

Interactive Streaming Media: Real-Time Conversation Practice

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Providing students with real-time conversation practice outside of the classroom is a difficult task for English teachers in Japan. The purpose of this interactive activity is to present students with opportunities to engage in real-time conversation through the use of “streaming-media.” Students will participate in the communicative process by interacting with various video segments. Furthermore, the course of the conversation will be determined by the students’ choices.

教室の外で学生へのリアルタイムな英会話練習の提供は、日本の英語教師にとって難しい課題であった。今回作成したインタラクティブ・コンテンツの目的は、双方向性を持つ”ストリーミング・メディア”を通して学生にリアルタイムな会話練習を提供する事である。学生が映像上のネイティブスピーカーとの様々なやり取りを通じて、コミュニケーションのプロセスを体験できるようになっている。さらに学生が行う画面上の選択によって会話の方向性が決まるため、一つの映像素材で複数のコミュニケーションが体験できるようになっている。

A significant challenge for English teachers is to provide students with realistic conversation practice outside of the classroom. The situation is even more difficult in the EFL setting of Japan where native speakers of English are limited. Therefore the following interactive activity was designed with these specific needs in mind.

This paper will provide an introduction to a web-based activity which presents students with opportunities to engage in real-time conversation practice by using interactive streaming media. The activity is designed so that students can experience multiple situations while interacting with a real-time video. Using streaming media provides students with minimum wait time between sequences.

Description of Activity

Here is how it works. The opening page of the web site shows a party scene with 3 people highlighted. In order to simulate a party atmosphere, an audio file of an actual party is playing in the background. Students are given the choice of whom they want to speak to. They simply click on the person and the conversation begins.

After making the selection, a RealPlayer window is launched. Students interact with the content by selecting from a set of multiple-choice responses. The results of each choice will launch a new video segment

Interactive Activity

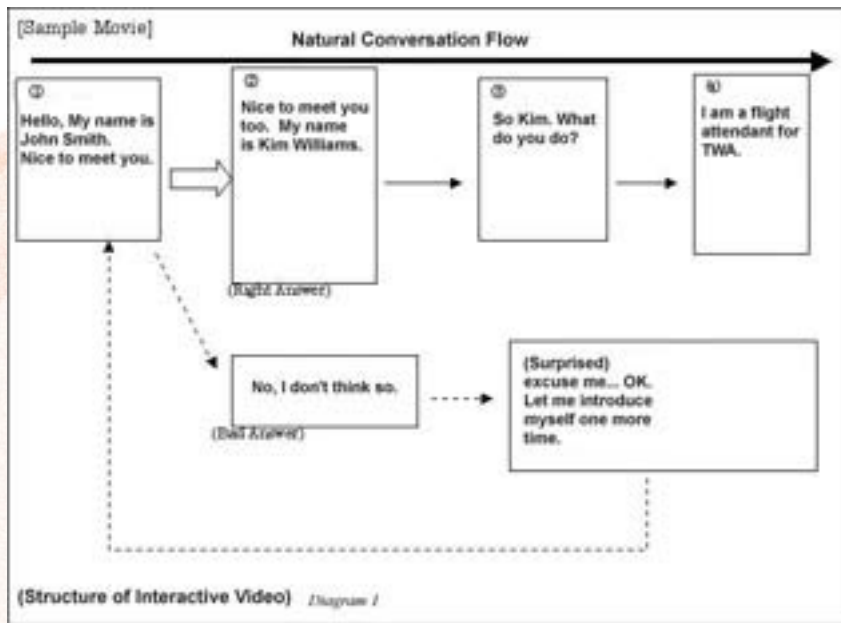
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in streaming media format. The use of streaming media is ideal because it allows the viewer to begin viewing the sequence while it is downloading therefore eliminating long wait times.





This chart illustrates how the interactive video reacts to the users' choice. Students will be able to determine the appropriateness of each speech act based on the resulting outcome. When the user chooses an appropriate response for a certain situation, the video will continue as in a natural conversation. On the other hand, if the user makes an inappropriate choice, the video will display a strange reaction by the speaker. The results of the interaction will be evident by the facial expressions and response of the speaker.

Furthermore, the students' choices will determine the course of the conversation. By actually creating the story line, students truly become participants in the conversation. As long as the student continues to make appropriate choices, the conversation will continue to flow until it ends naturally. However, if the student makes an inappropriate choice, the conversation will end abruptly. An inappropriate choice may include such things as a personal question or a statement that is made out of context.

Production Notes

The production of the interactive activity began with videotaping several versions of a similar conversation. The scripting was kept to a minimum to allow for more spontaneous and natural language production. After editing the videotapes, a tree diagram was constructed mapping out 3 different branches from the initial conversation opener. For each response, there were up to 3 possible choices given to the students. Each choice led to a single response which in turn led to 3 more choices. And so on until the end of the conversation.

The links for each video sequence were made using "SMIL". Pronounced, "smile," "SMIL" stands for "Synchronized Multimedia Integration Language." It is

an industry-standard markup language used for layout and time streaming media presentations. “SMIL” works for RealPlayer the way HTML works for a Web Browser. When streaming multiple video clips, “SMIL” provides the means to layout the presentation and time its clips. “SMIL” is a simple markup language that can be made with a word processor or text editor. Some software tools create “SMIL” files automatically.

Discussion

The interactive activity described in this article was a party scene. In this scene, the participant was the initiator of the conversation and was given the responsibility of sustaining the conversation through selecting a series of opening sentences. There were some obvious limitations to this format. For example, the lack of time constraints combined with the one-sided nature of this conversation scenario made the virtual conversation less authentic.

Future scenarios will include asking for directions and a conversation in an elevator. In these scenarios

the participant will be the respondent rather than the initiator. Furthermore, a time limit will be utilized in order to more closely simulate real conversation time constraints.

Although this interactive activity only remotely resembled an actual party conversation, it may be a useful tool to help some students overcome their anxiety about talking to foreigners.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined a web-based interactive activity which provides students with real-time conversation practice outside of the classroom. The activity is a simulated party scene, using “streaming video” and “SMIL.” The interactive nature of the exercise allows students to participate in the communicative process through their choices and thereby create their own conversation.