

How to Set Up Oral Homework: A Case of Limited Technology

Homework usually consists of the learners' written account of how they interpreted a task set by the teacher (Farmer 2008; Lantolf and Genung 2002; North and Pillay 2002; Zacarian 2009), and is generally defined as out-of-class assignments that are handed in for the instructor to grade (North and Pillay 2002; Yang 2005; Sasaki 1995). Learners may work individually or with partners to answer simple or challenging linguistic exercises, sketch out a mind map, or develop a highly creative piece of writing. Teachers who do the grading are often seen carrying around hard copies of students' homework, or sitting at computers when it has been sent by email or uploaded to the class group site on the Internet. However, grading is not always the entire responsibility of the teacher, for there are instances when students are seen busily marking each other's work. Likewise, homework may also include assignments that students set for themselves. If the instructional context allows, these peer correction and student participation options create a learner-

centered classroom and permit teachers to take on a less controlling role.

In any case, homework typically has a deadline and agreed upon formal characteristics, such as length, font type, organization, and layout (North and Pillay 2002; Strehorn 2001). Finally, homework occurs with some frequency throughout the course since, as North and Pillay (2002, 137) acknowledge, making more time for homework is normally considered to have "a positive effect on learning."

This article discusses the little used but important option of assigning oral homework activities as a way to give more attention to a critical skill that demands a lot of exposure and serious practice to master. Oral homework, just like regular homework, should have a deadline, be easily collected, and occur regularly throughout the course. As with regular homework, learners are asked to (1) complete it individually or with peers, (2) turn it in by email, uploading, or bringing it to class, and (3) offer and accept feedback. Oral homework is not without

challenges, as some students may be more used to handing in a paper assignment, or instructors and supervisors may be used to keeping track of how much visible work students produce. Most importantly, collecting speech samples does require technological resources that are not always available, and this increases the potential of discouraged learners and teachers (Chinnery 2005). Therefore, a major aim of this article is to outline the procedures I implemented during a two-year period in a limited technology context where oral homework was completed and collected mostly without access to the Internet. Of course, the same procedures are also useful for teachers who are lucky enough to have access to modern computers and high-speed broadband connections. In fact, there are situations where one-time Internet access must be secured to download free software or run file conversion applications.

Why oral homework?

Regardless of class size, language learners and teachers alike usually agree that there is insufficient class time to develop oral skills. Uttering words or producing fluent speech is a huge challenge for a good number of learners—possible reasons include language learning aptitude, language learning anxiety, individual learning style, and general readiness (Mendez 2007; Oxford 1999; Shamim 1996; Turula 2002). In very large classes, the chance to be heard by peers or the teacher is substantially reduced because of time constraints, often imposed by learners themselves. Some learners, for example, tend to be pretty hard on themselves and hold off on speaking until they have either flawlessly written down the words or rehearsed them several times on their own. As Gibson (2004), Hawkey (2006), and Littlewood (2001) suggest, by the time students feel ready to speak in front of others it is a few minutes before class is over. In other cases strong competition among peers creates problems because some learners are not willing to wait for less proficient ones to attempt to speak (Breen 2001; Hawkey 2006). Fatigue is yet another factor—after five pairs perform identical or very similar conversations students inevitably get restless and want to move on (van Dam 2002).

Oral homework addresses these problems by allowing every student to produce speech, articulate English sounds, and practice listening skills. It provides equal time for every learner to say something and may well reduce in-class competition among students to speak. While timid learners will benefit from producing the language on their own and at their own pace, more fluent learners can still do what they seem to enjoy the most: speaking and being heard. However, unlike regular homework that might simply consist of a notebook page, oral homework requires some technology to be feasible.

Required technology for oral homework

Technology plays an important role in recording learners' oral production, whether it is basic drills, minimal pair exercises, real-time chatting, or online conferencing (Egbert 2005; Chinnery 2005). The equipment and media used to record oral performances ranges from tape recorders to computers with the requisite software already loaded or available free on the Internet. However, teachers and students often have to deal with the following limited technology contexts:

- Teachers and students rely solely on school equipment.
- Teachers can only access school computers with unreliable connections.
- Teachers and students only have access to dial-up connections at home.
- Overhead projectors in classrooms have no Internet connection.
- Computer rooms are not set up exclusively for language learning.
- Self-access centers are booked for most of the term.
- Email accounts do not have capacity for dozens of audio files sized over 1 MB.
- Campus Wi-Fi is explicitly banned from classroom use.

How do I set up oral homework?

The challenge is to learn how to work with whatever equipment is available to record and play oral performances. If there is Internet access, learners can take advantage of a range of possibilities to develop, record, and deliver oral homework using *synchronous communication* (real-time interaction, such as Instant

Messaging) and *asynchronous communication* (delayed interaction, such as email). However, it is certainly possible to record and turn in oral homework without an Internet connection. One basic option is to record learners' oral production directly to the computer and either store the digital audio files on the hard drive or transfer them to other media, such as CDs, USB flash drives, or memory cards. If the computer is old or outdated, just make sure it has Windows Media Player, the basic recording software installed on most computers. (It can be downloaded at www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia.) Finally, to transfer recorded audio files to other media, the computer must burn/write CDs or have a USB port.

I suggest you carry out the following six steps at the beginning of your course. Not only will it help you get to know your learners, but it will also get them involved in the process. However, it is a good idea to get familiar with the technical details before meeting your students. Doing so with a novice colleague who is also learning is really helpful, as is enlisting the aid of knowledgeable family members or friends.

Step 1: Make sure learners have access to recording devices

You may have a computer room available in your school to record, or students may have the means to do it at home. Recording options include personal computers, tape recorders, or mobile phones (Chinnery 2006). Tape recorders may be easy to use and carry, but they may be out of date or unavailable to some learners. Digital recorders are another option, although they can be prohibitively expensive. In some teaching contexts cell phones are more available than fully equipped classrooms with the latest in computing and educational technology. Many students already carry a laptop computer with them, which most likely includes basic, one-minute audio recording software or Windows Media Player. In this case, students might just need to purchase an inexpensive microphone to start recording.

The option I most frequently use at the recording stage is the students' own cell phones, which is a very convenient option in my context. Students may not even be aware that their cell phones come with an audio

recording tool that records for at least 60 seconds. This recording tool allows students to use their phones as simple tape recorders, and they do not have to use their minutes to record themselves. To transfer the recordings from their phones to a computer, learners can use the phone's existing Bluetooth wireless technology or a USB data cable that comes with most cell phones. Some phones have a data memory card that can be used to transfer files by plugging the card directly into a computer's memory card slot (if it has one) or by using a memory card reader that connects to the computer's USB port. Once transferred to the computer, audio files from the phone can be stored and played.

Step 2: Set up or agree on a format

Audio recordings come in different *formats*, which refers to the way sound is encoded onto a file. Unfortunately, different formats are not always compatible with each other, although an incompatible format can be converted to a compatible one. This will require access to a high-speed broadband connection, at least for one computer, to obtain free downloads from the Internet to run the conversion programs. For example, many cell phones record in an AMR format that may be difficult to play with certain basic audio software or on outdated computers. Other cell phones record audio in MP3 format (which runs in Real One Player: www.real.com) or in less popular formats such as MOV (which runs in Quick Time Player: www.apple.com/quicktime).

An excellent solution is to ask students to convert audio files to a format everyone can use. For example, if you only have access to Windows Media Player you can ask students to convert their audio files to WMA format, or if you only have Real One Player you can ask them to convert the files to MP3 format. Some teachers may prefer to have students make audio CDs that can be listened to on a CD player, in which case the audio files will be automatically converted to the CDA format. Ask students, colleagues, or family members to help you choose an audio file converter; there are a good number of free conversion programs available on the Internet:

- www.snapfiles.com/Freeware/gmm/fwaudiocodec.html

- www.brothersoft.com/amr-to-mp3-converter-209199.html
- <http://nokia-multimedia-converter.en.softonic.com/symbian>
- <http://en.softonic.com/s/sony-ericsson-amr-converter:phones>

These programs typically have detailed instructions and tutorials to help users with the free downloading and conversion process. If necessary, ask for help from colleagues, students, friends, or family members if you feel unsure about doing it on your own—most of us need help when it comes to technology.

Step 3: Supervise students the first time they record

It is crucial to check that students are capable of completing a recording task for homework. It is simply not fair to assign a task that they do not have the ability to perform. You should, for instance, make sure they have access to school facilities to record. Book the room in advance and talk to the staff to make sure students will be allowed to use it for the purposes of your assignment. If most of your students bring laptops or cell phones to class you can easily ask them to record something right in the room.

First, have learners do a rehearsal of the activity without recording. Preferably, carry out a regular oral exercise in pairs, such as a role play, an information gap, or another activity. Then ask students to record themselves as they repeat the activity. This will very likely turn the recording exercise into a shared task among learners. In addition, you will see that the quality of sound will force many students to speak louder and more clearly, especially those who usually speak very quietly. As is often the case, teachers want certain learners to raise their voice enough so that classmates can hear what they say, and if students monitor their voice volume it adds to the potential benefits of this exercise. Some fluent students will want to start over several times and even ask you to let them record again because they are not happy with how their work came out. In case they do not ask you to let them do it again, ask them if they have listened to the recording and if they think it is ready to hand in. Then tell them they can do it again if necessary.

Students rarely think their recordings are perfect and will do it again. This is advanta-

geous for teachers who want learners to spend some time rehearsing new words or structures; students *wanting* to do things over and over can be an ideal scenario. Some learners will not want other people's voices or background noise to appear in their recordings, so doing homework at home, in quieter surroundings, will be more appealing. This supervision session will give you a good idea of how students will react to listening to and having others listen to their own speech, and will provide important feedback on their proficiency levels and language areas that need improvement.

Step 4: Set up guidelines for handing in homework

For their first oral homework assignment let learners know what equipment, format, and media are acceptable. As a teacher you may be in a position to decide what you feel more comfortable with, either because you will be the one listening to their work or because you have to make sure they all can listen to each other's recordings. If no Internet access is available, teachers can ask students to turn in their computer recordings on USB flash drives, memory cards, or even audiotapes and CDs.

If you are able to rely on access to high-speed broadband connections you can ask students to email audio files or upload them to a shared platform they are familiar with. The following free email providers offer free storage and/or group sites that can be created for your class:

- Windows Live SkyDrive storage (<http://windowslive.com/online/skydrive>)
- Windows Live groups (<http://groups.live.com>)
- Yahoo groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com>)
- Google groups (<http://groups.google.com>)

The group sites clearly describe how to set up and use the site for storing and sharing text and multimedia, including audio files.

As with regular homework, ask learners to properly label their work before they hand it in. Whether students' audio files are emailed, sent by Bluetooth, uploaded to a group site, or handed in on portable media such as CDs or memory cards, it is critical that you

train them to label each file uniquely and include their names. This will prevent receiving numerous audio files all named “homework1.mp3.” Finally, printed guidelines are useful to remind yourself and students when assignments are due, how you expect them to be handed in, and what the feedback and grading criteria are.

Step 5: Allow students enough time to hand in their work

Even though students may be good at using technology, they will still need extra time to get used to the idea of recording themselves. Quiet learners are likely to feel nervous, and more proficient ones may dislike how they sound and end up recording as many times as less confident learners. In my experience, learners who hand in oral homework tend to dedicate a good deal of time; in fact, several students have handed in CDs containing between 5 and 12 audio files. One of those audio files, not necessarily the last one, is labeled as “homework1paty,” “this_is_the_good_one,” or something similar.

If you assign dialogues or role plays, learners will need to meet after class to complete the homework. They will most likely practice, record, evaluate, rerecord, agree when it is ready, convert files if necessary, and transfer files to a previously agreed media, like a USB flash drive, a memory card, or a CD. I usually give students a week after a supervised recording to hand in their first oral assignment.

Step 6: Space out the frequency of recordings

This may be the first time you ask for oral homework, so start small and be realistic. The first time you receive your learners’ audio files you may be so excited to hear the ever silent students speak that you will want to listen to them all and give detailed feedback to each one. I suggest you simply listen to all of them but refrain from grading. This will help you make informed decisions about your next assignments. Allow yourself enough time to give recordings back before you assign students a new task.

Make sure that the oral homework matches the objectives at each stage of the course; in addition, consider the curriculum to determine the best occasions for oral homework. Decide if you would like to ask for oral home-

work in place of other assignments, or if you are willing to receive both written and oral homework assignments and to what degree. If you are familiar with the students’ calendar and know when they are busier, try to program the due dates of your oral assignments at times when their workload is not as heavy. North and Pillay (2002) recommend that teachers not overload students with assignments or overwhelm themselves with endless grading, even in contexts where teacher feedback is perceived to have more value than peer feedback.

The number of students is also another factor that will help you determine the amount of recordings you can ask for during the course, and whether you will have learners work in groups or do recordings individually. Usually, I ask for three or four recordings apiece when I have 20 to 25 students and four when I have fewer than 20 students. Some of these recordings are done individually and the students pair up for others. As a general rule I ask for one recording for every 20 hours of teaching, even with classes of up to 45 students. This is possible because I group students in triads at the beginning of the course when they are more available, and then in pairs later in the course.

What can I set up as oral homework?

Almost anything learners are asked to do orally in class can be converted into an oral homework task. For example, if learners will repeat model sentences to exercise intonation, a possible oral assignment could ask: “Record the following 8 to 10 emphatic sentences showing surprise.” As another assignment, student pairs develop dialogues that contain specified vocabulary and are asked to do the following: “Role play the dialogue with your partner, exaggerate the highlighted expressions, exchange roles and record again.” Another popular activity consists of having learners create the middle or end of an incomplete story with the instruction: “Record the last sentence in the unfinished text and then tell us how the story ends.”

Oral production tasks in the classroom can also be less dependent on prescribed scripts and allow for more open-ended student creativity. For instance, students frequently talk about their closest relationships, summarize

something they have read or listened to, read aloud a poem they like or wrote, state their opinion about political campaigns, and so on. Instructions for similar oral homework include:

- How do you think global warming is directly affecting your life? Explain whether or not you think drastic measures should be taken to fight it.
- Choose a joke from the list. Tell us the joke. Remember, you have to make us laugh!
- Who is your dearest relative? Say what he or she does, whether you see him or her frequently, and what sort of things you share, have in common, or do together.

Some assignments can be made into more interactive tasks by having students share the speech workload in pairs or in triads.

- Discuss together whether traveling alone is more fun than traveling with someone.
- Look at the brochures and decide where to spend a day off together.
- Take an exercise survey together. Do you agree with your results?

Additional options for oral homework

There are a plethora of possible options to consider for oral homework. Depending on the available resources, the number and type of learners per group, your own workload and, perhaps more importantly, what you would like students to achieve from completing oral homework, you can consider some of the following options for assigning oral homework. (See the Appendix for a summary of oral homework tasks.)

Individual work vs. pair or group work

Setting up oral assignments that entail group work extends the amount of time your learners interact among themselves (Gibson 2004). Dialogues, role plays, and information gap activities are an excellent oral activity for students to record. Besides developing communication skills, student interaction helps shy learners participate more easily in a group; this type of integration is crucial for any task that you assign students to do together (Littlewood 2001; Malamah-Thomas 1987; Strehorn 2001).

However, this means students must make themselves available to meet after class. Also, some students may feel unprepared to be heard so closely by peers—in the classroom, learners who produce the language in small groups are somehow sheltered by all the noise around them; producing the language in more intimate situations might actually overwhelm a few of them (Mendez 2007; Oxford 1999; van Dam 2002). Clearly, one major advantage of grouping learners is the fewer number of assignments to be graded, which would be at least twice as many if learners worked individually. On the other hand, to make sure learners produce as much language in pairs as when they work individually, an extended amount of recording material must be available. Many of my individual oral assignments last between 1 and 1.5 minutes, while pair oral assignments last between 2 and 2.5 minutes.

An existing script vs. an original script

You can choose to either give students an existing script or cards they can use to develop their own spoken exchange to be recorded (Cáceres and Obilinovic 2000; Zacarian 2009). Similarly, students can record an existing profile of a famous athlete or write up their own profile of a favorite athlete to record. Something in between is also possible, such as giving beginners a picture story to describe or an existing dialogue or text for them to modify in previously agreed places.

Some learners enjoy the exercise more when they record something they have written, like stating their point of view about something or describing their lifestyles, dreams, and ambitions. Yet these learners also acknowledge that an existing script makes it easier to produce language fluently. Again, what you would like your learners to get out of recording themselves will help you determine which option suits you best. For example, if you want students to give voice to something they wrote, a self-created script may be appropriate, but if you want them to work on pronouncing specific words or features of the language, an existing script containing those elements is called for (Tanner and Landon 2009). If you are still not sure, it may be a good idea to begin with an existing script and introduce self-created scripts later.

Teacher decides what to record vs. students decide what to record

Some learners want freedom to choose what to record while others are not ready to decide for themselves or unconsciously pick the most simple tasks. In most cases it is important to have homework closely relate to course content and objectives. If, for instance, one of your modules deals with common health problems, a doctor/patient role play fulfills the learning objective. Each student pair could record the same health-related role play or you could have students do separate health-related role plays on a variety of topics, such as a headache, a cold, a swollen ankle, a toothache, or a sunburn. The teacher distributes the role play or learners choose from a list. While the latter is more comfortable for learners who are reluctant to create something from scratch, they are still challenged by thinking about what task suits them best.

Your unit on transportation, for example, could contain the following instructions:

Choose your role play from the following five options.

1. Role play a dialogue between two friends who have to decide on one out of three transport alternatives to get to a monument in town.
2. Discuss with your partner how to purchase the best option of plane tickets from New York to Los Angeles.
3. You are standing at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park: Give a 1.5-minute speech on why we should ban cars from downtowns.
4. Discuss together the seriousness of the traffic problems where you live.
5. What do you think transport will be like in 10 years? Make your predictions.

Depending on the course content and what you want students to get out of doing oral homework assignments, you can choose among easier closed or more challenging open options, realizing the tasks requiring deeper reflection about important issues are likely to improve student readiness for autonomous learning (Hedge 2000).

Collecting recordings and giving feedback

At some point, even if you have planned for a highly structured session in which learn-

ers listen to each other's work and offer peer feedback, try making enough time to comfortably sit and listen to all first-time recordings. Listening to learners is time consuming and it is likely to make you feel tired the first time you do it. Perhaps the most rewarding aspect is that you will get to hear those students who seldom speak.

Keep an eye on your watch and time yourself. This will help you decide what changes to institute the next time you assign the same task. Take advantage of your experience grading regular homework and give yourself the chance to find a system for you to work at your best. For example, you may want to first make sure you have everyone's assignments and note whose is missing, and then determine if you can listen to the audio files; in some cases you will have to notify students of technical problems.

Feedback should correlate with what you want your learners to get out of recording. In role plays, for example, it is important to assess the degree students *become* the character and act with enthusiasm; feedback should specifically assess the objective of following a specific intonation when they record their lines (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin 1996; Dalton and Seidlhofer 1994; Tanner and Landon 2009).

It is important to make sure your first feedback is encouraging and cheerful, especially if learners have never recorded themselves. Try to include a self-assessment component to help you decide how you can evaluate their next assignment. This is also very useful to make students feel positive about repeating the task. Written feedback may be quick, but initially recording your oral feedback may be the most appropriate.

I also suggest you keep assessment criteria simple and straightforward when you initially assign oral homework, and that students react to their classmates' work rather than evaluate. For example, if all groups record a role play about an upcoming trip to a famous city, you could ask them: "Listen to another group's plan. Which one do you like best, yours or theirs? Why?" For assignments where they record different scripts, you could instruct learners to "Listen to your classmates' conversations. What did the doctor recommend?" or "Listen to your classmates' jokes. Rate

them with 5 stars if you laughed a lot,” or something similar. Team up students from the first recording so that they get used to the idea of being heard by others as quickly as possible. Asking them to listen to another group’s recordings at this stage will encourage empathetic feedback later.

Some students may be reluctant to do oral homework because they cannot meet peers after class, prefer working alone, or object to others listening to their work. You must be prepared for such scenarios and decide whether you will want oral homework to be a percentage of students’ grades. If you do, I suggest you start small and see how it works. Learners who do not produce recordings can still be included in the feedback sessions and you can keep checking to see if they want to participate in the next assignment. Just like every other new element you incorporate into your teaching, oral homework will definitely open new doors to your professional development.

Conclusion

Oral homework is an excellent option to give students an equal amount of time and opportunity for oral production and feedback. Recording tasks can range from exercising intonation patterns to telling an original story. Learners can exercise various levels of decision making and gravitate toward more autonomous learning.

Oral homework is largely possible even in a limited technology context without access to the Internet. Although some students may be unable to do oral homework because they lack the means to record audio files, giving options is what works best. For example, I have accepted regular audiocassettes and video files (or even older formats like VHS or 8mm) where students direct the camera to a blank spot while their voices are being recorded. Other students have used the voice recording options in PowerPoint software (Egbert 2005), and some others have given me their tape recorders or MP3 players to take home. It has been exceptionally rewarding to see how students work out ways to hand in their work. As a result, I have found oral homework assignments a fertile field for learner integration and interaction, problem solving skills, and creativity.

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Appendix Summary of Sample Oral Homework Tasks

How to Set Up Oral Homework: A Case of Limited Technology • Elba Méndez

Course Objective	Instructions	Material	Feedback	Number of Students/ Number of Recordings
<p><i>Learners will:</i></p> <p>1. Stress words appropriately</p> <p>2. Show surprise</p>	<p>1. Read words and sentences aloud</p> <p>2. Read a poem</p>	<p>1. Words and sentences</p> <p>2. Poem</p>	<p>1. Is stress good (yes/no)</p> <p>2. Scale from 1 (needs work) to 5 (excellent)</p>	<p>Individual work</p> <p>25 = 25</p> <p>45 = 45</p>
<p><i>Learners will:</i></p> <p>Participate in balanced interaction</p>	<p>Role play a health problem</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Printed dialogue Prompted dialogue Role cards 	<p>Answer comprehension questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What did the doctor recommend? Did you agree with the survey results? 	<p>Pair work</p> <p>25 = 13</p> <p>(1 student participates in two)</p> <p>46 = 23</p>
	<p>Take an exercise survey together</p>	<p>Printed survey with options and results</p>		<p>Triads</p> <p>23 = 8</p> <p>(1 student participates in two)</p> <p>48 = 16</p>
<p><i>Learners will:</i></p> <p>Discuss options</p>	<p>Decide where to spend a day off together</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brochures and model dialogue Brochures and useful expressions Brochures 	<p>Answer compare and contrast questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Which option did you like best? Yours or theirs? Why? Do you agree with them? Why? 	<p>Pair work</p> <p>25 = 13</p> <p>(1 student participates in two)</p> <p>46 = 23</p>
	<p>Discuss together whether traveling alone is more fun than traveling with someone</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful expressions Pictures 		<p>Triads</p> <p>23 = 8</p> <p>(1 student participates in two)</p> <p>48 = 16</p>
<p><i>Learners will:</i></p> <p>Describe a situation</p>	<p>How serious is the traffic problem where you live?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Model text Useful expressions Pictures 	<p>Rank: Very serious; Serious; Not very serious</p>	<p>Individual work</p> <p>25 = 25</p> <p>Pair work (students live in the same place)</p> <p>25 = 13</p> <p>(1 student participates in two)</p>
<p><i>Learners will:</i></p> <p>State opinions</p>	<p>How do you think global warming is directly affecting your life?</p> <p>Explain whether or not you think drastic measures need to be taken to fight it</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Model text Useful expressions Pictures None 	<p>Rank: Convincing; Somewhat Convincing; Not very convincing</p> <p>Answer compare and contrast questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How much do you agree with his/her view? 	<p>Individual work</p> <p>25 = 25</p> <p>40 = 40</p>
<p><i>Learners will:</i></p> <p>(write your objective)</p>	<p>(write your instructions)</p>	<p>(write which materials learners will use)</p>	<p>(write what listeners will do in response to others' work)</p>	<p>(list how many recordings you will collect and have to redistribute for feedback)</p>