

Learning How to Speak Like a “Native”:
Speech and Culture in an Online Communication Training Program

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Abstract

This article examines the oral communication training that took place in Eloqi, a virtual language learning community. Eloqi (a pseudonym) was a for-profit start-up that built and operated a proprietary Web-based, voice-enabled platform connecting English-language learners in China with trainers in the United States. While it existed, Eloqi's unique platform was used to deliver short, one-on-one lessons designed to improve students' oral English communication skills. Using the ethnography of communication and speech codes theory, a theoretical-methodological approach, the author presents an analysis of the speech code, or code of communicative conduct, employed at Eloqi. This code of English logic, which Eloqi's community members associated with native English speech, comprised six locally defined rules for oral English speech; namely, speech had to be organized, succinct, spontaneously composed rather than rehearsed, original and honest, proactively improved, and positive. The article discusses the significance of this code, particularly as it pertains to cultural communication, and concludes with some implications for researchers and practitioners in business and technical communication.

Keywords

Speech code, ethnography of communication, cultural communication, online ethnography, online training, oral communication

Ming I used the, uh some words, some strategies from Eloqi like uh, the order of your answer, and some connection words. I just answered the question step by step, and then- I think the way is different from Chinese.

Tabitha The way is different? What do you think the other students do?

Ming Different uh I think the way is different from Chinese, it's different from my first IELTS speaking test. So, I just feel the- I just answer the question. So, I think the Eloqi English is- it didn't teach me what to answer, but how to answer the question, and you know the answers are all something about- mmm I know what should I- I know [how] I should answer the questions in Chinese but I need to answer the questions in a different way in English, so the EQ English trainer just told me the right way in English to answer the question.

In the preceding exchange a student, Ming, speaks about his experience taking the oral component of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), a popular language proficiency exam for assessing individuals' preparedness for university-level interactions in English (Ducasse & Brown, 2011). At the time of our meeting, Ming had just finished a course of study on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at a school called Eloqi. The Eloqi course was specially designed to help students prepare for and ultimately pass the IELTS, and Ming gave it substantial credit for the high score that he had achieved. As Ming put it, Eloqi did not teach him what to say to the IELTS

examiner; it taught him how to say it “in the right way in English.” In other words, Eloqi had provided Ming with a mental tool kit—a set of intellectual resources—for formulating competent oral English speech. What made Ming’s learning experience most compelling was the way in which it took place. Eloqi was not a traditional, brick-and-mortar educational institute, but rather a *virtual community*, a group of people who are relationally involved with one another and share common (to the group) norms, rules, and practices and who assemble and interact with one another online (Komito, 1998; Kozinets, 2009; Rheingold, 1993).

Eloqi¹, a small startup that operated from 2006 to 2011, was the brainchild of its two cofounders: the chief executive officer (CEO), who was from Hong Kong, and the chief technology officer (CTO), who was U.S. American. Together they built and deployed an innovative two-part teaching and learning system, the first part of which was its *technological platform*, an interactive Web-based user interface coupled with *voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP)*, a telephonic technology that allows people to speak to one another voice-to-voice over the Internet. Through Eloqi’s user interface, students and trainers could connect with one another in real time with both voice and text, no matter where in the world they were physically located. The second part of the system, and arguably no less complex, was Eloqi’s teaching and learning *content*, a comprehensive educational program on how to communicate effectively in English that included a series of modules, lessons, homework assignments, and trainer-training materials. While Eloqi’s combination of technology and content could have been applied to any number of subjects, populations, or educational goals, the company narrowed its focus to delivering oral communication training. Specifically, Eloqi designed, built, and deployed its unique

system in order to connect English Language Learners (ELLs) in China with trainers in the United States. Through regular one-on-one, 15-minute conversation lessons, all of which occurred through the company's technological platform, Eloqi offered to help its students improve their spoken English skills so that they could successfully pass the oral component of the IELTS.

For 6 years off and on, but most critically during an intensive 10-month period of participant observation, I used the theoretical–methodological framework of the ethnography of communication and speech codes theory to study Eloqi's virtual community and the norms, rules, and procedures that its members (administrators, trainers, and students) employed to shape, regulate, and maximize the intelligibility of their oral communication with one another (Hart, 2012). This article is a product of that research. In it, I analyze the code of communicative conduct, or *speech code*, employed at Eloqi, explicating the ways in which this code imparted a holistic cultural framework for being a person in the world, socializing with others, and strategically communicating. My analysis of the Eloqi case demonstrates a proven method for analyzing a local community's definitions of oral communication competence and illustrates the link between communication and culture. It highlights the ways in which oral communication training can also be cultural training. I conclude with some implications for scholars and practitioners invested in studying and teaching oral communication in technology-mediated environments. In particular, I discuss the ways in which analyses using the ethnography of communication and speech codes theory offer resources for comparative research, design applications, and enhanced cultural understanding.

Technology Mediated Oral Communication Training

A decade ago the Internet afforded mostly text-based communication, but now it has advanced to richly layered, real-time connectivity incorporating images, voice, video, hyperlinks, and more, all of which can be quickly and easily transmitted via a range of devices. Such technological advances combined with innovative audiovisual applications create new possibilities for teaching and learning oral communication skills. Moreover, they create new demands for such training, especially since success in today's workforce requires diverse oral communication proficiencies that are relevant to professional as well as academic settings (Crosling & Ward, 2002; Dannels, 2003).

A logical configuration for delivering technology-mediated communication training is live audio or videoconferencing, a type of synchronous computer-mediated communication that is now a seamless part of the Web 2.0 experience. Audio and videoconferencing tools are strongly associated with business and professional communication in work settings (Denstadli, Julsrud, & Hjorthol, 2012; Ruppel, Gong, & Tworoger, 2013) and are gaining attention as an inexpensive and effective means for delivering professional communication training in educational settings (Craig, Poe, & Rojas, 2010; McNair & Parette, 2010). While extant second language acquisition (SLA) studies have examined learning communities in which members connect with audio or video in order to develop their spoken communication skills, these studies are largely experimental (Blake, 2005; Ghaemi, Khodabakhshzade, & Kargozari, 2012; Yamada, 2009; Yang, 2011; Yang & Chang, 2008), focusing on outcomes such as the number of utterances and self-corrections that learners produce (Yamada, 2009) or student performance scores in areas such as pronunciation, fluency, comprehension, and

vocabulary (Yang & Chang, 2008; Yang, Gamble, & Tang, 2012).

While these studies contribute to our understanding of the variables that play a role in the efficacy of audio and videoconferencing tools for enhancing oral communication skills in SLA, they do not provide in-depth accounts of the meaning making that goes on in these environments. Understanding meaning-making processes is imperative because technology-mediated learning environments, unlike traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms, do not always have clear protocols for communicative behavior (Jenks, 2009). So, besides engaging in the communication task at hand, learners must also navigate the conventions of these spaces, and how to appropriately communicate within them (Hart, 2013; McNair & Piretti, 2010). The need to understand such processes is further intensified by the rapidity with which information communication technologies (ICTs) continue to change (Moore, 2009). Furthermore, the choice of technology is bound to shape the interactions that it supports, affecting “the choice of language used, [and] the types of messages that can be conveyed, the social relationships that can be formed, the psychological pressure that participants may feel.” (Levy & Stockwell, 2006, p. 97).

But seen from another angle, the value of technology-mediated communication training does not lie in the mode of delivery but rather in the opportunity to engage in relevant communication (Jenks, 2009; Kozlova & Zundel, 2013; Schwartzman, 2007) that has a sound pedagogical framework (Chun, 2011; Hampel, 2006; Ishihara & Cohen, 2014; Levy & Stockwell, 2006; Moore, 2009; Yang & Chang, 2008). The ways in which ICT-mediated oral communication education is designed, structured, and deployed affect its effectiveness (Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Jenks, 2009; Kozlova & Zundel, 2013;

Schwartzman, 2007). It is therefore important to make sure that ICT-mediated curricula fit their target learners, platforms, and desired learning outcomes (Chun, 2011; Ishihara & Cohen, 2014; Kohn, 2009).

Communication practitioners have been interested in using ICTs in university-level teaching and learning for decades (Markel, 1999; Schwartzman, 2007; Tebeaux, 1988). Nevertheless, while some communication studies have examined how to take undergraduate public speaking courses online (Linardopoulos, 2010; Tolman, 2012), there is still a scarcity of applied research on teaching oral communication skills either partially or fully online. One interdisciplinary field with complementary research is computer assisted language learning (CALL), which focuses on the use of technology to facilitate and enhance language learners' communication skills (Blake, 2005; Chapelle, 2007; Chun, 2011; Kern, 2013; Kohn, 2009; Levy & Stockwell, 2006; Moore, 2009; Nguyen, 2008; Warschauer & Meskill, 2000; Yang, 2011). Here, technology-mediated communication training is thought to have significant potential for “engag[ing] learners in more extended and concurrent interaction” (Ishihara & Cohen, 2014, p. 253), offering students further opportunities for speaking and practicing the target language. Web-based communication training can eliminate physical and geographic constraints, allowing students to access education wherever they are, provided they have an Internet connection (Kern, 2013; O'Dowd, 2006).

More important, online communication scenarios can take an interactive approach (Wang, Shen, Novak, & Pan, 2009) in their provision of authentic “real world” material (Kern, 2013; O'Dowd, 2006). Accessing and engaging with such materials is a necessary step to gaining speaking proficiency in the target language, and online channels create

this possibility for students who would not otherwise have it (Kormos & Csizer, 2007; O'Dowd, 2006; Wang et al., 2009; Warschauer & Meskill, 2000). Finally, technology-mediated communication may help language learners engage with native speakers and authentic materials in ways that enhance their intercultural communication competence (Belz & Thorne, 2006; Chun, 2011; Ishihara & Cohen, 2014; Kohn & Warth, 2011; Nguyen, 2008; O'Dowd, 2006).

In sum, contextualized research on technology-mediated oral communication training is still needed, especially research that examines the meaning-making processes that interlocutors (both students and teachers) go through, as well as the local meanings that interlocutors attach to speech. To address this need, I offer the case of Eloqi, as guided by the following research question: What are the local norms, premises and rules guiding oral communication in this virtual learning community? To answer this question, I apply the theoretical–methodological framework of the ethnography of communication and speech codes theory.

The Ethnography of Communication and Speech Codes Theory

The combination of the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1962, 1972) and speech codes theory (Philipsen, 1997; Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005) offers an effective way to examine the meanings that speech community members attach to communication, as well as their protocols for communicative behavior in particular contexts. Rooted in anthropology and linguistics, the ethnography of communication (EC) is a theoretical–methodological approach for studying situated (i.e. naturally occurring) communication. By training attention on components such as the setting, participants, goals, speech acts, sequences, tone, modes of communication, norms, genres, and so on, the EC framework

helps researchers identify community-specific understandings of what it takes to communicate appropriately, as defined locally by community members themselves. In the 50-plus years since EC debuted, social scientific researchers have used it to document communication patterns in many locales and contexts of interest (for reviews, see Carbaugh, 2007b, 2008; Philipsen & Carbaugh, 1986), including classroom settings (Duff, 2002; Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2001; Watson-Gegeo, 1997).

Speech codes theory (SCT) is a powerful tool for moving beyond description to interpretation (Philipsen, 1997; Philipsen et al., 2005). Specifically, SCT can be used to analyze situated communication practices and the cultures that such practices instantiate, including local beliefs about personhood (what it means to be a person in the world), sociality (how to connect with others in a community), and rhetoric (how to communicate strategically to achieve one's desired goals) (Carbaugh, 2005, 2007a; Philipsen, 2002; Philipsen & Coutu, 2005; Philipsen et al., 2005). Numerous studies have used SCT to examine communication in different communities across the world (Baxter, 1993; Cohn, 1987; Coutu, 2000; Edgerly, 2011; Pratt & Wieder, 1993; Winchitz, 2001), demonstrating the amenability of this framework to a broad range of language varieties and means (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Furthermore, there is growing precedence for using both EC and SCT to study technology-mediated communication (Boromisza-Habashi & Parks, 2014; Carbaugh, Winter, Van Over, Molina-Markham, & Lie, 2013; Dori-Hacohen & Shavit, 2013; Flanigan, 2010; Hart, 2011; Witteborn, 2011, 2012). I now turn to a description of how I applied this approach to the Eloqi case.

Methodology

Just as Eloqi was getting off the ground, I approached the CTO, an acquaintance of mine, and proposed to study the company. Reasoning that my research could be of practical value, the founders agreed to grant me access to—and later membership in—the Eloqi community. During the first 3 years of my relationship with Eloqi, I maintained regular contact with Eloqi’s founders both online (Email, virtual meetings) and offline (face-to-face meetings), following their progress as they devised their learning system and got their company up and running. After Eloqi was up and running, I collected data during a 10-month period through participant observation as a volunteer Eloqi trainer; sampling and transcription of trainer–student lesson recordings; 2 weeks of fieldwork and interviews at Eloqi’s offices in Beijing, China; and remote interviews with Eloqi trainers using an online platform (Skype). Building prolonged engagement as well as data triangulation (i.e. collection of data from multiple sources) into my study design helped not only to produce a rich dataset but to ensure internal validity and credibility (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). This study received human-subjects approval, and all participants provided informed consent.

During the participant observation phase, I worked shifts just as my fellow trainers did, conducting one-on-one lessons with Eloqi’s students through the company’s specialized user interface (see Figure 1), attending weekly trainer conference calls (WTCCs), socializing with the other trainers and administrators in the chat room (see Figure 2), and participating in the trainer discussion forum—all online. Like all the Eloqi trainers and students, I primarily connected with the other members of the organization remotely, using a fast Internet connection to log into Eloqi’s password-protected spaces.

While conducting my online participant observations, I jotted down notes and took screenshots. After my shifts, I wrote my fieldnotes following the guidelines of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). All of this material—notes, screenshots, field notes—became part of my data set.

INSERT FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

Besides allowing me to serve on the trainer team, Eloqi granted me unrestricted access to the company archive of trainer–student lesson recordings. Eloqi’s platform was built to record each trainer–student interaction that occurred on it, a design choice that was influenced by the desire for both quality control and professional development. All students and trainers were provided with their own recordings and encouraged to listen to them, helping students to analyze and improve their English and helping trainers to improve how they conducted their lessons. As a researcher, these recordings were invaluable because listening to them provided me with another means of observing authentic interactions and collecting “natural” data (Silverman, 2013) in this community.

Eloqi’s archive contained thousands of recordings, with more added each day. To narrow down the selection process, I focused on recordings associated with a lesson series called Core English Logic. This series comprised a set of self-contained lessons, each of which was designed to teach students how to answer specific question types, such as “Is it difficult to do...?” “How would you improve...?” or “What do you like most about...?” The Core English Logic series was Eloqi’s most popular course, drawing the largest number of subscribers and the most attention from the lesson-content development team. I began by randomly selecting and transcribing recordings that had been archived within the prior 3 days. Then I focused on specific directions in order to

orient myself to Eloqi's approach to teaching oral communication online. I collected multiple recordings of each Core English Logic lesson in order to learn how each one was structured. I also collected multiple recordings of the lessons taught by each Eloqi trainer; this helped me learn how each of them delivered lessons and made use of the community's rules. From Eloqi's pool of subscribers, I selected students at random and then collected multiple recordings associated with them; this helped me understand how the students interacted with the materials and trainers at the different phases of their course of study.

Also, as my participant observations progressed, I searched for and transcribed interactions that were referenced by trainers and admins. For example, whenever trainers described an especially successful, unsuccessful, fun, or difficult interaction that they had had (as they often did in the Eloqi trainer chat room or discussion forum), I would search for and review that interaction recording. This helped me flesh out a big-picture view of communication within the Eloqi community. Ultimately I reviewed approximately 130 trainer–student recordings, transcribing half of them. These transcriptions became part of my data set.

I also conducted interviews with Eloqi admins, students, and trainers. My purpose for these interviews was twofold: to investigate points of interest that arose during my participant observation and to obtain interviewees' perceptions about the Eloqi teaching and learning experience. I conducted these interviews using a combination of methods, both in person and remote. I interviewed the Eloqi admins and students in person when I visited Eloqi's physical office in Beijing. During the 2 weeks that I was there, I sat in on content-development meetings, met and interviewed the admins, and joined the team for

meals and other company events. The admins provided me with the Email addresses of students who met my interview criteria, imposed for practical purposes: current or recent clients of Eloqi who were located within Beijing, 18 years of age or older, and willing to hold the interview in English. In total I interviewed nine Eloqi students. I interviewed the trainers online using an audio- and video-enabled platform (Skype). To initiate recruitment, I announced to the entire trainer team (20 people) that I was looking for interviewees, offering \$10 Amazon gift certificates as an incentive. In response to my call 12 trainers self-selected, and I interviewed each of them remotely, adding the interview transcripts to my data set.

By the end of my data collection phase, I had accumulated approximately 200 separate electronic files (field notes, trainer–student interactions, interviews, etc.), each of which ranged from one to eight pages long. To manage, organize, code, and sort through these data I used TAMS Analyzer (Weinstein, 2002), a free, open-source qualitative data analysis (QDA) software program written for Mac OS X. Like any other QDA program, TAMS does not do analytical work for the user. Rather, researchers use TAMS to methodically scrutinize and apply user-generated tags to the data. Once the data are tagged, TAMS can be used to sort through and retrieve tagged excerpts, which is an extremely useful functionality when working with large and complex electronic data sets (Hart, 2014).

To analyze the norms, rules, and procedures that Eloqi’s members used to shape, regulate, and maximize the intelligibility of their oral communication, I looked in the data for prominent symbolic terms, premises, and rules pertaining to communicative conduct. Such a speech code (which may be part of a larger cultural code) is “a system of socially

constructed symbols and meanings, premises, and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct" (Philipsen, 1997, p. 126). Briefly, a *symbolic term* is a word conveying a key concept or idea that is of great significance to its users, such as *citizen* (Edgerly, 2011) or *neighborhood* (Witteborn & Sprain, 2009). Symbolic terms are important because the ways in which people use them often reflect fundamental sociocultural beliefs. *Premises* "express beliefs of existence (what is) and of value (what is good and bad)" (Philipsen, 1992, p. 8) in regard to communicative conduct. In other words, a community's premises convey assumptions about what is right or wrong, helpful or unhelpful, positive or negative about speaking. *Rules* are "prescription[s], for how to act, under specified circumstances, which [have] (some degree of) force in a particular social group" (Philipsen, 1992, p. 7). A community's rules (whether spoken or unspoken) are a resource for guiding and interpreting behavior, including how to act, how to feel, and how to evaluate and make sense of speech under particular circumstances.

In practical terms, as I collected and processed my data, I entered it into TAMS Analyzer, tagging excerpts connected with communicative conduct. As I went repeatedly through the data, I refined the tags that I was using, discarding some, merging others, and investigating repeating occurrences. Periodically I conducted member checks (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) with key informants at Eloqi (both admins and trainers) to ask for clarification, share discoveries, talk through my analysis, and test my findings. Through this iterative process, a decided pattern emerged, which I will explain in the following discussion.

Results

My analysis revealed a set of six interrelated rules guiding oral communication in the Eloqi community, all of which were associated with native English speech, locally defined: Oral speech had to be organized, succinct, spontaneously composed rather than rehearsed, original and honest, proactively improved, and positive. In this section, I present a detailed description of each of these rules.

Speaking English Like a “Native” at Eloqi

The communication taught at Eloqi was explicitly marked as *native* English. Students were continuously reminded that they were learning native English from native speakers, and the lesson materials were touted as being full of native speaker content, expressions, and phrases. The required manner for framing feedback and corrections to students also indexed the concept of native speech, as in scripted trainer phrases such as “A more native way to say that would be...” and “A native speaker would say....” According to Eloqi’s trainer handbook, to produce this native speech, Eloqi’s training program should teach students “the format that native English speakers use when answering questions and discussing various topics.” To speak English (more) like a native, Eloqi’s students were taught to apply six local rules for oral communicative conduct.

Rule 1. Speak in an Organized Fashion

In the Eloqi community, native speech was modeled as highly organized. The company’s Core English Logic series taught students to answer any question by providing particular information in a specified order. Each Core English Logic lesson covered one of 31 question types and included explicit instructions on how to respond to that type. For example, to answer the question type “What do you dislike about X?” Eloqi instructed

that “first you say one or two things that you don’t like, say how much or the degree that you don’t like it, and say why you don’t like it.” To answer the question, “What do you normally/usually do?” a student ought to “state what you do when you get up in the morning. Next, state what you do at different parts of the day. Say how often you do these things (sometimes, never, frequently). Finally, say how you feel about them.”

In the following excerpt a trainer explains how to answer the question “What do you want/hope to do in the future?”

Darci Alright now let’s quickly remind ourselves of the native speaker logical order you need to use to talk about what you want to do in the future, OK?

Lucy OK.

Darci OK, so the first thing to do is to think about your main ambition and choose one that you’d especially like to do. Choose one that you think you can realistically achieve because it’s easier to talk about, OK? That’s number one.

Lucy Hmm.

Darci Number two is the-

Lucy OK

Darci -number two is to say *why* you want to achieve it and number three is to say *what* you will have to do if you want to achieve it, OK?

This exchange illustrates the typical manner in which Eloqi’s trainers taught students to respond to questions by (a) identifying the question type and then (b) following the

prescribed steps for answering it. This approach was locally known as following the rules of *native speaker logical order*.

Given that Eloqi's Core English Logic lesson series presented question types and the expected formulas for answering them, it was not surprising that Eloqi's trainers and students recognized an underlying rule for organized speech. A trainer, Iris, explained this requirement:

One of the questions we ask [the students] is talking about the fast pace of growth of the Chinese economy and whether there are benefits or disadvantages to that. So we say, you know, can you tell me about the advantages and disadvantages of the fast economic growth? So a native English speaker would say OK yes, China has experienced this rapid growth, here are the disadvantages, here are the advantages, here is the relative benefit of the two, and here is my conclusion. You know, just smack, 1-2-3. That's the way an English speaker would approach that. And that's one of those things that sometimes our students don't know. Hey, that's the order you answer that question if you're an English speaker. (Trainer interview, Iris)

Following Eloqi's line of reasoning, Iris described organizing your own speech as a native thing to do and affirmed that nonnative English speakers (Eloqi's students, in this case) must learn how to do it. Students shared this perception of organized speech as a characteristic of native English speech, as reflected in the following comments:

I heard that the writing and the speaking section [of the IELTS] are the most weak parts among the Chinese students. They often get the lowest

grade on these two parts, maybe because no matter [whether you are] speaking or writing you have to organize your words. So when you organize your words you have to use your logic or reason. So we don't get used to the English logic, so I think it's the- one of the reasons why we get such low scores [on the IELTS]. (Student interview, Terri)

The strategy of organizing your words was framed as a necessary technique that Eloqi's students would learn to master through the company's online instruction. What's more, at Eloqi, being organized involved applying a particular type of reasoning associated with the language – what Eloqi called *English logic*. In other words, when speech was disorganized it disregarded the native English speaker's logical order, effectively constituting a failure of reasoning.

Rule 2. Speak Succinctly, Don't Ramble

Eloqi admins told the trainer team to keep students from “rambling” or “beating around the bush” while answering questions. From the company's perspective, students had to learn how to speak succinctly, making points concisely, with just the right amount of information. Succinctness was, as Eloqi admins emphasized, a necessary speaking strategy for succeeding on the IELTS oral exam, which was strictly timed. One admin posted in the discussion forum that

if you find the student going on and on and on, it's OK to politely interrupt the student. Sometimes the student doesn't know when to stop and feels that the more they say the better. During the IELTS exam, an examiner could very well interrupt the student to move on to the next question or part.

As with the other rules presented here, the students seemed to recognize the communication values being applied.

I think the student should cultivate the English logic. No matter writing or reading or speaking, I think it's the most important thing. For example, when I sometimes gave my monologues one [Eloqi] trainer stopped me because she didn't know what I want to say. ((Laughs.)) You know there are the different logic or different reasons in the Chinese people. I mean [when] the Chinese people would like to think or say something, they would like to begin from saying the background information or something like that. They don't get used to state their opinions directly. When I tried to say something my trainer found she couldn't understand what I want to say, and she stopped me and asked if I understand her questions. I said I understand her questions but then I changed my way of expression, because I realized that I must be make a mistake of the English logic. I mean I'm using the Chinese logic to answer the question, so I had said so many blah blah blah, but not touched the key point." (Student interview, Terri)

Again, the speech characteristic desired by Eloqi community members (succinct answers) was marked as a native communication strategy, and learning how to use the strategy was cited as a valuable outcome of Eloqi's training program.

The need for succinctness was also built into both Eloqi's lesson design and the user interface for trainer-student interactions. Each lesson was written to last exactly 15 minutes, and all lessons were strictly timed. On the top portion of the trainers' lesson

screen (see Figure 1) a timer counted down from 15:00 to 0:00, indicating how much time the trainer had left in the lesson. When the timer reached 0:00 it flashed red and began counting up, indicating the amount of time that the trainer was going over the allotted 15 minutes. Going overtime regularly was grounds for intervention; not only was overtime unpaid, but going overtime also held up the queue of incoming student calls. The rule for succinctness was, in this way, literally encoded into Eloqi's user experience.

Rule 3. Speak Spontaneously, Don't Produce "Canned" Speech

"Canned" was a term used by Eloqi trainers and admins to describe talk that sounded overly rehearsed, memorized, written out, or read aloud rather than spontaneously composed. Admins and trainers strongly discouraged this type of speech, regarding it as a hindrance to extemporaneous speaking and effective communication. They reasoned that preparing too much in advance meant foregoing a context-specific analysis of the situation. In this way, such canned speech prevented one from speaking English competently. Even worse, canned speech was considered by Eloqi admins and trainers to be a form of cheating. Consider the following situation in which a trainer reported concerns about a recent interaction:

In the chat room Iris was mentioning a "weird" call with a student. Iris said, "there was always a delay and then she [the student] would either give me a mangled answer missing a verb or an answer that sounded canned. Maybe someone is there with her and feeding her answers."

(Field notes)

Iris's concerns were twofold. Not only was the student in question producing canned speech, but she might have been receiving the answers from a third party, thereby committing plagiarism.

In fact, admins and trainers disapproved so strongly of canned speech that they developed a protocol for identifying and curtailing it. When students' speech sounded canned, trainers were obliged to report it to the Eloqi supervisors, who contacted the customer service team. The customer service team then contacted students directly by phone to investigate if, why, and how they had been producing canned speech. Finally, the customer service team gave the offending student instructions on how to avoid canned speech in the future. The following excerpt from the discussion forum is an example of this process in operation. In it, an admin shares updates on a student who had been producing canned speech:

Carlo [was] repeating [material] verbatim. [He was] cautioned [by two trainers] not to read [answers out]. He admitted that normally he prepared the monologue 2 or 3 times before connecting with a trainer, then on the interaction he would recite it. It was not a good way to study English. The customer service team has given him some suggestions: don't write the monologue in advance and then read it on the paper, because it isn't helpful. If you [trainers] connect with Carlo and find him still reading, tell him directly that it won't help with his English improvement. For the monologue, he only needs to prepare the main points ahead of time. He should organize his thoughts on the spot.

As this incident illustrates, Eloqi students were expected to speak freely, spontaneously, and extemporaneously. While they were allowed to compose their thoughts in advance, students had to articulate their spoken words in the moment, which was not easy because they were provided with so much partially and fully prepared material to draw from (the formulas and explicit “logical order” for responses, suggested phrases and vocabulary, etc.). Nevertheless, in the Eloqi community, the rule for producing natural speech was a strong one.

Rule 4. Be Original and Honest

Despite being provided with highly structured lesson material, Eloqi’s students were encouraged to formulate original responses to questions. As the admins instructed the trainers, “[tell students that] when talking with your [IELTS] examiner, you should say something about yourself, especially interesting things, instead of memorizing answers from others” (WTCC). This directive was frequently delivered, as in the following exchange from the trainer chat room:

Trainer Students often use their own pre-prepared answers.

Admin Yes, they do. Trainers can guide students, and try to get them to come up with their own answers.

Trainer I have to remind them even from language step one.

This rule was not lost on the students who, drawing on their Eloqi training as well as past IELTS experience, acknowledged the importance of producing original speech. One student told me that

Eloqi students should not memorize the material because the IELTS trainers and examiners will be able to tell if the answer is a memorized

one instead of a personal one. The personal element of [your] answer is quite important. (Student interview, Jennifer)

As this student pointed out, Eloqi expected students to frame their answers in unique and individualized ways.

If students were successful in formulating unique, personal answers about themselves, would it matter if their utterances were actually true? In theory, Eloqi's students could simply construct new and original answers by piecing together the recommended formulas and vocabulary, without any regard to the answer's veracity. For example, if asked, "How often do you cook dinner?" a student could respond, "I never cook dinner because I work nights. Instead, I eat dinner in my company canteen. Last night I had noodle soup." If the student really did, in fact, cook dinner every night, was it problematic? As it happened, Eloqi trainers and admins expressed a desire for students to communicate honestly, sharing their true thoughts and real experiences. This need for students to be able to communicate honestly was heatedly discussed in the Eloqi trainer forum in one particular thread that began when a trainer posted a critique of the Core English Logic lesson covering "What do you dislike about X?" type questions:

[Students] always say that canned response about, "I don't like going to parties where I don't know anyone. I always have to say who I am and where I am from and what I do for a living." I don't like that. You know they don't really think that because they all say the same thing. We should be teaching them how to say what they actually think, not how to parrot back some canned response. They need to know how to talk about what they really think and experience, not some academic discussion of

things you might possibly dislike.... I would like to ask them questions that will get a more spontaneous and genuine response and help them to express what they really think. (Discussion forum)

This criticism sparked an intense discussion, over the course of which trainers and admins debated whether or not the lesson material was hampering students from expressing their true opinions. At no time did anyone counter this underlying premise that the students should express their true thoughts; rather, everyone seemed to agree that the best kind of oral communication was that in which students spoke about their true experiences and views.

Rule 5. Take Initiative, Be Proactive

That critique of the “What do you dislike about X?” lesson sparked an internal debate among Eloqi’s trainers and admins on why students might produce canned speech rather than articulate their real thoughts and experiences. Some trainers thought that students might do so because they lacked self-confidence. Others speculated that the highly structured nature of the Core English Logic lessons encouraged canned responses. And others thought that spontaneously producing original and honest speech was simply more difficult:

As far as I can remember [my students] have given very canned answers as well. It feels like they have the answers written and they're reading them. In fact I think the answers some have given are in their training scenarios and they're just memorizing that. Of course that's not every student. I had a couple of passionate ones who really seem to be trying to elaborate and give colorful responses. I think it's fear. It's easy to repeat

what you've heard and it's harder to make your own sentences because there's a bigger chance you'll mess up. (Discussion forum)

In this discussion, successful students (i.e., those who produced interesting, original speech) were characterized as “passionate” people who “really seem to be trying.” This characterization related directly to the discussion’s outcome: that the root of the issue was personal initiative or a lack thereof:

It's meant to be a semi-“natural” conversation. The students can show initiative. They CAN say "actually, there's nothing I don't like about parties at all—I love parties, everything about parties!" Maybe we can ADD some hints and tips to the preparation before connecting to trainer or at another point, to give the student more tips about using their initiative, and reminding them that the question is not forcing them to list dislikes but prompting them to answer the question in a “natural” way.

(Discussion Forum)

What the trainers and admins came to agree on was that Eloqi’s students needed to be encouraged to take (more) initiative in devising original and honest speech. This stance was reaffirmed in the final post on this thread:

I think this all touches upon something that needs to be addressed in the courses a little more: The issue of initiative, and encouraging, teaching, the students to think for themselves a little bit more. ... The issue lies in the fact that they still expect to learn a set answer to a question or type of question that, in their minds, will make learning and performing quicker and easier for them.... As a next step, the Content Team will be adding an

eliciting prompt for this particular lesson to help trainers encourage the student to speak more freely and naturally. This will help trainers to better encourage students to answer these types of questions, which are testing their ability to think more for themselves. (Discussion forum)

As illustrated in this thread, Eloqi's admins and trainers linked initiative and proactivity with the ability to produce speech "in a natural way," as well as the desired end for students to utter original speech that reflected their own opinions and experiences.

Significantly, Eloqi's leadership went as far as developing and implementing two policies explicitly to cultivate student proactivity. The first policy was to phase out the term *student*, heretofore the common nomenclature, in favor of *learner*. For the content and marketing teams, student had connotations with a traditional mode of learning whereby authoritative teachers transmitted information and knowledge to passive students. Eloqi wanted to move sharply away from this model to one in which students played an active role in their own development. Eloqi's content developer told the trainer team that

everyone gets the general idea as to why it's better we call the students learners. We just want to sound a bit more proactive.... One of the points of this is to get Chinese students to become more proactive and take more control of their own learning.... Again the student/learner thing is to try to push in this direction, to give the student more of a sense of control of their learning, a sense of personal responsibility. (WTCC)

Framing the students as agential learners was directly related to the second policy that Eloqi implemented; namely, a money-back guarantee for anyone who successfully

completed the Core English Logic series but failed to achieve their target IELTS score. To be eligible, students had to follow Eloqi's prescribed study methods to the letter; doing so, leadership reasoned, would cultivate students with a greater sense of initiative. By both framing students in a more agential way and motivating them to diligently follow the company's rules about how to engage in Core English Logic lessons, Eloqi successfully implemented a formal structure for promoting their rule for proactive communication.

Rule 6. Be Supportive and Positive

The final rule pertaining to Eloqi's communicative conduct was use supportive and positive speech. Trainers and students alike had to show these traits in their oral communication, albeit in different ways. Eloqi trainers were explicitly directed to be encouraging, supportive, and positive in their interactions with the students, as in the following directives:

- [As a trainer] it is essential that you are encouraging, professional and friendly from the outset (remember student may be nervous).
(Eloqi trainer training module)
- Sound happy, friendly and supportive. We want to give students the best impression. (Eloqi trainer training module)
- The feedback should be positive, and negative words should be avoided. Give the students encouragement and admit that they are making progress. (WTCC)
- Be encouraging—give praise where praise is due. (WTCC)

- The Learning Environment [should be a] comfortable confidence-building learning environment; [students can be] confident in learning from mistakes and getting constructive corrections; [create] a friendly, professional and safe atmosphere; [create] a supportive atmosphere. (Eloqi trainer training module)

As these directives to the Eloqi trainers illustrated, it was a rule—not an option—for trainers to be supportive and offer positive feedback. Following this rule would help the community maintain a friendly and motivating climate. One trainer expressed that sentiment in the discussion forum:

Feedback [that focuses on the negative] comes across as harsh and is destructive to Learner morale. It reinforces a “This is too hard”/”I can't do this”/”English is not fun” type of mentality. Obviously learners are going to make mistakes and pointing out errors that might be corrected is an important part of what we as Trainers do.

However, this should be done in as supportive a manner as possible.

At the same time, trainers were expected to avoid “blind praise.” In this way, just as students were expected to share their true thoughts, so too were the trainers asked to be honest.

Trainers and administrators appreciated positive communication from the students, especially when students showed an enthusiastic, can-do attitude and kept trying. Student mistakes were always recast as areas for improvement, and the students were framed as learners continually moving forward on their developmental trajectories. These values came out clearly in Eloqi’s guidelines for trainers and were also reflected in

the trainers' own interactions with students. Take, for example, the following incident in which a trainer describes her response to a student "dissing" himself:

It is better [for students] to present themselves in a positive light both for the impression they make and how they feel about themselves and their accomplishments.... I am talking about when the student says "my scores weren't good enough" or "I wasn't smart enough." One student told me he only chose Journalism [as a major] because he wasn't smart enough to do anything else. I helped him to see that there are positive things about journalism.... He understood the importance of not dissing himself, his major, and perhaps innocent bystanders.... He needed to hear that....

And I really think it is important for them to present themselves positively. It makes a first impression and it sets the tone for the whole interview. (Chat room)

This trainer's comments reflected the overarching expectations of the trainers and admins that students be positive about themselves. Since the Eloqi admin and trainer team wanted students to feel consistently encouraged, they used positive reassurance to keep focusing attention on students' achievements and their potential to succeed. They hoped that this unflaggingly supportive feedback would inspire students to frame themselves in an optimistic and confident light.

Discussion and Implications

I have described six rules that the Eloqi community considered fundamental for effective oral communication. First, Eloqi's students were expected to speak in an organized fashion. Second, they had to be succinct in their communication, avoiding rambling or

long-winded answers. Third, their speech had to sound natural and spontaneous rather than rehearsed or canned. Fourth, the students needed to produce their own original responses, which had to reflect their true opinions and real experiences. Fifth, the students were expected to be proactive in their own learning. And sixth, trainers and students alike had to be positive about themselves and others, showing support for each individual's efforts and achievements in the learning process. Students in particular were to be portrayed in a positive light. This set of rules represented Eloqi's expectations for communicating in the manner of a *native* English speaker, locally defined.

Eloqi's communication rules constituted a cognitive framework known as a *speech code*, "a system of socially-constructed symbols and meanings, premises, and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct" (Philipsen, 1997, p. 126). Developed and modified over time through sustained social interactions, speech codes illustrate shared understandings of, beliefs about, and expectations for communication within the communities where they are deployed. Speech codes provide their users with locally validated resources used "to label, interpret, explain, evaluate, justify, and shape their own and others' communicative actions" (Philipsen et al., 2005, p. 63). The speech code operating within the Eloqi community, which I will refer to here as the *code of English logic*, is significant for three reasons.

First, the code of English logic reflects what was required for effective communication in the particular locale of the Eloqi learning community. Eloqi's community members regularly referenced, reified, and drew on the code of English logic in their interactions with one another. Eloqi's admins and trainers indexed this local code—which they characterized as native and logical—when they explained how students

ought to communicate in English. Admins and trainers used the code of English logic to lend authority to Eloqi's learning content and instruction and to validate particular ways of speaking. As an organization, Eloqi strived to get students to follow this code, both explicitly through its teaching and implicitly through its socialization processes. After participating in Eloqi's online instruction, many students were able to name components of the code, such as organizing your speech into a clear sequence, getting right to the point, not reciting preprepared answers, and sharing unique and personalized information. Accordingly, students used their understanding of the code of English logic to speak in a manner that was locally approved and to tentatively predict how others (whether Eloqi trainers and admins or IELTS examiners) would respond to their speech.

In keeping with the assumptions of speech codes theory, I did not rely on *a priori* notions about how the national, ethnic, or cultural identities of Eloqi's members might correlate with their ways of speaking. But some elements of the code of English logic do dovetail with other codes—specifically U.S. American ones—that other researchers have documented. For example, Eloqi's strong preference for spontaneous and original (rather than canned) speech corresponds with U.S. American's use of speech “to express one's psychological uniqueness” (Philipsen, 1992, p. 6; see also Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996; Carbaugh, 1988, 2005; Katriel & Philipsen, 1981).

The rule that trainers and students should be honest overlaps with findings by Katriel and Philipsen (1981) and Carbaugh (1988) on U.S. American ways of speaking. Katriel and Philipsen found a pronounced tendency in their North American respondents to positively associate openness and honesty with feelings of connection and intimacy. Likewise Carbaugh found an intense desire for the openness of participants in a popular

U.S. American talk show (The Phil Donahue Show) throughout its lengthy syndication. Eloqi's emphasis on initiative and proactivity seems to reflect the U.S. American value of individual self-reliance (both emotional and economic) described by Bellah et al (1996) and Varenne (1977).

Finally, the Eloqi community's exhortations to be positive and supportive relate to the use of supportive communication to develop "positive self-image" in North American society (Katriel & Philipsen, 1981, p. 304; Ehrenreich, 2009). All of these similarities indicate a possible connection between Eloqi's speech code—the code of English logic—and some North American speech codes.

Second, the code of English logic is significant because it reveals critical information about Eloqi's larger cultural system. All speech codes provide us with symbolic–philosophic resources to help us answer questions about how to be a person in the world, how to successfully and productively interact with others in society, and how to present ourselves in order to achieve our desired ends—what Philipsen et al. (2005) named the psychological, sociological, and rhetorical functions of speech codes. Analysis of Eloqi's speech code demonstrated the community's preference for being open and honest, having a positive attitude, acting proactively toward your own development, and taking charge of your own learning. All of these aspects connect with the psychological function of a community's code (i.e., what that community believes about how to be a successful and effective human being). Eloqi's members viewed honesty, positivity, and support as cornerstones in the relationship between teachers and students, which reflects the sociological aspect of the community's code (i.e. what is required to connect appropriately with others in the group). Finally, Eloqi community members valued

succinct, organized, and spontaneous speech, qualities connected to the rhetorical function of a speech code. Taken as a whole, the code of English logic reveals critical information about how the Eloqi community perceived and enacted strategic communication. When Eloqi's members modeled proper communication behavior (locally defined), strategically oriented themselves toward one another in their interactions, corrected one another's comportment, or otherwise described how others should or should not speak, they were negotiating and confirming their group's cultural values.

Similarly, the third reason that the code of English logic is significant is that it was implicated in a cultural education that, intentionally or unintentionally, was regularly carried out at Eloqi. In learning the code of English logic, Eloqi's students were in fact learning a culture, "a socially constructed and historically transmitted pattern of symbols, meanings, premises and rules" (Philipsen, 1992, p. 7). This culture, as manifested in the code of English logic, informed Eloqi's community members on "how to be, or become, particular kinds of persons" (Swidler, 2001, p. 72). In this way, the Eloqi case study demonstrates how teaching and learning oral communication skills can potentially be an act of cultural communication training.

The term *cultural communication* denotes two related facets of communicative conduct. First, it signifies "the use of particular means and meanings of communication that can be found in particular times, places, and social milieus" (Philipsen, 2002, p. 51). That is, each speech community has its own distinctive set of guidelines for communicative behavior, which will vary according to locale, era, situational context, and other factors. Second, the term cultural communication refers to the "performative"

function of communicative conduct, its role in “constituting the communal life of a community and in providing individuals the opportunity to participate in, identify with, and negotiate that life” (p. 51). In other words, through the enactment of cultural communication, individuals can both establish themselves as members of the group and participate in the cocreation of that group’s culture. As this case study revealed, teaching and learning the code of English logic was an act of teaching and learning Eloqi’s unique culture. As Eloqi’s members engaged in these processes, they were both negotiating their community membership and collaboratively sustaining community life and culture.

While this article presents a case study on just one community (Eloqi) and is therefore not generalizable, it nevertheless offers theoretical and practical implications for scholars and practitioners of business and technical communication. First, this study examined local understandings of what it meant to be a good oral communicator in one particular intercultural (U.S. American and Chinese) online learning community. While my analysis focused primarily on what admins, teachers, and students viewed as the right way to communicate within Eloqi, the data that I collected strongly suggest that participants perceived the (native English) Eloqi speech code as notably different from other (nonnative English) ways of speaking. EC and SCT research is often used to study particular communities; however, the findings produced through this approach can be employed to generate comparative research on communicative conduct in general (Boromisza-Habashi & Martinez-Guillem, 2012; Philipsen et al., 2005). Albeit one example, my case study offers tentative support for the premise that communities will hold multiple (and sometimes conflicting) understandings of how to speak effectively and interpret speech, an observation that has been more deeply explored in EC and SCT

research on clashing codes (Coutu, 2000, 2008; Huspek, 1994; Philipsen, 2000). For researchers and practitioners in business and technical communication, and for those specifically teaching oral communication skills, it would be useful to conduct a series of EC and SCT studies on the local rules and expectations for being an effective oral communicator in the various communities that we serve. A body of work along these lines could then be used to analyze similarities and differences in oral communication norms across different groups or cultures.

Second, it is commonly accepted that analyzing student needs is a prerequisite to developing, delivering, and assessing any type of teaching or training program. A corollary to classroom needs assessments, particularly in the case of communication education, is the analysis of participants' communicative culture, or their "means of communication and their meanings to those who use and experience them" (Sprain & Boromisza-Habashi, 2013, p. 182). The EC framework was designed precisely for such an analysis. It is a highly effective approach for identifying, describing, and analyzing local perspectives and practices pertaining to communicative competence. Such research has been applied to the development of strategic communication interventions (Miller & Rudnick, 2010; Sprain & Boromisza-Habashi, 2013), user experience and digital media design (Milburn, 2015), and intercultural contact (Philipsen, 2010b). More important, the EC framework can be applied to the design of technology-mediated communication training programs.

One group, for example, uses the EC approach to inform the cross-cultural communication training material that they deliver to military students via the Internet (Mackenzie & Wallace, 2015). Following the EC presumption "that language *use* cannot

be separated or even understood apart from the scenes in which it occurs, and that specific emphasis must be placed on the study of communication practice itself” (Mackenzie & Wallace, 2015, p. 163), these scholar–practitioners routinely solicit student’s reflections on their ongoing cross-cultural communication interactions. They then use this feedback to develop materials for assessing students’ comprehension and application of the cross-cultural communication knowledge and skills taught in the course. Another recent study used EC to analyze problematic teacher–student interactions in a virtual language-learning community, and found that the cause of the trouble was conflicting understandings of how an online lesson should proceed (Hart, 2015). For researchers and practitioners in business and technical communication, and for those teaching oral communication in technology-mediated settings, the EC approach could be similarly applied. That is, it could be used to develop and design on-target course work that fits not only what students need to learn, but also their preexisting cognitive frameworks on what effective communication is and how it should ideally operate.

Finally, as part of a discipline that is growing ever more international, the business and technical communication community is routinely called on to work with, design for, and teach highly diverse clientele who operate under a broad range of cultural perspectives, expectations, and habits (Giammona, 2004; Iivari, 2010; Iivari et al., 2009; Sapienza, 2001; Spyridakis, 2000; Thayer & Kolko, 2004; Ulijn & St. Amant, 2000). Being able to account for the ways in which culture shapes communicative behavior is now a *de facto* requirement. As one scholar put it, “[technical] communicators must not only cross technical boundaries, but also ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and occupational boundaries” (Carliner, 2001, p. 157). The EC framework offers a way to investigate

communication practices and the local system of beliefs, or *cultural ideology* (Carbaugh, 1995; Philipsen, 1992, 2010a, 2010b; Philipsen & Coutu, 2005), that such practices instantiate.

By using a ground-up approach that starts with communities and local communicative behaviors (rather than fixed demographic variables, e.g., nationality, ethnicity, race, geographical location), EC researchers produce highly nuanced reports of local cultures and their communication practices (Baxter, 1993; Carbaugh, 1988, 2005; Coutu, 2000; Edgerly, 2011; Fong, 2000; Katriel, 1986; Katriel & Philipsen, 1981; Leichter & Black, 2010; Philipsen, 1975, 1992, 2000; Philipsen & Leichter, 2007; Sprain & Gastil, 2013; Winchatz, 2001; Witteborn & Sprain, 2009). These reports have been employed to understand, diagnose, and offer resolutions to intracultural, international, and intercultural communication conflicts and misunderstandings (Bailey, 1997; Edgerly, 2011; Hart, 2015; Miller & Rudnick, 2010; Philipsen, 2000). My case study on Eloqi suggests that teaching and learning oral communication skills is not a culture-neutral activity; on the contrary, it is a deeply cultural endeavor. For researchers and practitioners of business and technical communication, this is an important consideration. There will always be a need for knowledge about and sensitivity toward the cultural nuances of communication. Using the EC–SCT perspective helps attune us to the various means and meanings of the communication that we employ, teach, and encounter in our classrooms, technology-mediated or otherwise.

Conclusion

While it existed, Eloqi was part of a new generation of online learning environments that continue to make geographical location irrelevant. Using Internet-enabled devices, Eloqi's students connected to the company's virtual platform and its cadre of trainers to learn oral communication skills with people located on the other side of the planet, effectively internationalizing their learning experience. This study revealed the particularities of what it meant to be a competent oral communicator in the Eloqi community, exploring how competency, locally defined by Eloqi's members, encompassed a holistic cultural communication framework for being a person in the world, socializing with others, and strategically communicating. Although Eloqi is no longer in operation, online language-learning ventures abound, and other types of Web-based oral communication training projects will surely soon follow. Each of these ventures will likely promote its own novel approach to teaching and learning oral communication. This study demonstrates the value in exploring communicative competence and cultural communication as a way to understand how an online teaching and learning community operates. With such understandings, researchers and practitioners will be better equipped to conceptualize, design, build, and maintain effective technology-mediated learning environments for oral communication training.

Note

1. I have applied pseudonyms to the company and all of its members (administrators, trainers, students) in order to protect their privacy.

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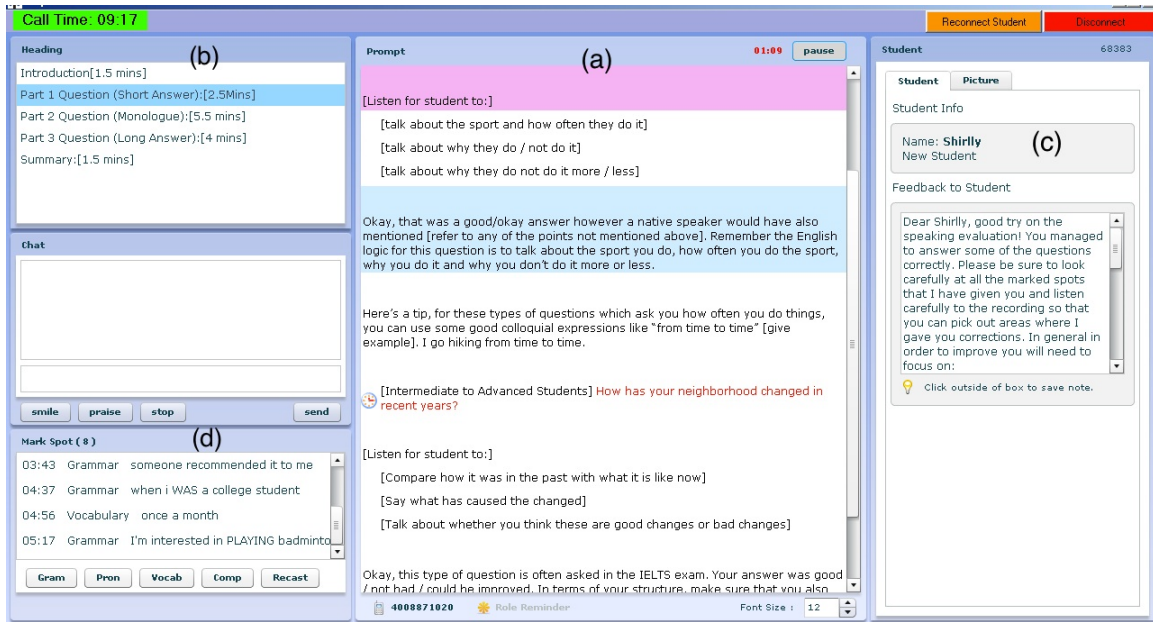


Figure 1. Eloqi's specialized user interface for trainer-student interactions.

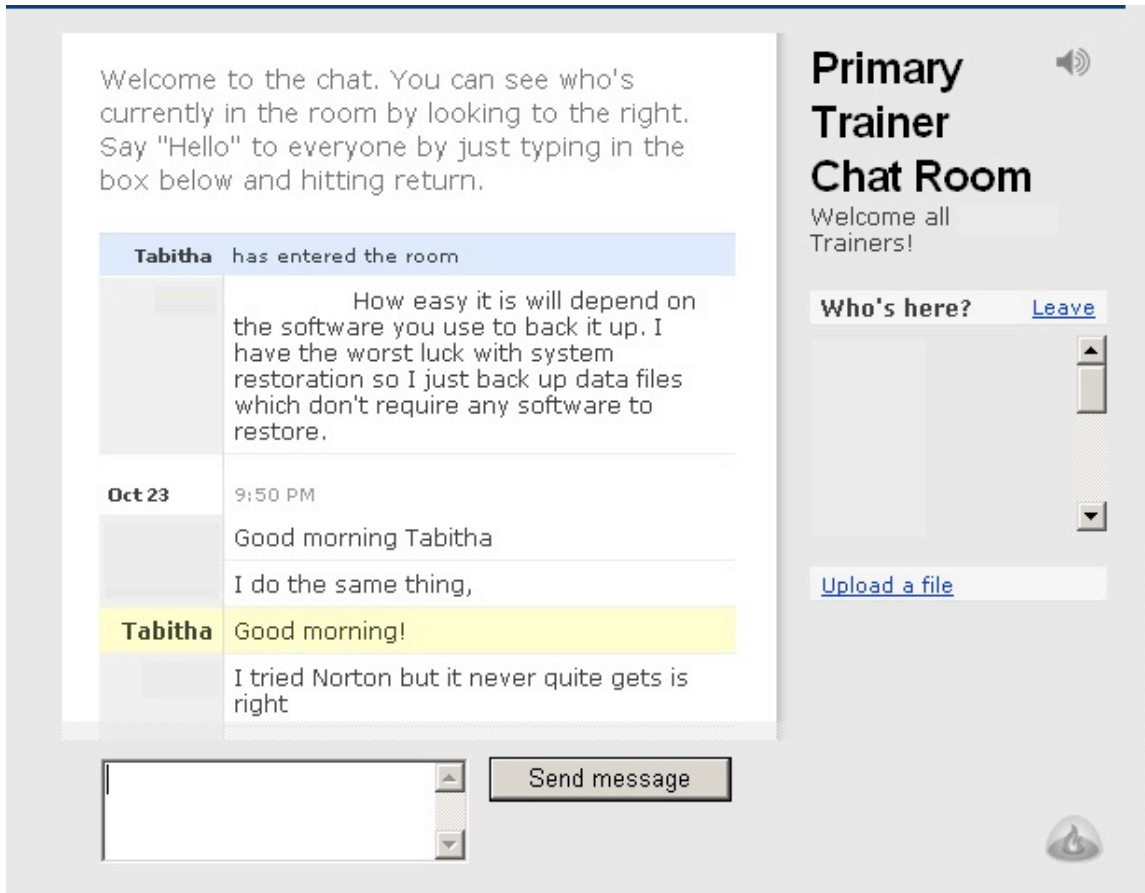


Figure 2. Eloqi trainer chat room.