

George Washington University, Georgetown University,
The Center for Applied Linguistics



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Critical Languages **Feature Article - September 2007**

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Getting Students to Talk in the Target Language

The "Strand of the Month" for September is interpersonal communication and I'd like to focus on the oral portion of this strand. What are some ways to engage and involve our students with oral conversation from the very beginning? What are some ways to continue that exciting entrée through the year and through their career as language learners?



Gathering material:



Pay attention to what the students are talking about as they come in to class, stand in the hallway, or chat in the cafeteria. Listen carefully without being intrusive and always remain aware of confidentiality. Just get a sense of the topics that are capturing their interest on any given day.

Do this every day so your ideas stay current. Students can smell a stale idea almost before it formulates in your mind. Get them to talk about these subjects in the TL by asking questions of a general nature that touch on the topics. Develop debates on the more controversial topics. Look to the Internet for interactive ideas; there are many great websites out there that can give you wonderful inspiration.

Find pictures to use as conversation stimuli. Ads in magazines are an excellent source since they provide a current context for the exchange. There are several excellent books of conversation drawings available as well, but my students like the quirky advertisement pictures best.

Providing information:



Leave room for students to ask questions. Be sure to provide sufficient information, in the form of a rubric for a formal assessment or in a list of "be sure to include ..." if it is a less formal situation, so that students know what you expect from them. Always encourage them to ask for further details. They need to learn to seek information and to manipulate those interrogatives.

If students have good control of the interrogatives, they will soon discover that they can control the conversation, making responses more predictable and manageable. They will become good conversationalists and good reporters of what they have heard.

Creating opportunities:



Everyday every student should have as much time as possible to speak the language. Working in pairs, or small groups, provides lots of opportunity for speaking and communicating. Take the vocabulary out of the book and make the language become a real means of communication. Insist on the use of interrogatives in these paired encounters. Not all of these conversations need to be graded for anything other than doing it.

Provide the students with a word bank and ask them to role play a conversation about the vocabulary topic. Be sure to include all parts of speech in the word bank you provide. Make up two lists of vocabulary that are different, but from the same lesson. Distribute the lists so that each partnership has list A and list B. Student A must use the words in List A, while Student B must use the words on List B during their conversation. Switch lists and do another conversation with the same words. Students will be surprised at the difference in the two conversations.

There should be a reasonable combination of impromptu and prepared conversations. Those that are impromptu can be practice situations with new material that lead them to the ability to do a prepared conversation (skit) at the end of the lesson. However, some of the impromptu exercises should be graded. Encouraging students to think on their feet is a necessary step to successful real-life conversations.



Be sure students understand these are communicative exercises and not just exercises in making up random sentences that use specific words. Start with a list of 6 to 8 words and expand it as their confidence grows. Create high-energy locations for the simulations by locating the situations in places where the students engage in their preferred after-school activities. You don't have to wait for the adventure vocabulary to have a getting-to-know-you conversation.



Create a natural simulation:



The students spend a great deal of time with their friends on the internet. Bring those writing exchanges and experiences into the oral realm and have them do some web-cam conversations. This can be accomplished within your classroom if your school has firewall and safety issues you need to accommodate. Web cams are inexpensive, easy to install, and easy to operate. Students will enjoy the visual dimension of their on-line conversations.

Creating the assignments:

When you are creating assignments for the students, keep in mind the proficiency aspect of your expectations. You want them to be actively engaged in using the material (words, structure, and concepts) to communicate their ideas. Vary these culminating activities so they take different forms. With this type of activity there is really no right or wrong answer, so encourage students to express their opinions.



Remember to include cultural behaviors that appear in an oral communication: things such as personal space, register, eye contact, gestures, and posture are all part of how one person communicates with another.



Building a community of trust is paramount to successful language learning. When the students understand that they will not be criticized, or laughed at, when they make mistakes they will be much more willing to try. Remind them of how they learned to ride a bike, play an instrument, or play a sport. It all takes repetition and learning from mistakes to become better at it. Start them on the first day with the simple phrases and keep building so that they find it natural to speak only the TL in the classroom and with particular individuals. Sharing your mistakes with them will go a long way toward raising the comfort level. Give some examples of how you chose a wrong word (maybe a false cognate?) that led to a completely different, and perhaps embarrassing, message. When they realize that even the teacher makes mistakes, the students relax.

The real key here is to keep students talking, in controlled and uncontrolled situations. The teacher doesn't always have to be the leader; give the students an opportunity to talk about anything they wish. The only requirement is that it must be in the TL. Give a very reasonable, easy to achieve time frame, and let them exceed that limit before you stop them. Reward them by letting them know they talked for "twice as long" as you had asked them to talk!



This month's Dear YANA column has a lot of specific examples to get you started on helping your students become more comfortable and more eager to use their new language.

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