REVIEW OF *WIMBA VOICE 6.0 COLLABORATION SUITE*

Title	Wimba Voice 6.0[TM]
Platform	Windows 7, Vista, or XP; Mac OSX 10.4+; Java
Minimum hardware requirements	128 MB RAM (256 MB recommended) Internet access at 56k or above Soundcard w/microphone and speakers
Software requirements	Updated Java
Developer	Wimba, Inc. (now Blackboard Collaborate)
Support offered	24/7 live and online; ASP Services responsible for server hosting, monitoring, and maintenance
Price	Unlimited use; licensed annually based on school or department's full-time enrollment
Publication Year	1998

Review by Elena Cotos, Iowa State University

OVERVIEW

Wimba Voice 6.0[TM] is a component of the Wimba Collaboraton Suite[TM] 6.0, which is a set of tools for online communication that combines a series of interactive technologies. Wimba Voice allows teachers to complement their pedagogical approaches with five web-based applications: Voice Authoring, Voice Board, Voice Podcaster, Voice Presenter, and Voice Email. These applications add audio and video components to asynchronous communication and can be easily integrated into different course management environments (e.g., Angel, Blackboard, Moodle, WebCT). Consequently, Wimba Voice has attracted the interest of an increasing number of language educators who are striving to enhance teaching and learning through online oral instruction, practice, and collaboration. Its features allow for the creation of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) tasks that are justified by second language acquisition (SLA) tenets and can target various skills, although due to its audio and video capabilities, they may have greater appeal for listening, speaking, and pronunciation practice.

DESCRIPTION

Wimba Voice Authoring

Voice Authoring is a basic one-way communication feature that allows users to record and listen to recordings embedded directly into a web page. It has a clear and user-friendly interface that consists of a Record, Play, Pause, Stop, and Save buttons, which is similar to all other Wimba Voice applications.
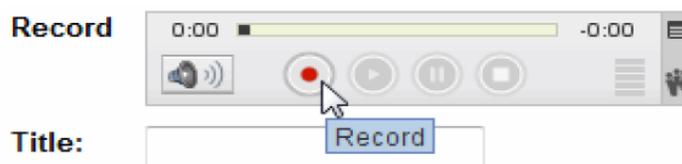

Figure 1. Screen shot of Wimba Voice Authoring.

Wimba Voice Board

Wimba Voice Board (Figure 2) is a voice-based discussion tool that allows for posting threaded voice messages that can be accompanied by text. These audio- and text-based threaded discussions provide students with opportunities for interaction with their teacher and for collaboration with their peers. Both teachers and students can create threads. One-on-one communication between the teacher and a student is also possible when the threads are set as private, in which case the students can view only the teacher's and their own replies. Due to its potential for asynchronous interactivity, the Voice Board is often used for class and small group discussions on given topics, short student presentations, audio journals, collecting audio recorded assignments, threaded conversations with individual students, or individual feedback.
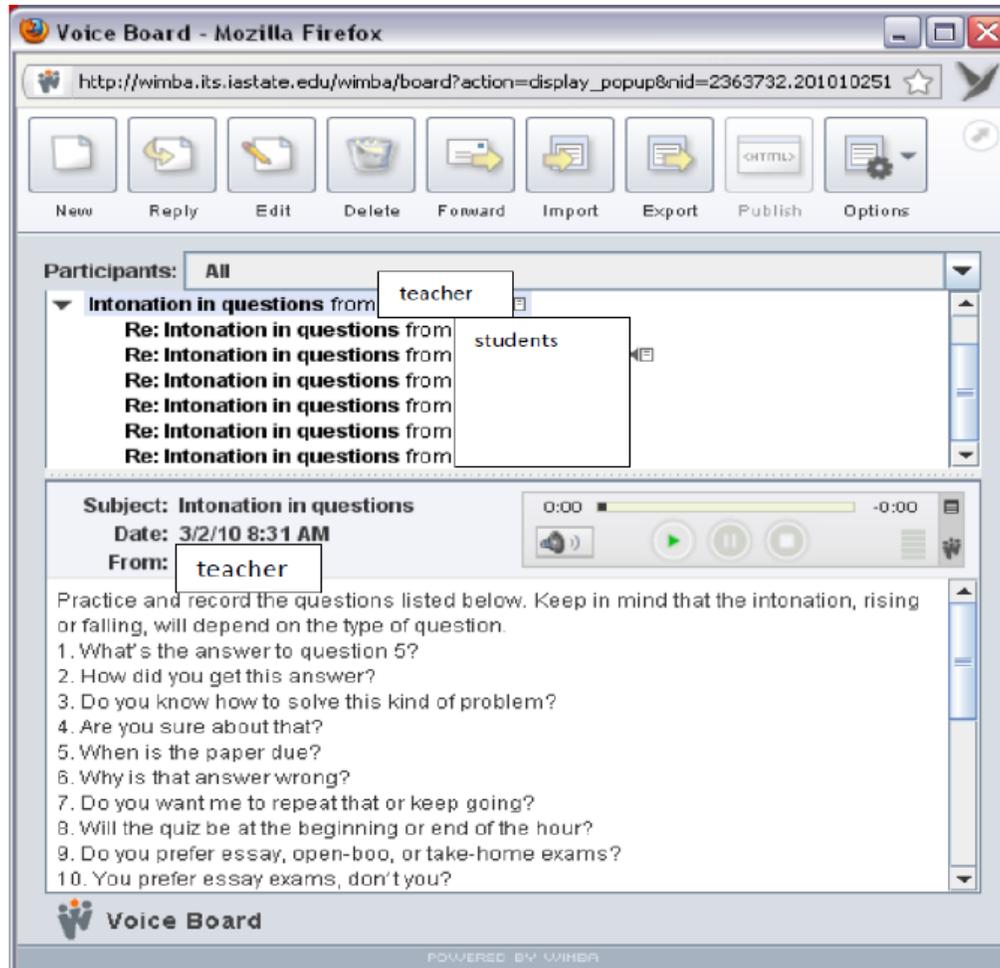

Figure 2. Screen shot of Wimba Voice Board

Wimba Voice Podcaster

The Wimba Voice Podcaster (Figure 3) is a tool that makes it possible to create and distribute podcasts (i.e., audio recordings delivered online). Podcasts can be created and posted as audio files in different formats, or they can be subscribed to. Students automatically receive the audio postings made by their teacher, and they can listen to them directly in the Voice Podcaster, download audio from the feed to their ipod or itunes, or subscribe using a preferred RSS reader. Students may also be granted the option of authoring audio recordings and contributing materials to the podcast themselves.
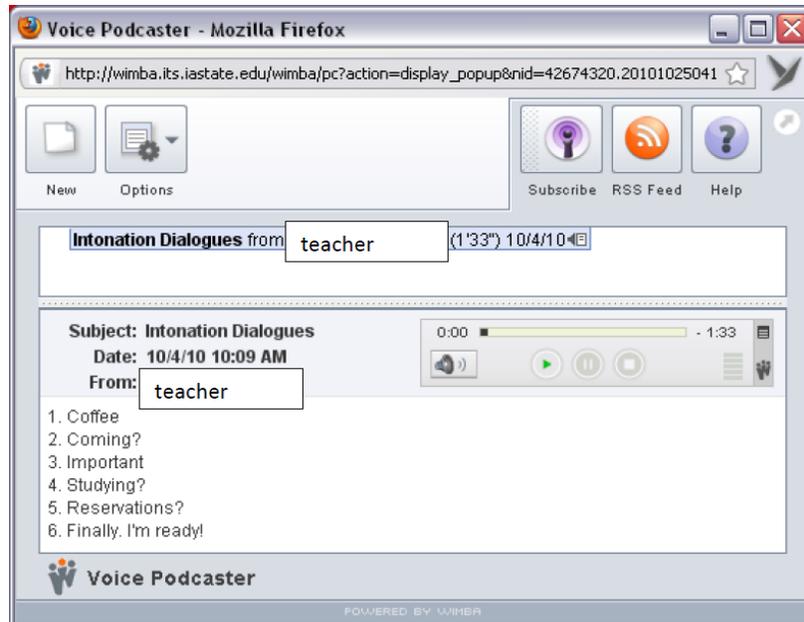
Figure 3. Screen shot of Wimba Voice Podcaster.

Wimba Voice Presenter

Wimba Voice Presenter is somewhat similar to the Voice Board in that it allows for large group discussions, but it is more advanced because it can integrate web pages. This feature enables teachers and students to create and comment on web-based slides that combine audio, text, and web content and to produce audio-enhanced online slideshows. Students can use Voice Presenter to author online presentations by linking to multimedia content and annotating it with their voice, and teachers can turn a Voice presentation into an asynchronous discussion by having students respond with comments on given slides. One-on-one communication and individual feedback are also possible since private conversation is one of the multiple options available.

Figure 4. Screen shot of Wimba Voice Presenter.

Wimba Voice Email

The Wimba Voice Email tool allows for sending an audible message accompanied by text to email addresses. It can be created as a one-time voice email or as an email with a reply option. Voice Email uses the email feature of the course management system employed, and the email message contains a clickable link to the audio (see Figures 5a and 5b). If the audio reply option is made available to the students, the email can become a sub-set of the voice board in which a discussion based on the voice email recording can be initiated.
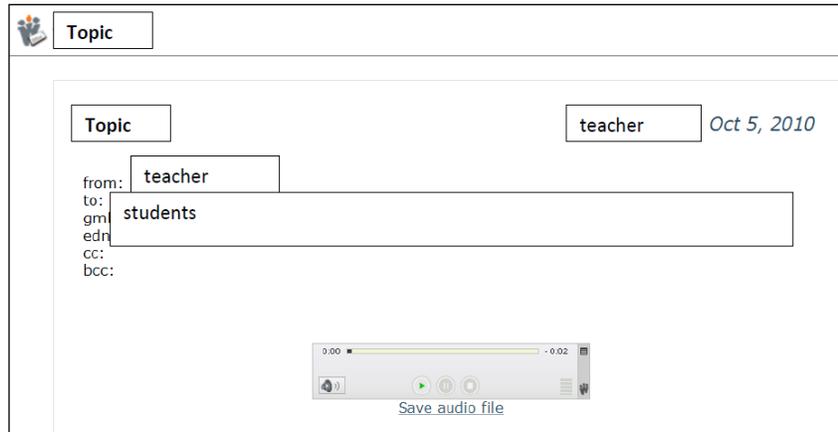

Figure 5a. Screen shot of Wimba Voice Email audio

Figure 5b. Screen shot of Wimba Voice Email message.

Table 1 summarizes the functions of the Wimba Voice applications and outlines their additional options.

Table 1. *Functions and Options of Wimba Voice Applications*

Wimba Voice application	Description of functions	Options
Voice Authoring	Allows for recording and playback of audio on a web page; integrates into CMS course pages	• Public access to audio • Download & save audio • Publish audio to a web page with playback/recording controls
Voice Board	Allows for posting voice messages and playback within asynchronous audio and text-based threaded discussion; can be set as a private conversation	• Play on click • Continuous play • Expand/collapse threads • Refresh/import/export content • Publish Voice Boards to a web page • Publish individual messages on the web (teachers only) • Reorder messages

Table 1. *Functions and Options of Wimba Voice Applications* (continued)

Wimba Voice application	Description of functions	Options
Voice Podcaster	Allows for uploading, distribution, and playback of audio files on computers and portable media players; allows for both the creation and subscription to podcasts using a preferred RSS reader	• Play on click • Continuous play • Edit/delete message • Subscribe to podcast • Expand/collapse threads • Refresh/import/export content • Save audio messages
Voice Presenter	Allows for creating and commenting on slides that combine audio, text, and web content; can be set as a private conversation	• Edit/reorder slides • Play on click • Continuous play • Expand/collapse threads • Refresh/import/export content
Voice Email	Allows for sending audio messages to email address(es)	• Archive voice messages • Publish voice message • Detach a voice e-mail form

EVALUATION

Although the Wimba Voice suite was not designed and developed specifically for language learning purposes, it is evaluated here in view of how its features can be utilized to create CALL tasks theoretically grounded in instructed SLA. Chapelle (2009) suggests that "the most useful for guidance concerning how CALL tasks might promote second language learning are the cognitive and social processes through which learners acquire a second language" (p. 137). She discusses the effectiveness of CALL tasks in terms of the learning potential they may have depending on the kind of input they provide and the opportunities for interaction and linguistic output they offer. Wimba Voice tools possess features that allow for the design of tasks that can create such learning conditions and enhance cognitive and social processes necessary for language acquisition (e.g., comprehension, attention to meaning and form, planning, production, communication, interaction, negotiation of meaning).

Input

A major tenet in SLA is that learners need to be exposed to linguistic input and that the features of the input are more likely to be acquired if they are noticed and comprehended (Gass & Mackey, 2006). An advantage of the Wimba Voice applications is that they allow for providing input through different modes: aural, textual, and, in the case of Voice Presenter, video. The texting option of the Wimba Voice applications, for example, allows for modifying the input in more traditional ways such as simplification, explanation, translation, definition, clarification, repetition, and elaboration. However, glosses, hypertext, and images are not possible unless the task is in Wimba Presenter and is connected to a web-based resource with such input enhancements. Also, visually marking the linguistic features that the learners would be expected to attend to can be difficult. One way to accomplish this would be to use capital letters, as there are no other means within Wimba such as underlining, bolding, italicizing, or highlighting text. On the other hand, it may be possible to ensure salience by orally emphasizing or repeating the target aspects in the linguistic input.

Interaction

Ellis (1999) summarizes the value of face-to-face interaction from a number of perspectives: interaction is helpful if it directs learners' attention to language form (interactionist perspective); interaction is helpful if it is conducive to meaning making (sociocultural perspective); interaction is helpful if it engages learners in deep mental processing (cognitive perspective). Chapelle (2009) further extrapolates these concepts to learner-computer interaction, arguing that with respect to "technology-mediated tasks, the value posited for interaction might be expressed as a means for getting better input, for receiving the assistance needed in knowledge and understanding, and for activating deep processing of input" (Chapelle, pp. 153-154).

Wimba Voice has the potential to allow for creating CALL tasks that stimulate interpersonal interaction with the following tools that include the reply feature: Voice Board, Voice Presenter, Voice Email. For instance, learners can interact with both their teacher and their peers (locally or distally located) by engaging in threaded asynchronous discussions. They can also receive feedback that can scaffold their language production. However, due to the asynchronous nature of Wimba-based communication, it would be somewhat difficult to design CALL tasks that would create a favorable environment for learners to negotiate meaning in ways that simulate face-to-face or real-time chat interactions online. Also, learner-computer interaction may be possible, but is likely to be limited because many Wimba Voice features (with the exception of Voice Presenter) cannot incorporate interactional enhancements that would clearly point to a connection between form and meaning. Consequently, since learner-computer interaction is key to stimulating learners' attention to linguistic form as well as their internal mental capacities and cognitive processing of input during the completion of CALL tasks, intrapersonal interaction through Wimba Voice tools may not be one of the strengths.

Output

Interaction, particularly interpersonal interaction, presupposes production of linguistic output during which learners may notice problematic aspects of their language use and attempt to modify it in order to make it more comprehensible (Swain, 1985). The cognitive perspective suggests that planning before the production of output and self-correction can enhance the value of L2 production.

Not all Wimba Voice applications lend themselves as readily to the creation of tasks that afford opportunities for output production. However, creative language teachers can find ways to utilize the different features. For example, Voice Board, Voice Email, and Voice Presenter provide learners with opportunities for planning before production by offering the text typing and re-recording options. The same options may be useful for learners' correcting their output. Self-correction of linguistic problems may result from learners' reading and listening to their output for self-evaluation, or it may be prompted by the input or feedback provided by their teacher or peers. What these Wimba Voice tools do not afford due to the limitations of the asynchronous communication environment are opportunities for guidance during the production of linguistic output, which may also confine negotiation of meaning.

Potential of Wimba Voice for Language Learning

The overall potential of Wimba Voice applications for language learning depends on the extent to which instructors can integrate the features to enhance input, interaction, and output in the design of CALL tasks; therefore, depending on the goal of instruction, some of the applications have more potential than others based on the descriptions and analysis provided. The characteristics of the input may range, for example, from only aural salience to a combination of aural, textual, and multimedia salience, modification, and/or elaboration. The type of interaction may include inter-personal and, possibly, learner-computer and intrapersonal. The tasks designed may elicit output that can be planned or unplanned and prompt self-correction, but only asynchronously. Voice presenter seems to have promise for designing tasks that would contain rich input and potentially lead to both inter- and intra-personal

interaction and output generation.

Although this evaluation suggests the overall potential of the Wimba Voice suite, each tool will find its use for implementation, possibly complementing another tool. Some can be used separately for specific activities, but teachers using Wimba Voice should design the overall learning task in a way that would operationalize input, interaction, and output by focusing on the strengths of each application. For instance, Voice Authoring or Voice Podcaster may be used to provide the necessary type of input, and then Voice Board, Voice Email, or Voice Presenter can be used to stimulate interaction and output production. Task design with Wimba Voice will require careful planning, keeping in mind factors such as instructional needs and context, teaching goals, targeted language skills, learner characteristics, and expected outcomes.

In conclusion, the Wimba Voice suite may be very appealing to language practitioners because it affords various options that enhance asynchronous communication with audio and video modes. It may also be potentially useful for language learners, depending on how principled and theoretically informed the pedagogical implementations of Wimba Voice are. Its usefulness for language learning will depend on the effectiveness of the tasks; therefore, the tasks in Wimba Voice should create a favorable language learning environment by ensuring meaningful interaction and purposeful outcomes for learners.

NOTE

The screenshots exemplifying the use of language learning tasks created in Wimba Voice are taken from the speaking course for international teaching assistants (English 180) at Iowa State University. The author is grateful to the instructors of this course."

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Elena Cotos (Ph.D., Iowa State University) teaches in the TESL/Applied Linguistics and Technology Program at Iowa State University and directs the Graduate College Program for international teaching assistants. Her research focuses on automated writing evaluation, intelligent/computer-assisted language learning and assessment, genre analysis, and learner corpora.

E-mail: ecotos@iastate.edu

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