EuroFone: calling all language learners
Jane Shelton and Graham Webb

It is widely accepted that the degree of active interaction with native speakers of the target language largely correlates with proficiency gain in second language learners (Coleman, 1996), while anxiety and acculturation difficulties are known to have a negative impact on language gain during a period of time abroad (MacIntyre, 1995).

During an informal chat about the progress of our students in speaking and listening it became evident that we shared a concern. The issue that we agreed needed a solution was: "How do we give our language undergraduates direct access to authentic colloquial language so they can gain confidence in speaking and listening before embarking on their period abroad?" We came to the issue from different perspectives: Jane teaches our students phonetics and phonology prior to their going abroad, while Graham assesses students' written placement reports in Spanish when they return for their final year after a year abroad in Spain. Students' reflective reports offered anecdotal evidence that those who made most linguistic and academic progress during their placement abroad were those who integrated most quickly and effectively into their new environment, working, teaching or studying in France, Germany or Spain. Students frequently reflected on the difficult early stage abroad when they felt they had a good general ability in the language but were simply not familiar enough with the colloquial language and slang used by their contemporaries abroad to enable them to integrate and make friends rapidly.

Although issues with oral competency may hinder students' comprehension within peer groups, it is virtually impossible to expose them to every variance in accent, tone or pronunciation in a standard classroom environment. Furthermore, although in modules such as Practical Phonetics and Phonology students may begin to learn about variation of sound production in their target language, unless they get an adequate opportunity to actually practise, through active, authentic speaking and listening activities, they may not be adequately prepared for the reality of the variation that they will encounter when they go abroad.

While adequate preparation for the year abroad may be important for a good quality year abroad experience (Cohen et al, 2005; DeKeyser, 2007), delivering that preparation is not a simple matter. Not all speakers in a linguistic community speak exactly the same language (cf Lyons' "fiction of homogeneity" (Lyons, 1981, p. 24)) and students who wish to integrate well with their age peers will need to deal with age-graded language – linguistic variation within a community

based on age differences. However, authentic non-classroom-based peer interaction in the target language is not readily available in the home country. It is true that some students may be prepared to seek out visiting native speakers of their target language to converse with, but those who are not as proactive will not benefit from such interactions. Moreover, oral communication in real time with native speakers may in itself be anxiety-inducing (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), suggesting that provision of authentic opportunities for students to practise their speaking and listening skills should be in environments that are as non-threatening as possible.

The increasing robustness and simplicity of the voice tools (Wimba) available through X-stream (the Leeds Met Virtual Learning Environment) seemed to offer a potential solution. Specifically, the voice tools allow the opportunity for both synchronous and asynchronous voice communication via chat rooms and voice boards, providing a potential platform for communication between peers in what could be a safe, non-threatening environment. Computer-aided communication is under investigation in the language learning field (Felix, 2003; Blake, 2007) and Wimba voice tools have been applied specifically to language learning environments and, in some cases, have been found to reduce anxiety associated with speaking and listening in a second language (McIntosh, Braul & Chao, 2003).

The EuroFone X-stream module provides a simple-to-use opportunity for around 200 students in four countries to engage in oral communication with peers in the target language. The module consists of voice discussion boards made accessible to all Leeds Met undergraduates learning French, German and Spanish and to students in ERASMUS partner universities in those countries who are learning English. Since the project is, essentially, a collaborative one, students are expected to communicate in their native language as well as their target language. In this way, participants act both as the provider and the receiver of the authentic oral input.

On entering the module, students are presented with a choice of languages represented by national flags. Behind the flags are voice discussion boards linked to areas such as university life, cultural differences, sport, music etc that students can begin topics on or ask questions about. Other students can then respond and post their own questions or start a new topic. Communication is entirely oral. The only writing is in the title of the message that the student leaves on the board. Apart from an obligation to avoid

offensive language and topics (for which the boards are monitored) the only 'rules' are that only French can be used on the French board, Spanish on the Spanish board etc, and if students leave a message in French for a French student to respond to, they must also respond in English to a message left by a French student. In this way students are both learners and teachers and can begin to appreciate not only the help they receive from native speakers but also the difficulties others have in learning English.

The main advantage of the voice boards is in the asynchronous communication which has been found to benefit language learners (Roed, 2003). Students are not under face-to-face time pressure either to produce or to comprehend the target language. They can take their time to produce the message, listening to and amending their message before they post it. They can also listen to messages from other speakers as many times as they wish without keeping someone waiting for a response. In this way, we anticipate that anxiety will be reduced and confidence in communication ability will increase.

When we initially established the resource following consultation with our partner, the University of Murcia, we provided not only detailed technical information so that students could access the facility but also comprehensive guidance on how to exploit it with suggestions for discussion topics and themes. During the first experimental year (2008-09), EuroFone was used only to link our students of Spanish with students in Murcia studying English, so we asked for feedback from all involved to help inform further development. It became obvious that owing to their use of Facebook and a multitude of online communication tools, students were more than capable of operating the technology and tended to use it mostly from home laptops and not university PCs. This seemed to suggest also that, as they knew the resource was not a formal part of their modules (and not assessed), they considered it more of a personal 'social' tool, hence using it from home rather than university.

As a result of the very forthright, positive and helpful feedback we got from the 50 students who had participated in the first year we amended the structure for 2009-10 and also, with the help of colleagues who visited our partners in France and Germany, we extended the resource to all our students of French and German and about 30 students from France and Germany.

We are continuing to monitor the students' use of EuroFone but are neither intervening nor correcting the grammar or pronunciation we hear. The intention is that it will provide a non-threatening environment in which students can engage with other students of their own age and share issues in the language they are learning. This means they are listening to precisely the type of colloquial language they may encounter during their period abroad as ERASMUS students and, hopefully, incorporating some of what they hear when they respond. EuroFone gives them the opportunity and they have the motivation, as they want to be able to integrate quickly when abroad, and so they exploit the resource.

In terms of the topics students discuss, the main ones are lifestyle, what their social life is, what music they listen to, and what they do at weekends. As almost all the students involved will eventually spend time abroad on ERASMUS placements there are also some interchanges about accommodation and living costs. However, there are few, if any, interchanges about course content, work or placement opportunities, or more 'serious' academic issues. What is evident, though, is that students value the resource and use it in a way that is appropriate to them.

The TQEF (Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund) project funding was vital in giving us some space and time to develop the resource and get initial feedback so we could improve and extend it in Year 2. Now that the system is functioning and liaison with colleagues in France, Germany and Spain is established, we will be able to embed EuroFone within the course structure of our students and continue to develop it. There is also no reason why it cannot be extended to incorporate links with students in many other countries so that learners of the other 20 languages we teach can benefit too. We believe there is more scope for students to exploit it in terms of helping each other with linguistic issues, although it is clear that we cannot assume that students will always use this particular technology in the way we imagine. But as long as they do exploit it and gain from it we should feel that our project has been successful.

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Jane Shelton
Subject Group Leader, Speech and Language Therapy

Graham Webb
Principal Lecturer, Spanish