VoiceForum, a software platform for spoken interaction: a model for the "Call Triangle"?

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VoiceForum is a pedagogical project created as a response to learners' needs in the spoken language observed mainly at the Hypermedia Language Centre of Blaise Pascal University, France. It comprises a web-based forum approach for posting interactive audio and text with a dedicated unintrusive space for teacher feedback. The software platform (freely available via download), thus, offers a means of providing guidance through contextualised help to individual learners on their spoken discourse in authentically interactive situations (Fynn, 2007).

We will limit our frame of reference to our experience with students at levels of B1 to C2 to discuss, firstly, how teachers are confronted in face-to-face group work with issues concerning the focus on the meaning of students' utterances to the possible detriment of focus on form. A central problem is 'which knowledge should be given greater value?' or how to reconcile "the tension between the desirability of communicative use of the FL in the classroom, on the one hand and the felt need for a linguistic focus in language learning, on the other" (Long, 1991). To address issues of form there is at least a latent pedagogical desire to interrupt discourse, considering that for feedback to be effective, the distance between the triggering effect of students' errors and corresponding teacher feedback must be short enough to enable learners to compare the correction with their own utterance (Annett, 1969).

We will go on to confirm that teachers are all the more prepared to embrace a technology if it can be seen to be an obvious, as well as a readily available solution to an essential preoccupation (Beaven et al., 2010). Digital voice recording technology has existed for decades but has not necessarily been seen as an essential asset to the teaching of spoken production. Drawing on our experience with teachers and students, we will try to show how VoiceForum not only integrates voice recording technology to offer a solution to the meaning versus form issue but how it has been designed also to provide a natural learning and didactic framework where the respective roles of students and teachers become perfectly clear. Data collected from learners and teachers reinforce this view and show that promising results can be achieved by complementing, or sometimes replacing face-to-face work with VoiceForum tasks.

From our experience of developing the software and using it extensively as an in-class and distance learning and assessment tool, we aim to show how the "Call Triangle" has been successfully implemented, fully engaging students and teachers and, thereby, encouraging institutional support for its deployment.