Online Business Chinese Speaking Instruction: A Speak Everywhere Speaking Program for Practical Business Chinese

Bailu Li
Atsushi Fukada
Wei Hong

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol17/iss1/8

Copyright © 2012 by Purdue Research Foundation. Global Business Languages is produced by Purdue CIBER. http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the CC BY-NC-ND license.
ONLINE BUSINESS CHINESE SPEAKING INSTRUCTION: A SPEAK EVERYWHERE SPEAKING PROGRAM FOR PRACTICAL BUSINESS CHINESE

ABSTRACT
Despite the obvious importance of speaking skills, for technology and other reasons, it is difficult for foreign language instructors to provide ample speaking practice opportunities to students. However, particularly in business language teaching, speaking is crucial. To address this problem, the authors have created an oral program for a Business Chinese textbook on an online platform called Speak Everywhere. This article discusses general oral training issues and reports on the design of the oral program.

KEYWORDS: Business Chinese, speaking skills, Speak Everywhere, computer-assisted language learning (CALL)

INTRODUCTION
In general foreign language teaching/learning, it is well established that oral proficiency is a top priority for students as well as instructors (Harlow & Muyskens, 1994; Tse, 2000; Rivera & Matsuzawa, 2007; Houston, 2005). This is all the more true in business language teaching/learning. In the world of business, as Grosse (2005) argues, for Asians and those in many other cultures, establishing a business relationship with a client is a necessary requirement for doing business. And a solid business relationship is forged through such social activities as dining, drinking, and playing golf and by showing such qualities as patience, respect, humility, and sincerity. Knoss and Beveridge (2007) also stress that relationships in Chinese business settings are cultivated mostly during meals and over drinks. Leisure is part of the Chinese business life. Clearly, these activities are interactional, requiring

1 This project was funded by a Business Language Teaching and Research (BLRT) grant sponsored by eight Centers for International Business Education and Research.
the use of oral language. This adds greater importance to oral proficiency coupled with culturally appropriate behavior.

Given the importance of speaking, we may wonder how are we doing in the area of speaking instruction. Since we generally do not give speaking homework assignments, class time is the only time when the students can practice speaking. However, there is much to cover during class sessions: vocabulary introduction, presentation of grammar points, discussion of culture, etc. According to a pilot survey of foreign language teachers (Fukada & Wei, in press), foreign language instructors spend less than 50% of the class time on oral practice, on average. Considering that in-class oral practice is largely group or pair work, the percentage is 25% or less on a per-person basis. In terms of quality, since the instructor cannot monitor all students, their oral practice is certainly not optimal. Assuming four 50-minute sessions per week, 25% translates into 50 minutes of semi-monitored oral practice per week, or 10 minutes a day. Certainly, one cannot hope to become orally proficient in a foreign language with such a small amount of practice. This is especially true with noncognate languages for which a greater amount of foundational oral practice is required.

Another way to examine the oral component in a curriculum is to look at the percentage of oral practice/assessment in the determination of the final course grade. This percentage is typically between 10% and 20% in general foreign language courses, and it is usually based on a couple of oral tests conducted in a semester. On the other hand, written tests (“chapter tests”) are usually given several times during a semester. Curiously, no one has made a significant issue of this discrepancy so far.

In light of the general lack of speaking training opportunities in foreign language education, an online oral training/assessment platform called Speak Everywhere was designed and developed in the Center for Technology-Enhanced Language Learning at Purdue University. In response to the heightened importance of speaking skills in business language education, we created an oral training program on this platform to accompany Practical Business Chinese (PBC) (Hong, 2007), a Business Chinese textbook. Because the platform allows students to work on oral skills outside the class time on an individual basis, it is expected to boost the amount of speaking practice that the students receive.

We will first discuss further issues in oral training in foreign language teaching, introduce as a possible solution Speak Everywhere (SE), an online oral practice/assessment platform, and then describe the Business Chinese oral practice module (PBC-SE) that runs on the SE platform.
THE CURRENT PROBLEMS WITH ORAL TRAINING/ASSESSMENT
We identify five major problems with foreign language teaching today with respect to oral language instruction.

(a) Lack of Technology
The traditional language laboratory with double-track audiotapes is definitely outdated. Modernized language laboratory systems with digital recording and computer consoles exist. However, the fact that these systems are not in mainstream use suggests that the decline of language laboratories had more to do with their association with the now-outdated Audio-Lingual Method than with obsolete technology. Most foreign language textbooks come with audio CDs, part of which can be used for speaking homework. However, there is no way to check whether or not the students have done the practice, let alone how well they did. It is also impossible to give feedback to the students on their work.

(b) Inefficient and Ineffective In-class Foundational Oral Work
Foreign language instructors currently find themselves doing basic oral work using precious class time. This situation is highly problematic because doing such work in class is both inefficient and ineffective. It is inefficient because calling on each student takes too much time and leaves the rest of the students idle. Doing the work together (in chorus) is ineffective because the instructor cannot check how each student is doing, nor can students monitor their own production well. A large class size exacerbates the efficiency and effectiveness problem further. Also, students learn at different paces. Faster learners are frustrated when the instructor spends too much time on what they can already do. Slower learners are left behind when the instructor proceeds too quickly. All of this clearly points to the need for individualized practice.

(c) Insufficient Time for Oral Work
Because speaking practice cannot be assigned as homework conveniently, all speaking practice must happen in class. Considering that the class time must be used for other activities as well, the amount of time the instructor can devote to oral practice is quite limited. It seems imperative to find a way to increase the amount of oral practice.

(d) No Firm Foundation
As a consequence of (b) and (c), many students end up not firmly establishing basic building blocks of a language (i.e., words, phrases, and basic sentence structures). For this reason, communicative activities that are so important
to Communicative Language Teaching practitioners often meet with limited success.

(e) **Sporadic Oral Assessment**

It is customary for foreign language instructors to give an oral test in the form of a one-on-one interview. This presents several logistical issues. At Purdue University, we typically cancel two to three class sessions in order to schedule individual interviews. Securing space for interviews is another problem, since some of our staff do not have private offices. Because the logistical cost of an oral test is great, we usually limit ourselves to two oral tests a semester, while the other skills are tested more often throughout the semester. Ideally, oral skills should be assessed continuously, or at least as often as the other skills throughout a course (Tuttle & Tuttle, 2011). The cost, however, makes doing this impractical.

**A PROPOSED SOLUTION**

A software system called *Speak Everywhere* (SE)\(^2\) was designed and developed specifically as a foreign language oral practice/assessment platform. Having operated successfully since Fall 2009 in real courses, it has proven to be a viable technology. Furthermore, it is in full production and available worldwide. This solves problem (a) **Lack of technology** above. With oral practice materials prepared, instructors are able to simply assign them to the students to do outside class time. Also, because *Speak Everywhere* makes it possible to deliver individualized, self-paced, and teacher-monitored practice, problem (b) **Inefficient and ineffective in-class foundational oral work** is solved. Problems (c) **Insufficient time for oral work** and (d) **No firm foundation** can also be adequately addressed by providing an ample amount of exercises. Problem (e) **Sporadic oral assessment** is rectified by administering oral tests on *Speak Everywhere*, which eliminates logistical difficulties associated with one-on-one interviews.

**SPEAK EVERYWHERE: AN OVERVIEW**

*Speak Everywhere* is a web-based server software program. It consists of three sub-systems: author, instructor, and student. Instructors and/or material designers use the author sub-system to create oral exercises using video, audio, graphics, and/or text. Students, then, access the student sub-system to work on the exercises. As they speak, their oral response is recorded, which they

\(^2\) [http://speak-everywhere.com](http://speak-everywhere.com)
can listen to immediately afterward. They can also compare the model and their own pronunciation side by side. They can repeat each exercise item as many times as they wish. When they are satisfied with their production for an item, they can submit it to the system. When instructors log into the instructor sub-system, they can see which students have done which exercises, and listen to each recording. They can choose to grade them and/or give feedback on them in text, or in audio, or both.

Speak Everywhere does not contain ready-made exercises for any language. Rather, it provides a template-driven system for creating exercises for any textbook in any language. Although it is a user-friendly system, developing a set of exercises for a whole course can take some time. That is why we developed PBC-SE and are developing other oral practice modules for other textbooks. Instructors using these textbooks can start using Speak Everywhere without going through the trouble of creating exercises on their own.

THE STUDENT SUB-SYSTEM
The heart of the system is the student sub-system. Figure 1 presents the first page (the Home Page) that students see. Exercises are grouped into chapters. Assigned exercises are marked with “AS” in the first column. Clicking an arrow on the right-most column opens the exercise associated with it.

![Figure 1. The home page of the student sub-system](image-url)
A number of exercise formats are available, including repetition, question and answer, role-play, flashcard, picture description, grammar drills of various kinds, oral reading, and short speech. Examples of some of these formats are described later when we introduce PBC-SE.

**THE INSTRUCTOR SUB-SYSTEM**

There are two major functions in the instructor sub-system: (1) assign/unassign exercises, and (2) review students’ audio submissions and provide feedback. The first screen of the instructor sub-system serves the first function (see Figure 2). The instructor can assign/unassign one or more exercises at one time and change the assignment setting at any time. Clicking an exercise name on this screen takes the instructor to a page like Figure 3, where he/she can access the students’ audio submissions. The first column contains students’ names, and the second column lists their recorded responses. On this screen the instructor can check at a glance whether or not the students have completed the exercise. By clicking a “play all” button, the instructor can listen to all the recordings from one student in this exercise. After reviewing the student’s production, the instructor can click the pencil icon next to each audio link to add a comment to that specific item. The instructor can create a comment in text and/or audio, as in Figure 4.

**PRACTICAL BUSINESS CHINESE**

*Practical Business Chinese*, written by Professor Wei Hong at Purdue University, is an introductory Business Chinese textbook for students and busi-
ness people with three semesters of college Chinese background. The book is composed of ten chapters that simulate a business trip to China, including greetings and introductions, hotel and banquet scenes, business negotiations, dinner at a Chinese home, shopping, sightseeing, and saying goodbye. It adopts a function-based approach, emphasizes building the learner’s linguistic competence, and focuses on communication protocols for business and
daily life in China. Learners are able to successfully establish a relationship with business partners by learning not only the language but also culture and etiquette. Each chapter includes a realistic dialogue, addresses key sentences in language usage, and provides cultural notes on things like etiquette. The textbook has an accompanying video program that contains dramatized versions of the main dialogues.

**PBC-SE: AN ORAL PRACTICE PROGRAM**

**FOR PRACTICAL BUSINESS CHINESE**

The exercises described below are specially designed to be used with the textbook *Practical Business Chinese*. They can be used at home in preparation for class sessions or for review. Each of the ten chapters has seven exercises, which are described below.

**Exercise 1: Read and Repeat**

This is an accuracy-based exercise (see Figure 5). Students repeat a new word/ expression after the instructor in the video. When students hear the teacher utter a word in the video, they are supposed to repeat it. The students’ utterances are automatically audio-recorded. Subsequently, they can compare their own production with the model. If their production is not satisfactory, they can repeat the item as many times as they want. When they have a satisfactory
recording, they can submit it to the server for instructor review. When instructors evaluate the students’ submissions, their accuracy in *pinyin*, a romanized system for the pronunciation of Chinese characters, is taken into account.

The exercise is ideal for the introduction of new words. Yoshida (2010) found that repetition practice of this type is beneficial in promoting the acquisition of correct word accentuation in Japanese. It would be interesting to see if it is similarly effective for Chinese tone acquisition. Yamaguchi (2011) also examined the effects of word-level repetition, specifically repetition of conjugated forms of verbs. The study found that oral repetition facilitates the learning of verb conjugations to a significantly greater extent than writing down the forms on paper.

*Exercise 2: Flash Cards*

This exercise (see Figure 6) is designed to measure whether or not students have internalized new words and to what extent they have automatized their retrieval. When an English translation is displayed in the video area, students are expected to utter the corresponding Chinese word immediately. In this exercise, a time limit can be imposed. For example, the instructor can require students to say the words within five seconds. It is an ideal online vocabulary quiz as well as a learning tool students can use to self-evaluate their mastery of the words.
Exercises 3 and 4: Role Play

The following two exercises, making use of the dialogue video clips from the video program, are designed to help students practice the main dialogues in the textbook. The dialogues are between Chinese hosts (Mr. Li, Mr. Huang, and Ms. Liu) and American business travelers (Mr. Lang and Mr. Tai). In these two exercises, students are expected to take the roles of the American representatives, while the people in the video take the roles of the Chinese hosts.

Exercise 3 (Figure 7) is a preparatory step where students repeat the lines of the American business traveler from the video, sentence by sentence. When students have practiced the lines enough to be able to say them fluently, they are ready to participate in the dialogue.

In exercise 4 (Figure 8), students play the roles of the American business travelers with the characters in the video. Scripts are provided without pinyin romanization on the direction panel. This exercise utilizes a template different from the other exercises, in that students are not allowed to stop and listen to their utterance. The only button available to the students is the NEXT button, which is used to indicate that they are finished with their line. The conversation proceeds without stopping until it reaches the end. In other words, this template gets students involved in a natural conversation with Chinese native speakers.

It is an ideal exercise to work on after having learned the text contents in each lesson. Both the accuracy and fluency of students’ production can be assessed.
Exercise 5: Comprehension Questions

Exercise 5 (Figure 9) is a fluency-oriented interaction exercise. The instructor in the video asks a series of questions with regard to the text, and students
are expected to answer it orally with complete sentences. The exercise gives students an opportunity to practice answering questions by creatively forming sentences on their own, rather than repeating the model, as in the previous exercises. As an assessment tool, it can be used to measure students’ understanding of the text and their grammar and discourse organization skills.

**Exercise 6: Language Usage Questions**

Exercise 6 (Figure 10) corresponds to the “Language Usage” section of the textbook. The section features question-answer exchanges that carry social and cultural significance in some way. For example, 您贵姓？is a polite and formal way to ask for the surname of the interlocutor. Although it is used in nonbusiness contexts as well, it is a very important expression to learn for business purposes. Learning about these expressions in class is one thing, but becoming able to use them is quite another. Following a class lecture, this exercise is designed to help students learn to use these expressions appropriately and fluently. The instructor can review student responses and give appropriate feedback as necessary.

**Exercise 7: Make Up a Dialogue**

Exercise 7 (Figure 11) is designed to be a free-format creative production exercise in which students are challenged to apply the language skills and
cultural knowledge that they gained in the chapter. A situation similar to the target text is given to the students, and they need to make up a dialogue and record it. They can do it as individual work or pair work. It serves as a comprehensive wrap-up activity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS
As discussed at the outset, the importance of oral proficiency in a business context cannot be over-emphasized, but in reality, foreign language students do not seem to receive enough training in speaking skills. The oral training program for *Practical Business Chinese* (PBC-SE) was developed to improve this situation. It offers numerous benefits to students and instructors. For students, it offers opportunities for language and cultural enhancement activities outside the classroom. Furthermore, these activities can be done on an individual basis anywhere, at any time, and at their own pace. For instructors, it allows them to remove foundational oral practice (e.g., repetition and fluency-building practice) from the class sessions, and by doing so, gain more class time for discussions and highly interactive activities. Also, through the feedback function, it is possible to give each student one-on-one attention.

In terms of curriculum design, a blended learning approach (cf. Barsin, 2004) is highly recommended when using PBC-SE. In a blended curriculum, classroom activities build upon what students practice online, and vice versa.
The oral training program for *Practical Business Chinese* was developed on the *Speak Everywhere* platform. Similarly, it is possible to develop other oral training programs for other textbooks in other languages. For Chinese, we released an oral training program for *New Practical Chinese Reader* (Liu, 2010) this year. It is our hope that many more oral programs will be created and widely used to improve speaking instruction in foreign language teaching in general, and in business language teaching in particular.

WORKS CITED


