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LLTI HIGHLIGHTS



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Back to the boutique?: Search for Free & Affordable Voice Recording to Replace Wimba Voice Consumes LLTI

The LLTI listserv serves a very important role for IALLT as it provides its members with access to members' impressive and constantly growing collective intelligence. As of this writing, the, the topic most often written about in the LLTI listserv in 2011 has been the pragmatic need to provide faculty and learners with a less expensive alternative voice recording software to replace what was until recently known as the Wimba Voice Suite.¹ The reasons behind this flurry of interest are easy to understand: in these challenging economic times, Wimba Voice has become far too expensive to be sustainable on many campuses. In addition, Blackboard's acquisition of Wimba (prior to SunGard's acquisition of Blackboard) has left users of Moodle and other learning management systems (LMSs) to worry that Wimba may not have a long life in their LMSs.

Wimba's Appeal

Designed specifically for language learners, Wimba Voice offers a number of easy to use voice recording applications, including:

- Voice Board – an oral threaded discussion list
- Voice Podcaster – a podcast creator
- Voice Email – a program that allows for the creation of one way emails (it is not possible to send replies)
- Voice Recorder – a recording applet that can be embedded in quizzes, announcement pages, etc., in the LMS
- Voice Presentation – a tool allowing a presentation around web pages (not particularly useful)

In addition, its easy integration into LMSs allows students to access it with their university passwords and IDs.

Designed specifically for language practice, Wimba Voice's simplicity guarantees that it can be scaled to allow most any faculty member who values language speaking and listening practice to integrate it into its classes. Having had access to Wimba Voice for one year, I can report that faculty who used Wimba Voice at my institution, Case Western Reserve University, were very happy with its ease of use and applicability to their teaching. However, due to budget constraints, the university chose not to renew our license for second year.

Like many others active in the LLTI listserv, I have been exploring other tools to capture most of the functionality of Wimba Voice at a much lower cost.

There are many free and low cost tools with voice recording capabilities available, but as our members reported in the LLTI, there are no current applications that offer the same degree of usability and flexibility as Wimba Voice.

Possible Replacements

IALLT member Edie Furness began the Wimba thread in early 2011. After following the list and reading about the many possibilities, she recently created a very helpful Google spreadsheet containing the applications suggested by members. Her list contains applications designed for just one or two types of voice recordings, applications that allow more possibilities but remain relatively low cost, and a few of the large language center providers that provide audio recording capabilities at a distance, such as Sony SansSpace.

Small but Mighty Applications

Of these solutions suggested by members, many are free or very reasonably priced applets that satisfy just one or two of the functionalities handled by Wimba Voice, while some take a completely different approach to recording. For example, Nanogang and Vocaroo are simple but effective recording applets, similar to Wimba's Voice Recorder. While Nanogang can be embedded into Moodle, users must sign up for a Vocaroo account and make recordings from there, which can then be either emailed or embedded on a website. In my limited test, I found the audio quality to be good. However, there are some drawbacks to using it. First, Vocaroo is no longer free. (Check the website for pricing information: <http://vocaroo.com>.) In addition, requiring students to create many web accounts can lead to frustration on the part of learners.

Another solution mentioned in the thread is Voxopop, an oral discussion forum application. Having used Voxopop in a course, I found it very easy to use and very effective. However, as mentioned by IALLT member Lauren Rosen, Voxopop has a linear as opposed to the threaded format provided by Wimba Voice Board. In addition, as a stand-alone program, students must once again create their own accounts to use it.

The CLEAR Rich Internet Applications for Language Learning contains many recording apps for language learners. In full disclosure, I have not tried these tools personally and our discussion must continue beyond this summary. That said, I am intrigued by the audio drop box that can be embedded on any webpage, blog, wiki, or LMS such as Blackboard. This feature allows instructors to access recordings from one central location. For instructors with many students, this is a necessity.

Voki and Voicethread take a more creative approach to voice recording. Voki (www.voki.com) enables users to record their voices to create talking head avatars created by selecting one of the many options. Voki has both a free and a very reasonably priced Classroom option. Recordings can then be emailed or embedded on different sites.

If the number of recommenders is any indication, Voicethread is currently the most popular voice recording application with IALLT list serv users who responded with suggestions to replace Wimba Voice. Voicethread takes a different approach from the other applications mentioned here, as it is centered around group discussion of an asset: whether it is text, audio or visual. With its simple interface focused on collaboration, Voicethread is ideal for discussing pdfs, Powerpoints, photos, videos, etc. Free and large pay options are available for individual and paid university accounts are available as well. Files can be accessed from the Voicethread site, embedded into web pages, or used inside Moodle. In addition, university accounts support LDAP, Single Sign On and other forms of university authentication. Therefore, unlike many of the applications mentioned above, Voicethread offers the

advantage of being able to scale it to serve our institutions easily as opposed to requiring our professors and students to manage separate accounts.

Voicethread is not a 100% replacement for the functionality provided by Wimba Voice as it does not provide ways of threading discussions, sending emails or simple voice recordings. However, in my view, its features are as just as valuable, if not more so, than those provided by Wimba Voice. One can imagine many possibilities for students to use Voicethread to support collaborative, task and even project based learning. A quick peak at the many publically accessible voicethreads (they can also be made private), show a number of examples of how they are being used in second language learning, including this example of pronunciation:

- J' aime la Provence:
<http://voicethread.com/?#q+language.b110967.i568692>
- This ESL example discussing what to look for when renting an apartment: <http://voicethread.com/?#q+language.b1252460.i6733190>
- And finally, a short story in Spanish created by a four and six year old child: <http://voicethread.com/?#q+language.b45350.i237670>

Voicethread allows many creative opportunities for language learners to create their own projects, such as the story above, narrated slide shows, show and tell of digital objects, etc.

One the solutions listed, ListenUp by JavaSonics is no longer for sale, with the explanation that revenues did not cover the cost of development, maintenance of the product, etc. Thus providing justification for why many are leery of using smaller applications: one could structure activities around an application that might could be available today for free, tomorrow for a fee, or as is the case with ListenUp, even fee based applications could have a limited life span.

Commercial Online Language Learning Centers

Language learning centers offer extended possibilities, and often a high price. Some of the commercial options that provide sophisticated voice recordings include WebSwami, SANSSpace, ReLANPro, and others.

WebSwami integrates into Moodle and Blackboard and provides a variety of voice recording applications. Some of the advantages to using WebSwami are its ability to help students improve their accent using a Voice Graph application, record themselves speaking in a range of exercises using their web cams, and download or embed their recorded videos into the LMS, Facebook etc. There is much to like about WebSwami, as it provides a range of activity types and LMS integration at a reasonable price. (For Case Western Reserve University, with a FTW of less than 10,000, our Wimba Voice cost was approximately \$25,000. The price for WebSwami for one year would have been around \$5000.

However, during the time that I tested both of these, Wimba Voice was far easier to use. I found it to be time consuming and cumbersome to set up activities using WebSwami. However, that was two years and it is very possible that WebSwami 2.0 is easier to use. I am less familiar with ReLanPro and SANSspace. I would welcome continued dialog with the IALLT group.

ANVILL (A National Virtual Language Lab) offers a great deal of potential both in terms of functionality and cost (it is free!). ANVILL is being developed as a research project by the Yamada Language Center at the University of Oregon. ANVILL provides opportunities for both asynchronous and synchronous communication, with options including text, audio, and video responses.

Instructors can use it as an LMS by creating classes with it and managing online assessment with it, as well as numerous practice exercises. I find ANVILL to be a very exciting application and I look forward to its further development.

WebSpeak is another free application developed in higher education, a partnership between Harvard University and The George Washington University. While having some valuable features, I felt that ANVILL featured a better interface design and greater functionality.

Now and The Future

In summary, there are many applications available for voice recording to replace the functionality found in Wimba Voice. Deciding on the best application is difficult, because there is at the moment opportunities and challenges with each.

Wimba Voice was used at many institutions due to its ease of use, LMS integration, and the different recording options it provided. There are no reasonably priced direct replacements. However, it seems clear that as we look for new applications, we must also continue our dialog to explore not only the applications presently available, many of which promote individual, student to teacher communication, but also how we can allow our students to create meaningful, mobile, personal learning environments.

ⁱ Blackboard's acquisition of Wimba and Eliminate has led to a merging of the solutions formerly provided these two companies into Blackboard Collaborate. Due to member's many references to Wimba Voice, and none to Blackboard Collaborate, I will continue to refer to these tools as Wimba Voice in this column.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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