In my mobile fellow project, I was looking for ways to use technology to improve verbal skills and practice in my web and webinar Spanish classes. It has long been perceived that online foreign language classes do not provide sufficient oral practice for the students enrolled in those classes. My goal was to use apps and online programs to improve this perceived lack of oral practice.

One of the first issues that I had to face in my project was how oral practice is collected in online classes. The original method for oral practice is a basic oral recording. I had been using oral recordings of students for this activity in my online classes, and it is commonly used in other foreign language web classes. This method is acceptable when the students submit audio files that the professor can actually open. Unfortunately some students submit audio files that cannot be opened, for example an .aud file, which is an audacity project file that can only be opened by the computer that created it. Also, some .mp3 files are not accessible to computers that do not have the exact same processing system. This causes frustration among students and faculty since the files usually end up having to be redone using another program and resubmitted. My hope was that by using a few apps or web programs, the submitted files would be of the same format and would be able to be opened by myself and by the other students. This also means that I would only have to train the students on those few programs instead of having to deal with an unknown number of audio recording programs.

Another issue that I had to face when planning my project was that not all of my students had devices that used the apps that I wanted them to try. This meant that I also had to locate computer programs for the students to use since they all had access to a computer for accessing the class. Besides making sure that students had alternatives for whichever technology they had,
I also had to be sure that they knew how to use that technology. This required me to create several tutorial videos on how to use the apps/computer programs. I also had to make sure that all of the students had or had access to microphones to do their recordings, especially if they were using an on campus computer. IDT, the main offices of satellite campuses and the campus library assisted with this by having headset microphones that the students could check out and use for creating their recordings.

The assignments that I used for this project were actually the same as what I had been using previously, with an adjustment to the option of the submission format. The students did still have the option to just submit a regular audio recording. I encouraged the students to try the new programs and either demonstrated the different programs and/or gave them links to the tutorials of how to use the programs. They were reminded that these recordings could be public domain, so they should not post anything that they were not comfortable having made public.

For some of the assignments the students had to submit the link to their recording in the Discussion board section of eLearn where their classmates could view their work and give them feedback. Other assignments were submitted to Dropbox where I was the only one who could see the assignment. They were also informed that they were taking part in a special project where their work could be shown in various conferences and presentations. All of the students submitted the required waivers to participate in this project.
Technology Used

I used Adobe Connect to teach the webinar classes. This allowed the students to practice speaking Spanish during most of the class sessions, as long as they had a functioning microphone. There were some days when a few students were not able to speak in class due to technology issues or not having their microphone, but they could still participate using the chat box function of the program. The students enrolled in this program reported that they enjoyed the format and were more comfortable participating in class using the webinar than when in an ITV (video-streamed) class. As a professor, I noticed that the interaction between students was more evident in this class format than in my other ITV classes. The students were more likely to ask questions of me, discuss items with their classmates, volunteer to answer questions, and participate in class in general. The personality of the class developed very quickly and the physical distance between students and me was basically erased since the interaction was not limited to which campus they were on, which is what happens in the ITV classes. This class allows me to teach from different locations, adding to academic continuity of the class, and the students are able to attend from different locations, making it easier for them to attend, especially if they have issues with transportation or work. Unfortunately the enrollment numbers in the webinar classes is not growing at this time, probably due to a fear of the unknown, new formatting, or lack of knowledgeable advising.
They were also offered the option of using Adobe Connect’s record feature to record their audio assignments, but none of the students choose this option, mainly because I had to be in the program with them. This meant that there were limited times for them to work in the program outside of class time, as well as the added pressure of having me present while they recorded their audio. I also offered this option to my web only students, but once again, none of the students chose this option.

The most popular computer program that students chose to do their oral recordings was Powtoon.com. Approximately 95% of the students chose this program even though it seemed to require more work than some of the other options. They liked the idea that they could choose a cartoon character to represent themselves. They also liked being able to import pictures from their computer, especially for their oral recordings about their families. They were also able to include the text that they were speaking in the program. Some of the students also managed to include their personality in their presentations. We did find some limitations to Powtoon in that
several of the options are only available on the paid versions, but the students managed to find a way around these problems by either using photos or putting notes in their presentations.

One student did report not being able to record the audio in the program so she submitted the audio file separately from the Powtoon.com creation. She liked the program well enough that she still wanted to complete that part of the project even if she had to do the audio in a different program. Another student told me that her favorite thing in the class that forced her to really work and learn was the project that she completed on Powtoon. She felt a great sense of success in having grasped grammar concepts, vocabulary, and pronunciation by working on this project, and she couldn’t wait to do another one.

Several students decided to use Educreations.com to complete their oral recording projects. The majority of the students who chose to use this program were in the Medical
Spanish online class. The format of Educreations seemed to work better for their specific projects. They were able to import pictures of medical related items or people that they found on the internet in the common use folders. They were also able to record their voice over the pictures and include the written text. 99% of the students who submitted projects using Educreations reported that they benefitted from using the program. The only exception was one student who was unable to complete the assignment due to issues using the program.

Students were also offered the opportunity to use Puppet Pals 2 or Toontastic, which are both apps with free versions in the app stores. I find it interesting that only one student opted to use an app for the oral recording project. This project was just as detailed and creative as the other projects that were done on Educreations. I’m not sure why other students chose to use the computer programs over the apps. The apps do have a more limited selection of items for animations, but they do still allow for the voice over that was required for these projects.

Presentations Given

Since the lack of oral practice in online classes is a current topic of discussion among university professors of foreign languages, I was able to present my study to my colleagues across the state of Tennessee (TFLTA) and in the Southeastern Region of the United States (SCOLT) at two different conferences. Because these conferences are attended by foreign language teachers of k-12 and colleges/universities, I was able to reach a wide audience. Many of the attendees were interested in learning how to use the technology in their regular, on-ground class rooms. A few other online professors were also in attendance and were able to share their
struggles, as well as some other programs that they used to increase oral proficiency in the online class room. I was able to learn about some other programs and techniques that are being used by other online professors such as Classcraft.com, Blabberize, Telegami and PhotoStory3. I may use some of these programs in future classes.

**TFLTA Conference November 2015**

**SCOLT Conference February 2016**

**Results**

Although the number of audio assignments did not change from previous classes, the format of the assignments did change. This change in formatting had some pleasing results. The result that I found the most significant was that the students were much more engaged in completing the animation assignments as opposed to just doing a normal audio recording. By
increasing their engagement, they were able to better retain the information they were learning. They also put more effort into the recordings, which showed in their grades. Normally online students have a more difficult time with pronunciation, but the increase in engagement actually seemed to cause an increase in pronunciation skills as seen by the scores on the audio recordings. This may have been due to one of two things: practicing more because they wanted a more polished end project or a heightened awareness of the pronunciation since they tended to do more editing in the animations than they did with the normal recordings.

Another substantial result was that these projects were much easier and interesting to grade than the regular audio recordings. Part of this was because the personality of the student was more evident in the animations, but also the students were more engaged with these projects. The extra effort that was put into the animations, as well as the programs themselves, made the grading of the projects something that I enjoyed doing. They were also easier to grade because I did not have to worry about having a variety of different audio format files that I may or may not be able to open. The unifying of technology made my job easier. By using these animation assignments in Adobe Connect classes, I was able to free up more time for oral interactions between the students and between the students and myself in the class time. This means that the webinar students actually had more oral interaction than my ITV or web students.

One problem that I found was that some of the students had problems submitting the links to their projects in eLearn. Sometimes this was due to a lack of technological experience, but some of the free versions of the programs prevented them from exporting or sharing the presentation. All of the students were able to figure out how to submit the project some other way, whether it was as simple as copying and pasting the link or emailing the link to me, so this was not a major issue.
The use of the animation programs encouraged the students to complete the projects. Although this cut down on the problem of lack of audio submissions, there were still students who did not complete the projects. Some students reported having technical difficulties or a lack of understanding of the project, even when given the link to the tutorial videos that I created. This was a problem, especially for the web only students, since I was only able to communicate with them via email. Most of the problems were solved with the tutorial videos, but there were two students who continued to have problems due to lack of experience with computers. They ended up just submitting regular audio files via my phone voicemail because they were not able to create regular audio files either. Students in all class formats were given the option to submit audio recordings via voicemail if they had any problems with the other programs.

In looking at the percentage of students who passed the classes in comparison to past web or webinar classes, there is a slight increase in the number of students who passed the classes. For two of the classes there was no previous data to use for a comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class name</th>
<th>Previous pass rate</th>
<th>2015-2016 pass rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SPAN 1010 – webinar (Adobe Connect)</td>
<td></td>
<td>83% (average of 1 class)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPAN 1020 – webinar (Adobe Connect)</td>
<td>84% (average of 2 previous classes)</td>
<td>86% (average of 1 class)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPAN 1020 – web</td>
<td>86% (average of 4 previous classes)</td>
<td>100% (average of 1 class)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPAN 1006 – web</td>
<td></td>
<td>81% (average of 1 class)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted in these numbers that the Spanish department did start using a new textbook in August of 2015, which could account for some of the difference in percentages. The SPAN 1006 web class is a new class that was first offered in the fall of 2015 and was taught by an adjunct in the spring of 2016. The average pass rate was also affected by students who stopped doing work in the classes, but did not drop the class. This makes it difficult to tell if the improvement in
numbers is due to the use of the animations, the change in textbook, or other various factors. More study needs to be done in this area with more specific study parameters to determine what actually caused the increase in the pass rate.

**Final conclusion**

With the minimal problems due to lack of experience with technology, I do feel that this project was successful. The use of the animation programs increased student engagement and helped them to remember the information. I am still looking for better ways to increase oral interaction between students using animations, apps, or computer programs. This will continue to be an ongoing challenge and will require more practice and study. As a result of this project, my students either increased the amount of time spent in speaking Spanish or had the same amount of time as before, but were more engaged in the speaking which made them more proficient in their speaking skills. I plan to continue using animation assignments in my web and webinar classes in the future. I think that the animation assignments will also benefit my ITV students, so I am planning on adding them to my classes this fall.