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Incorporating technology into teaching L2 conversation through scenarios

Abstract

Teachers often struggle to engage students to speak in class. Research has shown that language learners wrestle with oral fluency even after two full years of second language instruction (Rossiter, Derwing, Manimtin and Thomson 2010: 584). In this paper we explore innovations on teaching the spoken language, based on Robert Di Pietro's (1987) psycholinguistic and humanistic approach to acquiring a language through Strategic Interaction, thus promoting the desire to communicate. In our study we describe and explain how the Scenario methodology was successfully used and enhanced in language classes at the Australian National University in two different levels and in two different languages. While Di Pietro's methods concentrated on giving grammatical and cultural explanations based on students' improvisations on the proposed scenarios, we were able to expand on this aspect by asking students to write a script based on their improvisations and to present it again to the class. This was facilitated by advances in technology whereby students accessed a digital recording of their improvisation through the university learning management system. Through this process, students incorporated cultural and linguistic insights—gained in the debriefing on their improvisation—into their script and second theatre-like representation.

1. Introduction

Sometimes, in the oral class, the teacher had a hard time making us speak, so he covered the topic on his own!

(Language student reflection, ANU focus group, 3 June 2011)

It is not uncommon to hear teachers of second languages say: “I don’t want to teach [everyday] conversation; I wouldn’t know where to start” (Barraja-Rohan 2000: 67), or “I don’t want to teach oral ever again! I don’t know how to!” (a language teacher’s admission in 2011 after teaching for more than ten years at the Australian National University [ANU]). It can indeed be disheartening when we are teaching foreign languages and our attempts to engage students to speak and participate in class activities are met with silence. Often, “when [we] look out in the classroom, [we] see disengaged students who make little effort to hide their apathy and who stare at us vacantly or perhaps even hostilely when we attempt to pull them into class discussions” (Barkley 2010: 3).

Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) indicates that teaching oral communication is indeed a challenge (Chamot 2005). Students often convey in class their fear of appearing inadequate in front of their peers when having to express themselves orally in the language they are learning. In communicative language classes, where teachers are always looking to create new opportunities to engage students to speak in the second language (L2), there is still an emphasis on accuracy that often excludes spontaneous language use (Lightbrown and Spada 2006).

Until the 1970s, little importance was given to communicative activities in the classroom to improve the oral competence of the language being taught. However, in 1971 Hymes claimed that favouring the acquisition of linguistic abilities over communicative competence was no longer sufficient to learn to speak the L2 (Larsen-Freeman 2000). Later, Stephen Krashen (1981, 1982), among others, insisted that the L2 is better acquired when there is a focus on meaning rather than on form, in a very similar manner to that in which a child learns a first language (L1), and it includes implicit, natural and informal learning, where stress must be placed on oral communication (Gass and Selinker 1994). Lo Bianco (1987) had warned that, at university level, the teaching of languages had traditionally focused on the practice of reading and writing skills and on the study of literature, rather than concentrating on the development of oral fluency. More recently, when reviewing the use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) practices in the language classroom, Gatbonton and Segalowitz (2005: 327) were still finding resistance from teachers to acknowledging the learning value of communication activities, seen by many as 'intangible' and 'unpredictable' exercises. In confronting this misconception, particularly useful is Robert Di Pietro's (1987) teaching methodology that enables the teacher to stimulate the students to communicate in the classroom using the target language (TL) while becoming the "main actors in this learning process" (Teschner 1990: 222). Di Pietro's (1987) humanistic approach to teaching and learning an L2 uses scenarios as the main tool to engage students to speak in class and acquire the language. He named his pedagogical approach 'Strategic Interaction' (SI). Language researchers such as Johnson, DeHaan, Henman, Madden and Novenario (2010) agree that SI offers a powerful learning experience in the development of language proficiency, and yet it has been omitted from recent discussions in the literature on language pedagogy. However, at ANU we have used this methodology effectively since 2006, in accordance with the belief that more oral practice is needed in the classroom.

The main goal of this methodology is of particular importance in Australia, where a recent study of student retention found that students valued speaking skills most highly, followed by understanding (Nettelbeck et al. 2009). As Nettelbeck et al.'s (2009: 19) research corroborated, a major motivation for students is to learn advanced speaking skills and yet this fact is not given due consideration when teachers or language curriculum planners are designing their course programs. At ANU, students also indicate a strong desire to learn to speak the language (but see Quijada Cervoni's research (forthcoming) which explores motivations for studying a

second language). The integration of the scenario methodology into language classes at ANU responds to this demand to focus on the spoken language.

In the next sections, we will explore the pedagogical practices of SI used at ANU to push the learner to speak in the TL and we will explain how we have enhanced this teaching approach by using technological innovations and incorporating the skills of listening and writing into the method.

2. Di Pietro's pedagogical approach to teaching a second language

2.1 What is Strategic Interaction?

SI is a student-centred approach to second language instruction proposed by Di Pietro in 1987 that uses real-life events and conflict-based scenarios to engage students to speak in a language class. It encourages oral communication in a natural way between the students, as they cooperate with each other to establish a dialogue using the new language (Lightbown and Spada 2006). A scenario as described by Di Pietro is “a mini-drama that happens because of an unexpected event or the need to resolve some dilemma of social interaction” (1987: 22). SI is based on a Vygotskian model of learning, where interaction among individuals in a social setting “activates the thinking processes” and produces language output (Marsh 1989: 305). According to Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1962, 1978), students' learning is regulated by three factors: the ‘object’—i.e. the target language with its specific forms and structure/syntax; the ‘other’—the teacher and the peers in the classroom; and the ‘self’—the learner him/herself (Di Pietro 1987:14) and those three factors are essential components of the scenario approach to language development. SLA research indicates that language learning occurs when language is used (Swain 2000; Swain and Lapkin 2001), and thus the pedagogical importance of SI is that learners are pushed to enter into a “collaborative dialogue” in the L2 while they “negotiate towards mutual comprehension” and “co-construct linguistic knowledge”, paying attention to both form and meaning, thus reinforcing language acquisition (Swain and Lapkin 2001: 90).

It is important to clarify the difference between scenarios and role plays. Role plays are mechanistic practices with a pre-programmed outcome where “the teacher usually presents a dry, non-problematic situation [and provides the student] with a complete description of what he or she should want to do and how to do it” (Taeschner 1990: 221). These simulations are task-oriented and teacher-dominated activities, where the teacher controls the communication process. In standard role plays, students “portray someone other than self, they are told what to do or think, and they usually know what the others will say and do” (Di Pietro 1987: 67). They are given a part, and everyone involved, including the audience, knows what will be said and done. In scenario roles, students play themselves or someone else within the framework of the role, but they are given a problem to solve or a situation described

only partially and in which they have to decide what to do and say. The interaction focuses on finding a solution to assumed situations from the other camp and contains moments of uncertainty, anticipation and drama, since neither the students nor the audience know the outcome *a priori* (Smith Rutledge 1993).

With the use of a well-written scenario that contains the elements of surprise, real-life drama and possibly humour and without knowing the agenda of the other person, the learners interact spontaneously in the TL once they are engaged in face-to-face dialogue and create discourse in the L2. The element of uncertainty is one of the strengths of the scenario and “the urgency of the situation [triggers] the ‘language acquisition device’, and enhances retention of what is learned when the interaction is performed” (Di Pietro 1987: 3). When we teach a scenario class, we witness the excitement of learners handling unexpected situations and collaborating with each other in an attempt to find a solution to the problem. The activity creates an inclusive environment in the classroom and students momentarily forget their fear of expressing themselves in the L2.

Scenarios are a blast! Scandal engages! They really prompt you to speak French. The improvisation was daunting, but it was a good exercise and helped overcome my fear of speaking French.

[It’s] the most effective class! It helps students improve their speaking skills as well as use their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

(Course feedback questionnaires, FREN2025 Continuing French II, Semester 2, 2011)

2.2 The rationale for using an interactive approach

When we observe the oral activities in an L2 classroom, language use can be very artificial, since students engage in producing chunks of decontextualized sentences and in answering questions often aimed at accuracy rather than fluency, since teachers tend to focus on accuracy themselves. When that happens, students feel that teachers are not listening to *what* they are actually saying, but *how* they are saying it. In a scenario class, students are persuaded that making mistakes is part of the language learning process. When we look back at the input hypothesis of SLA, Krashen (1982: 21) encouraged teachers to direct students’ awareness to “meaning first”, with the “acquisition of structure” to follow later. Similarly, Di Pietro advises teachers “to strive for interaction first, then meaning and finally structure” (1987: 125).

In this interactive approach, students practise the language they are learning in a natural way and they are presented with spontaneous situations where they must “exchange information” with its “grammatical orientation” and negotiate meaning, thus “maximizing the opportunities for language acquisition to occur” (Jackson 1993: 111). When the students are performing a scenario, it is also interesting to see how they use other dimensions of communication to interact with each other, including

non-verbal elements such as gestures, facial expressions, intonation and laughter, which are natural reactions in our day-to-day communication with other people.

2.3 How does it work?

Di Pietro's SI is an L2 teaching methodology divided into three basic phases: rehearsal, performance and debriefing. These different stages, which will be discussed in detail in the next section, place the language learners into three distinct kinds of classroom activities: small group work; paired presentations in front of the class; and whole class discussion. Prior to the activity, the teacher should select (if available) or write several conflict-based and culturally appropriate scenarios having two roles (A & B), and develop a series of colour-coded role cards with a description (in the L2) of either Role A or B to be distributed to the small groups. Di Pietro insisted that in order to be successful, a scenario needed to have the elements of dramatic tension used to stimulate lively performances in the TL, and thus teachers in the first instance need to make sure that the "dramatic nature of human interaction" is portrayed in all scenarios (1987: 3). From experience, we know that when we have travelled to a country where our L1 is not spoken, or when we have been involved in L2 instruction, dramatic episodes can be very effective in triggering our memories and stimulating the language learning process. While witnessing the unfolding of the scenario in its three phases, "the teacher changes roles several times, from counsellor and coach [during the rehearsal], to orchestrator [during the performance phase], to discussion leader [in the debriefing]" (Di Pietro 1987: 61). However, the students' learning is at all times under their own control and not under that of the teacher.

3. Innovations and technology

3.1 Di Pietro's approach revisited at ANU

At ANU, we have developed a semester-long program of teaching 'scenarios' as the oral component of the language class. We have been teaching this class for several years in two different languages and at two different levels: Continuing (2nd year) French and Intermediate (3rd year) Spanish. The only variation between the two levels is that for 2nd year students we lower the complexity of the scenarios and adapt them to the appropriate level with less cognitive difficulty. The main difference from Di Pietro's original methodology is that at ANU we have used technologically innovative practices to enhance the benefits of meaningful and spontaneous language use and make room for student creativity. We have incorporated a self-correcting component through the students listening to their own improvisations, as well as the writing of two scripts in the TL and the performance of two theatre-like representations.

In the first part of the semester, the students work with the scenarios prepared by the teacher, such as the one illustrated below, entitled "Fathers should spend more time with their sons" (Di Pietro 1987: 78).

Scenario:

Role A (mother)

You had promised your 10-year-old son that you and your husband would take him to the beach tomorrow. It is the last day of vacation for the child. However, an old and dear friend from your college days had called to tell you that she will be visiting tomorrow, just for the day. The two of you have not seen each other for twelve years. Talk with your husband and ask him if he will take your son to the beach by himself.

Role B (father)

You and your wife have agreed to take your 10-year-old son to the beach tomorrow. It is the last day of vacation for him and he has wanted to go to the beach for a long time. However, your boss had just now asked you to go golfing with him and an important client tomorrow. Prepare to discuss this problem with your wife. Perhaps she will take the child to the beach by herself.

In this situation, both roles have a shared context in that they have promised to take their son to the beach. However, the two roles have each group prepare for the unexpected since they do not know what the other group's situation or personal agenda is. The groups' main task is to develop an action plan or different strategies potentially to confront the other player—while using the L2 in a social interactive setting—and find a solution to all the issues that may arise during the coming performance phase. Understanding the personal agenda of the person representing the other role and finding (or not) a solution to the dilemma presented by the scenario requires students to use whatever linguistic oral skills they have available in the L2 to address the situation.

In the second part of the semester, the students are asked to go beyond improvisation and prepare a final oral representation that they write themselves, expanding on one or more of the scenarios used in class or writing a completely new theatre-like representation—the product of their own inspiration and imagination.

3.2 First part of the semester (weeks 3 to 7)

3.2.1 First class: The Scenario

This component follows Di Pietro's original conception of the scenario.

The Rehearsal or small group work activity (10 minutes)

The class is divided into four groups. Each group is assigned a role and the group members' task is to develop an action plan to be executed in the TL during the coming performance phase. In this phase, even though the use of L2 should be encouraged during the discussion, the use of L1 is permitted to facilitate a good understanding of the task assigned to the group. Students can ask the teacher questions on linguistic and/or cultural aspects of the scenario at any time during rehearsals. This is a good opportunity for the teacher to clarify any lexical or grammatical concerns, to explore

the meaning and use of colloquial expressions and to offer the students a “point of entry into the culture” of the target language (Crozet 1996: 46). After deciding on a plan of action, one person from each group volunteers to perform the role assigned. One of the pedagogical and psychological benefits of this group discussion on a shared concern is that it is a relaxed, non-threatening setting and it reduces the anxiety felt by those students of the group who normally feel less confident to speak in class.

Scenarios create a relaxed environment in class which helps everyone’s confidence. The tasks are funny and enjoyable, and the pressure isn’t there. You generally want to be involved; such is the nature of the environment.

(Course feedback questionnaire, FREN2025 Continuing French II, Semester 2, 2011)

The Improvisation or paired presentation in front of the class (5-7 minutes per scenario)

The two students who volunteered to perform roles A and B sit or stand in front of the class and the improvisation phase begins. This phase is executed entirely in the TL. It is captivating to see how the two students struggle to communicate in the L2, though in a meaningful context to them and use acquired verbal components of the TL, as well as non-verbal expressions, to get the message across. The learning outcome during the improvisation is to communicate in the TL using their previously acquired linguistic knowledge and perform as well as they can as they discover new information about the other team’s game plan. In this phase of the scenario activity, students will probably make many linguistic mistakes and will often produce incomplete sentences, but that will be remedied during the representation in the second class. It is important to note that the improvisation of a scenario is not graded.

Improvisations, as scary as they were, they were a great way to develop my oral skills under pressure.

I enjoyed this [scenario] class the most as I can put in practice all the listening and grammatical skills that I have acquired.

(Course feedback questionnaires, FREN2025 Continuing French II, Semester 2, 2011)

Setting the improvisation scenarios meant I had to think in Spanish quickly and efficiently, which was quite a rewarding challenge [...] Improvisations provided a stimulating environment for language learning.

(Student Experience of Learning and Teaching [SELT] course evaluation, SPAN3002 Intermediate Spanish II, Semester 2, 2011)

The Debriefing or whole class discussion (5-10 minutes)

The debriefing is the phase when players and non-performing group members from other groups can ask questions motivated by the improvisation. The pedagogical

importance of this activity is that students receive feedback on the cultural context and on their linguistic competence. They also have the opportunity to explore alternatives to the performed dialogue and to find out from the teacher what is culturally appropriate in the particular country where the language is spoken. Teachers can give explanations about specific grammatical difficulties, and suggest alternatives or recast in a more fluent style some of the linguistic expressions students used during the improvisation of the scenario.

3.2.2 Second class: The Representation (5-8 minutes per representation)

This component was added to the original conception of the scenario to allow students the possibility of incorporating into a new activity the insights gained in the debriefing described above.

Technology and the writing of the script

During the improvisation activity and the debriefing sessions, all the scenarios are recorded. After the debriefing phase, the teacher downloads the recordings of the improvisation activity to the computer, then uploads them into the university learning management system and sends the recording only to those students who performed the scenario. Through the use of this technology, students have immediate access to a digital recording of their improvisations. In this medium, the teacher and the students can open a dialogue that allows the teacher to give additional feedback to the students. Students will listen to their own improvised scenario and transcribe it, while correcting their mistakes and they will incorporate some of the cultural and linguistic insights gained in the debriefing of their first performance. Self-transcription—as described by Swain and Lapkin (2008: 119)—is a process that allows the students to “take speaking out of its rapid, real-time, meaning-making context and provides [them] with opportunities to notice their own use [of the L2]”.

The writing of the script is done at home. This phase of the activity allows students to build on their linguistic competence in the TL by adding to their script the utterances learned from the recast and discussion of the vocabulary, the cultural conventions, the language idioms and the grammatical structures encountered during the debriefing session. In this part of the scenario activity, the students are graded as a group for the script.

The Performance

The performance takes place at the beginning of the class, before the distribution of new scenarios. The purpose of this second performance is to give students a chance to reflect on their spoken language, self-correct it and explore new ways of expressing themselves and communicating more fluently in the L2. The pedagogical objective of this second performance is not just to get students to produce a dialogue in the TL, but to make students aware of their linguistic errors in their first improvised performance. During this representation, students are graded individually in areas

such as pronunciation, intonation and fluency and as a group during the team's performance.

The scenarios [...] were useful to practise speaking in different contexts using 'Usted', 'Tú' [formal and informal pronouns in Spanish], and other constructs.

(SELT course evaluation, SPAN3002 Intermediate Spanish II, Semester 2, 2011)

I did not feel humiliated when I said something wrong. We would all just have a laugh or the teacher would aid me in the right direction.

(Student feedback questionnaire, FREN2025 Continuing French II, Semester 2, 2010)

3.3 Second part of the semester (weeks 9 to 13)

In the second part of the semester, the students have to create their final theatre-like representation. The class is divided into groups of 4 to 5 students and the activity is twofold: (1) to write a new scenario-like play with a maximum duration of 10 minutes; and (2) to play it in front of the class during the last two weeks of the semester (12 and 13).

3.3.1 The writing of the new scenario-like play

All the students have to take part in the writing of the script and all the students have to represent a role. By creating their own script, the students are able to use the spoken TL to express themselves in a natural and spontaneous manner. Through the writing of the script of their new scenario during three workshops held in class in weeks 9, 10 and 11, the students are also able to show command of the written language.

The new scenario can be turned into a comedy, a tragedy, a satire or a soap opera, in accordance with the taste and the spirit of the group. This allows distancing from the native culture and discovering the unfamiliar cultural content, while going beyond the stereotypes students have about the culture of the TL. It is an opportunity for the students to explore the new culture by entering a third dimension from where they "can observe and reflect on both their own and the target culture" (Ho 2009: 67). This intercultural position—defined by Kramsch (1993) as 'third place'—is the dynamic space where learners of an L2 can develop an empathy towards that second culture and interpret the cultural differences of both languages while achieving communicative goals (Crozet and Liddicoat 2000).

3.3.2 The final theatre-like representation

The pedagogical objective of the final theatre-like representation is for the students to improve their language fluency acquired throughout the semester and this can be observed in their performance.

I was very engaged [in the oral class] thanks to the group work and having to meet up and speak French outside of class to practise the scenarios.

What I liked the most about the scenario class was that this activity created a friendly, fun and relaxed atmosphere, where you were encouraged to speak French all the time, and where fluency and having a go was favoured over perfect accuracy.

(Student feedback questionnaires, FREN2025 Continuing French II, Semester 2, 2010)

The most noticeable difference between the improvisation and the two theatre-like performances is that students are able to expand on their vocabulary and significantly reduce their linguistic errors, thus improving the accuracy of their language output.

4. Conclusion

Nowadays, many scholars in the field of teaching languages would agree that “speaking is the most complex skill to teach in foreign language education” but even though most teachers are well aware of this, “few will spend the time, the resources, and the energy” required to get their students to speak (Garcia Laborda 2007: 503). Language teachers and linguistic researchers agree that comprehensible input is just not enough for conversation to occur. Swain (1985) developed the concept of ‘comprehensible output’ and through her work has suggested that “conversation pushes learners to impose syntactic structure on their utterances” and when the output is “pushed” and learners strive toward comprehensibility, it might also motivate them to look for structures already acquired in the classroom and conversation would take place (Gass, Mackey and Pica 1998: 301). Therefore, dialogues and theatre-like representations based on the scenario teaching methodology provide students with opportunities to “reflect on their output and consider ways of modifying it to enhance comprehensibility, appropriateness, and accuracy” in the use of the L2 (Swain 1993: 160).

Language teachers often rely on a selection of communication activities from course books and on their own imagination, which does not always result in a successful teaching methodology. Another problem is that many teachers are too busy “teaching students to express themselves” or even “organizing natural language activities (a contradiction in terms), to ever discover what their students’ real interests and preoccupations are” (Rivers 1983: 111). A critical obstacle to teaching conversation to L2 students in a classroom setting is that students are confined between four walls for fifty minutes, literally deprived of any association with real life situations.

Di Pietro’s humanistic approach to foreign language teaching deals with the full range of human behaviour and thus is able to reach the students’ feelings and emotions. We know that learning theories are often classified within three domains: the behaviourist, the cognitive and the affective. Unfortunately, this third domain of learning—the affective—is “often overlooked or misunderstood” (Rompelman

2002: 1). Di Pietro's notion of Strategic Interaction is more aligned with the affective domain of learning theories and with real life drama and this teaching approach is embedded in the idea that dynamic tension and the unexpected can create a momentum that challenges students to communicate in the TL and gives them a sense of empowerment over the scenario they are acting out (O'Neill 1993). As Di Pietro (1987: 12) wrote, if

we concentrate on building classroom activities through recipes that deal with disjointed bits and pieces of language, we risk losing sight of our students as fellow humans committing themselves to one of the most engrossing endeavours anyone can undertake. The basis of human interventions with language is not only cognitive; it is social and personal as well.

Thus, as observed in the language classes at ANU, Strategic Interaction can be an effective pedagogical methodology that rests on the assumption that when students sustain meaningful dialogue in the context of real life and create dramatic episodes that have personal meaning for them, communication in the TL is achieved and language learning does occur.

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