WEBSITE REVIEW

YouGlish.com

Yasin Karatay, Iowa State University

INTRODUCTION

There has been increasing interest in pronunciation teaching and learning in parallel with recent developments in technology. Thanks to these developments, we have witnessed a number of applications and websites focusing on pronunciation. As Levis (2007) stated, computers can be utilized for individualized instruction, frequent practice through listening discrimination and focused repetition exercises, and automatic visual support. In this respect, *YouGlish,* a website which relies on YouTube videos to present target vocabulary through videos from a variety of genres, offers an invaluable resource for English language learners (ELLs) to improve their pronunciation.
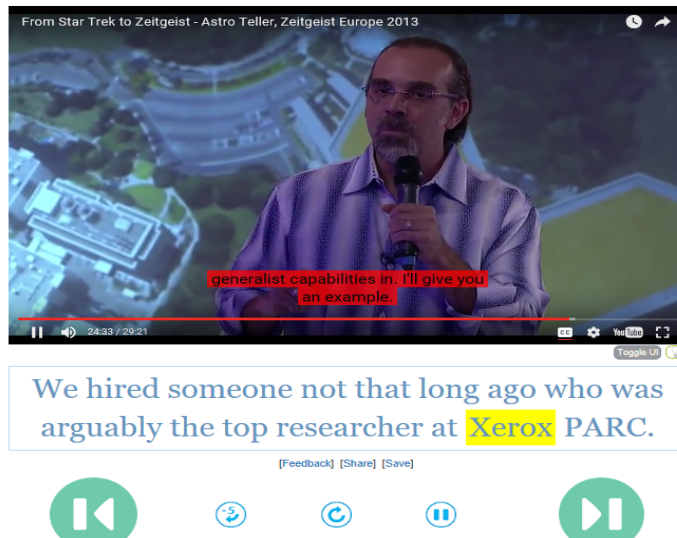
OVERVIEW OF THE WEBSITE

This website was first deployed as *YouPronounce* in February, 2015, then renamed as *Youglish* in January, 2016 by Dan Barhen, a software engineer from Paris. The basic idea behind this website is to provide users with fast and unbiased answers about how English is spoken by real people and in context instead of what's prescriptively correct. According to the updated information on the website, *YouGlish* currently supports more than 300,000 terms which can be searched in three different accents of English (British, American or Australian). Although it only provides results in English, *YouGlish* offers five language options (English, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Italian, and French) for explanations.

How It Works

YouGlish illustrate for users how to pronounce English words by presenting them in natural speech from native or fluent speakers by making use of over ten million YouTube videos. In other words, users can be exposed to target words that are represented in natural contexts. In our email correspondence, Dan Barhen stated that listening to real people pronouncing an utterance in a real context is much more effective than a regular dictionary approach. He reported that technically, *YouGlish* uses an algorithm that processes YouTube videos by taking into account numerous parameters such as the caption/audio synchronization, video/audio quality, video statistics (number of views, likes, etc.), video quality, restriction (regional, on site), language, accent, user inputs and much more to figure out how each video should be indexed and ranked.

Basically, *YouGlish* allows users to type any word, phrase, or sentence in the search tab to watch a video where someone is pronouncing that keyword. After the users get the results, the video automatically starts from the relevant point, which is a great feature that helps you find the right place. If the users want more examples of the target word or phrase, they simply click on an arrow button to go the next video result (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Highlighted search terms on YouGlish.

As seen in Figure 1, the site presents the video with the target word color-coded in the transcript. Another important function is that all the words in every transcript are hyper-linked to different videos making it relatively easy for users to navigate between target words and videos.

Search Tab

YouGlish allows users to search any kind of utterances to check their pronunciation. They can search a word (i.e., Xerox), a phrase (i.e., a great deal of), a sentence (I'd appreciate it.). It can even search parts of sentence such as 'the tools but', or 'is essentially' if the users want to listen to how two different words are pronounced in different contexts. Additionally, users can use hashtags to look for a word in a certain context, e.g., iowa#education, iowa#TedTalks, button#computer (see Figure 2). In this case, the target word is the one before the hashtag, and the video context to listen to the target word in is the one after the hashtag.

Figure 2. Using hashtages to target particular content.

For each result, users can make use of three sections, in addition to the videos, dedicated to *Nearby words* where students can click on the hyperlinked words similar to the target word, *Phonetic* where users can see the Phonetic transcription of the target word, and *Tips to improve English pronunciation* where users are provided with several suggestions regarding pronunciation.

YouGlish can also be run in a *'Restricted Mode'* that will block any inappropriate content from being displayed. If teachers plan to use *YouGlish* in their classes, they can activate this feature by just clicking on the *'Restricted Mode'* button at the bottom of any page.

Referring to what Levis (2007) suggested as the ways that computers can be used in pronunciation, there are three other functions this website offers its users.

Lesson of the day: After signing up, based on the settings, users can receive emails of a randomly-selected video everyday, twice a week, once a week, or once a month. What makes this option different from what has been described so far is the different settings offered in each lesson (Figure 2). Learners can watch the video continuously or adjust the duration and repetition times of the utterance to listen to a specific section of the video. For example, they can watch every four seconds of the video twice and then they will have a four second interval to repeat what they have heard.

Word of the day: Similar to the '*Lesson of the day',* users can also receive emails regarding a randomly-selected word every day, twice a week, once a week, or once a month. Users can make use of the definitions, synonyms, usages (10 different sentences), translation to 52 different languages, pictures/images if available, and pronunciation (videos) of the target word. In the timeline tab, since the website tracks the user's content, users can also refer back to the previous words of the day (see on the right).

My content: Under every video, users are provided with a 'save' button for future reference. If saved, the users can watch these videos from 'My content' section whenever they want.

EVALUATION

This free, user-friendly website is rich in content and has great potential for aiding pronunciation improvement. Considering that the users have the opportunity to focus on problematic aspects of their own pronunciation by moving at their own pace, *YouGlish* can also promote autonomous learning (Lu, 2010; Hanna & Gao, 2016). In addition to self-paced learning, it should also be noted that it offers a stress-free environment (Roed, 2003). Although there are a variety of software applications available to teach pronunciation, *YouGlish* stands out among them because it presents target vocabulary in authentic contexts. It provides input not only in segmental level but also at the suprasegmental level such as sentence stress, intonation, rhythm and word linking because learners listen to speech in natural context uttered by native speakers, which is of great importance in pronunciation (Derwing & Rossiter, 2002).

However, there are some issues which need improvement. First of all, YouGlish does not give its users the opportunity to produce the speech they hear, record it, and receive feedback. As Kissling (2013) underscores, input, practice, and feedback are the factors that affect a learner's pronunciation improvement most. However, *YouGlish* is one of the best websites by far regarding the input provided and the potential for practice, even though it does not provide feedback. As Flege and Wang (1989) argued, learners should be helped noticing how they are doing by being given immediate feedback.

Another limitation is that *YouGlish* does not provide phonetic transcription of the words on the 'word of the day' page although it provides this when the learners watch the video separately from the homepage. Also, since it relies on only YouTube, the videos are not viewable in some countries where YouTube is blocked.

Considering that it is a relatively recent website, I should say that it has the potential of being one of the leading websites in pronunciation learning. As a nonnative speaker of English, I believe many learners would be extremely happy when they find what this website can do for them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yasin Karatay holds a BA in English Language Teaching from Anadolu University and MA in TEFL from Bilkent University in Turkey. He has taught a variety of English courses at the tertiary level, including academic reading and writing, grammar, and technical English. He has presented at local and international conferences, including IATEFL and EuroCALL. He has worked as an EFL instructor and assistant director at Duzce University in Turkey. He is currently a PhD student in the Applied Linguistics and Technology program and an ESL instructor at Iowa State University. His research interests are automated writing evaluation, CALL use in material development and assessment, and second language acquisition.

REFERENCES

Derwing, T. M., & Rossiter, M. J. (2002). The effects of pronunciation instruction on the accuracy, fluency, and complexity of L2 accented speech. *Applied Language Learning, 13*(1), 1-17.

Flege, J. E., & Wang, C. (1989). Native-language phonotactic constraints affect how well Chinese subjects perceive the word-final English/t/-/d/contrast. *Journal of Phonetics, 17*(4), 299-315.

Hanna, B. E., & Gao, Y. (2016). Exploring optimal pronunciation teaching: Integrating instructional software into intermediate-level EFL classes in China. *CALICO Journal, 33*(2), 201-230. doi: http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.iastate.edu/10.1558/cj.v33i2.26054

Kissling, E. M. (2013). Teaching pronunciation: Is explicit phonetics instruction beneficial for FL learners? *The Modern Language Journal, 97*(3), 720–744.

Levis, J. M. (2007). Computer technology in teaching and researching pronunciation. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 27*, 184-202. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.iastate.edu/docview/85669655?accountid=10906

Lu, D. (2010). A salutary lesson from a computer-based self-access language learning project. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 23*(4), 343-359. Retrieved from http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.iastate.edu/docview/772290692?accountid=10906

Roed, J. (2003). Language learner behaviour in a virtual environment. *Computer Assisted Language Learning, 16*(2–3), 155–172.