Using an Asynchronous Video App to Stimulate Spontaneous Oral Interaction

by ANNA CIRIANI-DEAN

Two key ingredients for developing language skills are output and interaction. Without actually using the language and negotiating meaning with others, learners may comprehend the language but may never become true "speakers." For this reason, most English language teachers carefully engineer their lessons to integrate opportunities for authentic interaction. These activities become particularly crucial in English as a foreign language classrooms, where students do not encounter many natural opportunities to practice speaking English outside class time. Furthermore, the challenge of simulating authentic speaking tasks outside the classroom and the tendency to prioritize written skills for at-home tasks limit speaking practice largely to the classroom for many students.

One solution to these limitations is the use of computer-mediated communication (often referred to as "CMC") tools and of social networking sites (SNSs). Indeed, studies have shown that these tools can increase both written and spoken output by learners, expose them to a wider range of language use, and boost their participation in cyber-communities, among other potential benefits (Reinhardt 2019). These platforms, in other words, offer ways to extend language use beyond the four walls of the classroom, especially for speaking. Whether through synchronous video-chatting platforms or

through asynchronous voice messages, these tools offer a valuable resource to teachers and learners who wish to extend learning beyond the classroom walls, especially as traditionally in-person courses shift to online formats.

Recent years in particular have seen exponential growth in the number of platforms available to teachers and students for virtual interaction. These fall along two lines: tools developed exclusively for educational purposes (i.e., educational technology) and tools developed for general use, such as SNSs. On the side of education-specific tools, for example, Flipgrid was developed specifically for educators to promote asynchronous oral discussions and collaboration around a given topic. On the side of SNSs, applications such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, and many others were created to facilitate communication and connection with friends, family, and/or public audiences, but they can be adapted for use in an educational setting.

Teachers, then, simply have to choose the platform that best suits their objectives and learning environment. They must ask themselves questions such as these:

- *What do I want my students to achieve?* As usual, teachers should start by defining clear objectives.

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- *How does each platform support these objectives? What tasks does it facilitate?* If the platform is being used simply for technology's sake instead of as a means to enhance student learning, then teachers might reconsider using it.

- *What are the trade-offs of using these platforms?* In some cases, practicality might trump some of the benefits of using a virtual platform.

- *What platforms do students have access to?* Most social-media sites are restricted to users over 13, while educational tools are available to broader age groups, and some tools may not be available in every country.

- *What platforms are students most comfortable with and engaged in?* Students will be more likely to use a tool they already interact with on a daily basis or that resembles one of their preferred applications. Younger students tend to love using social media and other apps on their phones and are generally open to trying something new, while older learners might be less amenable to adopting a new language-learning tool.

- *What platforms am I familiar with or willing to familiarize myself with?* Taking on a new technology can be overwhelming, so teachers should be conscious of how much novelty they can handle.

In this article, I wish to share my ideas for using one specific mobile application, Marco Polo, for stimulating spontaneous oral communication and providing feedback to learners. I begin by explaining the features of Marco Polo that make it ideal for language learning. I then provide instructions on how to use the app for a learning activity, and I describe two tasks that can be implemented on it.

WHAT IS MARCO POLO?

Marco Polo is a mobile-only application that allows users to easily record videos and send them directly to a single user or group. Its interface is simple: videos play automatically when opened, users tap the video camera icon to start recording, and there are few special effects or other features. Unlike video-based stories and live videos on platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook, messages on Marco Polo are restricted to a single recipient or small group rather than a broader following; that makes the experience more intimate and targeted. Furthermore, the messages do not disappear after 24 hours, making it possible for learners and instructors to rewatch videos multiple times, for comprehension and feedback purposes. Recipients are notified as soon as the speaker starts recording, and they can listen both synchronously and asynchronously.

Because of its highly personal and simple interface, the app discourages learners from overly planning or rerecording their responses and thus stimulates spontaneous language production. This spontaneity,

combined with the fact that users do not need to plan a specific time to meet but instead can watch videos asynchronously at their leisure, makes the app a useful tool for simulating in-person interaction without the hassle of coordinating meeting times.

Marco Polo is best for teenage and adult learners who have access to their own mobile devices and are above the minimum age (13) to download the app. Other apps with similar affordances include the educational app Flipgrid and SNSs with video-messaging capabilities, such as WhatsApp.

GETTING STARTED

Follow these steps to create your profile on Marco Polo and implement interactive learning activities:

1. Download Marco Polo and set up your profile. The app is available on iPhone or Android devices at the App Store or Play Store, respectively, and offers a free version as well as a paid premium version. The free version is adequate for the activities described in this article.

2. Click on the "+" sign at the top right of the home page and select "New Group." Do not add anyone to the group; instead, click through until you come back to the home page.

3. Locate the group you created, select the three-vertical-dots symbol next to it on the right, choose "Edit Group," and click on "Invite via Group Link." You can copy the link and send it to your students, which is easier than gathering your students' phone numbers and adding each one manually.

4. Have your students download Marco Polo, send them the link you copied in Step 3, and ask them to join your group. Depending on the task, you can create multiple groups if you would like students to interact with fewer

classmates at a time; smaller groups might be more manageable for you and might make less-confident students feel more comfortable in participating.

5. Watch and assist as your students join your group. I recommend recording a welcome message for them and inviting them to introduce themselves in the group (or assign another simple task) so they can learn how the app works.

6. Assign a prompt. Record yourself providing instructions to the task you want your students to complete. To do so, enter the group and press the blue record button, shaped like a video camera. (With the premium version, you can upload a video you have already recorded on your phone by choosing "Photo" on the menu options below the record button.)

7. Provide ongoing feedback. A few times during the activity, check students' contributions to the group, take notes on some of their observations, and provide oral feedback on what they say in video responses.

8. Follow up in class with an activity that mirrors or expands on the Marco Polo task.

TYPES OF TASKS

Marco Polo, in my experience, lends itself to two formats of tasks: (1) collaborative and (2) dialogic. I will now describe two tasks in order to demonstrate how to apply these formats.

Task 1: Collaborative Format
In the collaborative format, students contribute individual responses to a collection of videos and create a shared product. An example of a collaborative task is one I implemented in a narrative-writing course for first-year university students, though it could easily be adapted for lower-level

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learners. The objectives of the task were to expand vocabulary for describing indoor spaces and objects and to practice providing detailed descriptions. The task was, therefore, to co-construct a detailed description of a home interior—in this case, my apartment—using Marco Polo to contribute pieces of the description.

In our Marco Polo group, I uploaded a video of myself walking slowly through my apartment, pausing on the many details in different rooms. In the instructions, I asked students to take notes on what they saw in my video and to record themselves describing in as much depth as possible one or two details they noticed, without repeating anything their classmates had already said. I first recorded the instructions and then recorded the apartment video, so they knew what to look for.

The students had two days to record their response, and each student focused on different details. By the end of the two days, they had generated a complete description of the apartment, with details on the position, size, colors, and other features of objects within it.

At regular intervals, I watched the videos students posted and recorded targeted feedback. I provided alternative vocabulary they could use to describe what they saw, corrected pronunciation, and praised particularly accurate descriptions to impress certain vocabulary in them and encourage detailed descriptions. Students were thankful for the consistent and personal feedback and often followed up with a question or left a message to acknowledge comprehension.

The task was implemented in a writing course, so as follow-up, students wrote a detailed description

of a room in their house, using the vocabulary and descriptive skills they had developed in the oral task on Marco Polo. For support, they were able to refer back to the videos on Marco Polo and other materials I posted.

Beyond this example, the collaborative format can be used for a variety of tasks, such as a collaborative storytelling task in which students co-construct a story, with each student adding the next action of the story.

Task 2: Dialogic Format
In the dialogic format, students treat their Marco Polo group as a forum for exchanging ideas and opinions, responding directly to each other as in a face-to-face conversation. One example of a dialogic task took place in a critical-thinking course I taught, again at the university level. In the course, students learned to think critically about contemporary issues and to assert their own opinions in response to them. The objectives of this task were to formulate an opinion on a given topic, to practice the rhetorical moves involved in oral argumentation, and to support the opinion with evidence. The task was to respond to a debate question and to engage in debate on the topic by using Marco Polo.

For this task, I split my class into groups of three or four students, each forming a separate Marco Polo group, so that the groups were manageable and students could respond easily to specific arguments presented by their peers. In each group, I recorded myself asking a question and had students argue their position on the topic with each other, supplying personal evidence to support their claims. I also instructed them explicitly to respond directly to their classmates (instead of just stating their position) and to participate at least three times in the conversation. Each group received a different yet related

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question and had three days to complete their discussion. After three days, I rotated the topics so that each group received a new question to debate. Overall, each group debated two topics over the course of one week.

During these debates, I monitored the students' videos at regular intervals, redirected conversations, highlighted points for them to focus on, and provided language support as needed. As follow-up in class, each group met with the other two groups who had shared their topics, presented a summary of their debates, compared their answers to the debate questions, and discussed the feedback they had collectively received. In the long term, students were asked to write an argumentative essay on one of the two topics from the activity.

This format could be adapted for a lower level by choosing less-complex, more-personal topics to discuss or by having students complete role-play dialogues. It could also be used to create reading discussion groups instead of having students write reflections on readings in an online forum.

CONCLUSION

In both tasks, using Marco Polo ensured that each student had the space to participate, unlike in a classroom, where certain individuals might tend to dominate the conversation. While in some cases students seemed to have prepared a script, for the most part student responses seemed spontaneous, meaning they had the chance to practice using English naturally. The tasks helped them collaboratively generate a vast range of

language and forced them to practice both their listening skills (while listening to their classmates' descriptions and arguments) and speaking skills (while posting their own descriptions and arguments). Equally important, the app allowed me to provide more-focused feedback than I might have been able to while balancing the competing demands of managing the classroom, as I was able to watch student responses multiple times without distractions. Also, the students seemed to have fun with the activities.

The simplicity of Marco Polo, combined with its interaction-driven design, makes it a useful tool for engaging language learners in speaking practice beyond the scope of the traditional classroom. I plan to use it for more online learning tasks in the future, and I hope other teachers will try it, too.

REFERENCE

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Anna Ciriani-Dean was an English Language Fellow in Yerevan, Armenia, in 2019–2020 and a Virtual English Language Fellow in Armenia and Ukraine in 2020–2021. She holds an MA in applied linguistics from Teachers College at Columbia University and has worked as a language education specialist in a variety of settings in the United States and abroad.