they all agreed that the authenticity and real-world aspects of this tool helped them move forward. “I was not stuck with a few words … when I was in front of the recorder I felt that I had to say something, I had to create and not just memorize what I learned.” There was collaboration in real-time and in the real world. “I liked how I commented on my classmates’ recordings and messages. I also learned from theirs … we had fun writing the stories together.”

Voicethread encourages collaboration by allowing students to comment and express themselves while integrating the three modes of communication in an authentic manner, using reading, speaking, writing, and listening. Students took what they were producing very seriously because of the public nature of what they were sharing. They were not only motivated to speak and write, but also to read what their peers or pen pals had come up with. They worked at their own pace and were able to use the visual cues and auditory commentary to support their reading.

There was significant growth in terms of speaking and writing skills. The majority of my heritage students were initially rated as ACTFL Assessment of Performance Toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL) Intermediate (I2–I4) in speaking and writing. They were able to advance to upper Intermediate and Advanced levels (I4–A) during the spring session. This means that they can now express themselves fully, not only on familiar topics, but also on some concrete social, academic, and professional topics. They can also talk in detail and in an organized way about events and experiences in various time frames. In addition, they can confidently handle routine situations with an unexpected complication and share their point of view in discussions on some complex issues.

My non-heritage students who rated as low to upper Novice (N1–N4) were able to score higher (N4–I3) in their speaking and writing. These students are now able to communicate about themselves and their lives, using the target language to express their own thoughts, add descriptions, and tell stories in well-connected sentences. Even students who were hesitant became more actively involved through ongoing interactions with the instructional content, and this active involvement contributed to increased learning success.

What makes this web-based program so interesting is its relevance and authenticity on the one hand, and the interactivity that it provides with the overlapping use of the three modes of communication (interpretive, interpersonal and presentational). It promotes more student-to-student talk in the language, places greater emphasis on authentic responses and interactions, and provides more peer-based correction.

These and other web resources can be accessed through the Publications area on the ACTFL website at www.actfl.org/publications/all/the-language-educator/tech-watch.

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A new episode of the podcast, We Teach Languages, includes an interview with ACTFL Director of Education Paul Sandrock talking about performance assessment.

Check out this interview at weteachlang.com/2017/10/13/episode-23-performance-assessment-with-paul-sandrock. The podcast, from Spanish lecturer Stacey Margarita Johnson of Vanderbilt University, can also be found on iTunes and the Apple Podcast app.
WEBSITES to Watch

PlanBoard
www.chalk.com/planboard
Save time on lesson planning! PlanBoard makes it easy to get organized and reduce your classroom prep time. Accessible from anywhere, you can plan lessons, align them to curriculum sets, and manage your schedule with ease. Plus, it’s free to individual teachers.

Forvo
forvo.com
Forvo is the largest pronunciation guide in the world, the place where you’ll find nearly 4 million words pronounced by native speakers in their native language. Its mission is to improve spoken communication across cultures by creating a platform where users can share the pronunciation of words in their native language and listen to words pronounced by other native speakers. Today, Forvo is the largest online pronunciation reference source with a database of nearly four million words pronounced in more than 330 languages—all created and maintained by native speakers.

BBC Quickfix
www.bbc.co.uk/languages/other/quickfix
This site offers a selection of essential phrases in 40 languages. The list of phrases varies slightly for each language, but they all include greetings and other essential polite phrases like “I’m sorry I don’t speak Icelandic.” All lists can be printed. You can also hear all of the phrases pronounced, and the pronunciations can be downloaded as MP3 files.

Lingus
www.lingus.tv
Lingus TV offers short, entertaining videos in Spanish for beginning, intermediate, and advanced students.

Verbling
www.verbling.com
Verbling is an online platform where language learners can take lessons from professional language teachers. Only language teachers who meet rigorous standards are accepted, ensuring high instruction quality for learners. There are language teachers available 24/7, covering all time zones globally.

Quizlet Diagrams
quizlet.com/diagram-showcase
The popular site Quizlet now offers a new section: Quizlet Diagrams, which offers study sets in Spanish, French, and German with common vocabulary words. You’ll also discover some creative ways in which teachers are using Quizlet Diagrams at: quizlet.com/blog/four-creative-ways-teachers-are-using-quizlet-diagrams.

WHAT’S THAT APP?

LingroToGo
www.lingrolearning.com
Discover a whole new game-based language learning experience. Co-created with the Center for Applied Language Studies (CASLS) at the University of Oregon, LingroToGo is based on the latest learning science and inspires users to master Spanish. Combining the latest in gaming mechanics with proven language pedagogy to keep users engaged and motivated, users earn XP and valuable coins for time-on-task, accuracy, speed, and problem-solving abilities, all elements that have been shown to increase success in achieving language proficiency. Watch videos, play games. Play games, watch videos. It’s completely up to the users—they get to choose what they want to learn and how they want to learn it.

Kahoot!
kahoot.com/mobile-app
Kahoot! has launched a new mobile app that allows students to play games in the classroom or at home. Available for Android and iOS, the new app offers a “single player mode” which lets students see questions and answer choices on the same screen. This eliminates the need to have a second screen to participate in a Kahoot game. The single player mode is the mode that students will want to choose when they are playing Kahoot games outside of the classroom, which is another new feature of the Kahoot mobile app. And you can now send your students “challenges”—quizzes that you assign to them to complete outside of your classroom—by sharing a link via email, sharing in Google Classroom, or by just sharing a game PIN assigned to the challenge.