

TARGET PRACTICE: USING NATIVE SPEAKERS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM.

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The paper was divided into three parts: -

- A. Introduction:- Aveiro: my classes /courses
- B. Interviewing native speakers:- a strategy for productive use of time outside class
- C. General input and comment session with ideas from colleagues

A.

I have taught 2nd and 3rd year 'Língua e Cultura' classes, as well as first year 'Língua Inglesa' classes. For the courses I teach, homework assignments (integrated, multi-skill and topic based) are part of the process of Continuous Assessment.

The focus of this paper then is not about class activities but about out of class activities – often called homework or assignments. The question of how they might be evaluated, though important, is not under discussion in this short paper.

B.

What do students do outside class?

There is felt to be a lack of study-related interests in many of our students' daily lives. For example, despite our exhortations, students tend not to devote much of their free time to reading in the target language.

Table 1 represents the results of a questionnaire given to the new intake (Portuguese/English and English/German) for the academic years 1996/7 and 97/98. With regard to the question of reading, about half those who replied (57 out of 104) indicated that they had read at least one book during the academic year. However, as many of those often wrote the title of novels used in the secondary school as a standard work, one has to interpret the statistics with caution.

Without going into a detailed analysis of the other questions put to the students, it is nevertheless interesting to see how important a part popular culture plays in their lives (e.g. listening to 'English' music etc.). Also, with regard to the questions about having direct contact with native speakers, it is apparent that, what little contact some of them have had, it has been sporadic to say the least (e.g. 'in the summer' or 'twice a month').

Finally, although 60 out of 100 showed a lively interest in the Erasmus programme, the actual number of those who can and do take part in the scheme is probably about a fifth. Nevertheless, the idea of spending part, or, in some cases, the whole of an academic year abroad is considered worthwhile by a large proportion of students.

Whereas the classroom might be a forum for the exchange of ideas and for many useful language activities, we cannot deny that individuals are often denied many opportunities to participate. The sheer number of students, together with the constraints of time and the timetable all help to limit individual participation. Even despite the use of group work, which can help to increase opportunities for individuals to contribute more actively in the class, the time that the spotlight is on any individual student is really quite short.

No matter how content rich the classes are, they cannot provide students with sufficient opportunities to engage actively in meaningful interaction in the target language. In terms of the quantity and quality of the communication in the target language it must be said that what little there is tends to take place 'in a vacuum', so to speak.

To add an extra dimension to the learner's experience we must look outside the classroom. Using 'native speakers' in the community could be seen as a possible strategy. It is important to note that the word strategy is used. It is not a method. Not only can it be beneficial in the short run to the participants, but it can also be a stepping stone in the future: using native speakers in classrooms can be a very valuable resource when it comes to reinforcing skills and knowledge. Moreover it can act as a strong motivating source as well. 'Real' contact with native speakers can provide that spark of contact that some learners need to feel that their learning experience is genuine.

Target Practice.

Types of informant

Native speakers can be found in the local community, though, naturally, the large conurbations such as Lisbon and Porto will be better supplied.

As an example, according to available statistics, there are 1514 British citizens and 55 British Companies **registered** at the Oporto British Consulate (April 1998).

Getting the chance to meet and talk to native speakers largely depends on how much contact there is between both communities. For this

reason, I have illustrated this as a circle, in which the centre or 'bull's-eye' provides an easier source of informants than the outer zones.

Inner circle : - e. g. friends (of friends); children of emigrants etc.

Middle (inner): -e. g. teachers; overseas students (same Institution)

Middle (outer): - e. g. teachers etc. at local language schools etc.

Outer circle: - expatriate residents; business personnel; staff (other Institutions).

Briefly, it would be theoretically much easier for a student to attempt to interview people of their own age, like for example the son or daughter of an emigrant family than for that student to try to set up a meeting with a company manager.

Whereas the examples mentioned below refer only to video recordings, it should be pointed out that audio recordings are equally as good, and have the advantage of being technically easier to handle.

The first sample of a **VIDEO** presentation was of the 'Inner circle' type, in which an emigrant family's daughter was interviewed. One of the most noticeable features about this was the sheer effort put in by the participants in order to present their work in a professional way. How far is this merely packaging? It is tempting to dismiss these endeavours as mere gloss and no substance. But if we ask ourselves what exactly is involved in the process, then we come to realise that this final product is a reflection of the amount of hard work and involvement. Even a very basic recorded interview would demand the following: -

planning and brainstorming for ideas and topics; writing questions; rehearsing the questions; editing etc.

As the first video also had music and images of American popular culture to accompany the main theme of the presentation (focus on American youth and education), it is hard not to appreciate the sheer amount of dedication and commitment that go into such an endeavour.

In another extract from a discussion group video, students who had participated in the making of recorded interviews talked about how they had gone about the task, and gave their opinion about the process. The following points were raised: -

planning; discussion; group work; initiative; communication between colleagues; technical and artistic input.

In short they identified many of the process type skills that are needed to carry out a task of this nature. They also commented that it had been an

interesting and challenging activity, and that it had required a great deal of time.

The final example was of an 'outer circle' **VIDEO** presentation. In this, professional basketball players from the USA were asked about their background, education and integration into the game in Portugal, amongst other topics. The interviewees were co-operative and informative. Once again the 'packaging' was suitably entertaining, showing scenes of a basketball club and training sessions. Even without including the preparation time for this assignment, the initial camera work and interview took several hours to complete.

Finally, although it is perhaps the process involved in carrying out the task which is of prime importance as an aid to developing associated language skills, the product too is of considerable value as an artefact in itself. It can both be an object to treasure and to view at a later stage, or it can be a useful teaching aid in itself.

Once the interview has been completed and the videotape made, there are many activities that are possible. Students could be encouraged to watch /listen to each other's video/audiocassette, paying particular attention to both the content of the interview as well as to the use of language. Students can be encouraged to be sensitive to their own as well as to others' uses or misuses of language and to point out certain of these features without being unduly critical. Furthermore, parts of certain interviews may lend themselves to transcription, or to note-taking and summary activities.

With large classes and little contact with the target language, outside activities and contacts can have a significant influence, and be both useful as well as inspirational.

C.

A discussion followed in which many points of view were put. I noted with interest that Media Studies students in Coimbra use a similar technique. However, other comments inevitably tended to focus on teacher-centred classroom activities and the need for basic language work. While not disagreeing with this, I tried to remake the point that my focus was essentially on outside activities and that this approach was itself just one strategy and not a whole method of teaching or learning. Furthermore it is my contention that if students are given sufficient encouragement they will in most cases carry out fairly demanding tasks with determination, drive, interest and pleasure, thereby enriching their own learning experience.

Table 1

1st Year QUESTIONNAIRE 1996/7/8

* = sample of 104 students

** = sample of 48 students

Have you ever lived in an English speaking country? Give details	* 8
Have you ever visited an English speaking country? Give details	* 23
Do you expect to take advantage of the Erasmus programme to study abroad?	* 60
English books read :- October - April.	* 57 Average 1.5
English magazines October - April.	* 49 Average 1.5
Films in English (cinema) October - April.	** 38 Average 3
Average n ^o hours per week watching English language TV channels	* 54 Average 5.5
Average n ^o hours p.w. studying English (homework etc.)	** 48 Average 3.5
Average n ^o hours p.w. listening to music (English)	** 48 Average 5.5
Personal contacts (English speaking friends) e.g. conversation. <i>Indicate frequency</i>	** 12 (2 p.m. in the summer; 4 p.a. etc.)
Personal contacts (English speaking friends) e.g. correspondence. <i>Indicate frequency</i>	** 13 (irreg;- 1 p.a; 2 p.m. etc.)
Other contact e.g. Internet; radio; travelling. <i>Give details</i>	** 3 (Internet; radio)

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