

“CARLA” (COMPUTER-ASSISTED RECORDED LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT) - SOFTWARE FOR EVALUATING STUDENT ORAL RESPONSES

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More and more, teachers are being encouraged to integrate computers into their teaching programs (McLafferty, 2000). Some encourage their students to use software designed to enrich the curriculum, others have their students use computers for research. Fewer are using computers for testing purposes. However, as Gronlund suggests, “as computers become more widely used in the classroom, we can expect computer-assisted testing...to play an increasingly important role”. (Gronlund, 1998, p. 131). This belief is echoed by Hall (2000) who states that “computer-based testing is the wave of the future” (p. 15).

At the University of Windsor, software has been developed to allow instructors to evaluate their students’ progress orally. The software, named “CARLA”, has been particularly welcomed by foreign language instructors who must evaluate the oral language skills of their students on a regular basis (Gonzales, 1989). “CARLA” would, however, be well suited for evaluations in any situation where oral responses were desirable. The software could be especially beneficial in the case of exceptional students who have difficulty in responding to written questions. Instructors in ESL (English as a Second Language) programs would also find the software very useful.

“CARLA” is capable of delivering pre-recorded instructions and questions to students in any language. It also has graphic and video capability which makes it possible for teachers to include prompts for the students in the form of sound material, still pictures, moving pictures and written text. Thus questions may be tailored to appeal not only to aural learners but to visual learners as well. This fact plus the interactive nature of the software help instructors to meet the needs of students with different learning styles, a key element in good teaching practice (Grasha and Yangerber-Hicks, 2000). Furthermore, instructors can use the prompts to establish a context for the questions, thus helping to ensure that the test has content validity. (Brown, 1987).

The software may be used in one of two modes: practice mode which allows students to listen to questions and record answers as many times as desired until they are satisfied

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with their response and test mode in which students hear each question and are then given one opportunity only to record their answer. The software requires students to record their responses in a controlled format. The program permits instructors to specify a time limit for responses which are then stored on the computer hard drive or a school server. Instructors are then able to retrieve the student responses and mark them from any computer to which they have access. When evaluating the recordings, instructors are able to record and append their own comments and reactions to what the students have recorded. Thus, when listening to their marked recordings, students are able to hear not only what they recorded but also their teacher's comments and corrections. This makes the feedback students receive meaningful and timely, two factors which are of the utmost importance if students are to benefit from the evaluation (Hall. 2000).

There are a number of advantages associated with oral evaluations done with “CARLA”:

- teachers may author their own questions if they wish to tailor their questions to specific material taught in class;
- students frequently tend to feel more relaxed responding to a machine than in front of a teacher;
- the software has video as well as audio capability;
- teachers can mark the responses at their convenience, even at home if they have a computer there;
- teachers can play the same response as many times as they wish, thus allowing them to focus on different aspects of the student’s speech at different times. The result is a fairer and more accurate assessment;
- teacher comments can be inserted into the recording so that students can play back not only their own answers but also the teacher’s corrections;
- the software can either be used in a computer lab setting or on a single computer by one student at a time. This allows teachers who have access to a computer lab in their school to test a group of students at once or alternatively, they can give the disk to students individually and have them record their answers on a computer at the back of the classroom while the regular lesson is taught by the teacher;
- the volume of students’ recorded work can be increased or decreased even after the recording has been completed according to the marker’s preferences.

“CARLA” is currently being used in pilot studies in elementary and secondary schools as well as at colleges and universities throughout North America. Anyone wanting further information about “CARLA” or who would be interested in piloting the software at their institution should contact either of the authors of this paper. Additionally, interested parties may visit the project website at:

<http://www.netresources.ca>

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