

Using What They Know: Encouraging Students to Speak Spanish in the Intermediate Language Classroom

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Introduction: Why Avoid Spontaneous Conversation?

Students are often reluctant to converse in the target language (TL), yet their language study can prepare them for spontaneous and authentic opportunities to use what they know in conversations with all TL speakers.

Why don't students speak in the TL? Anxiety/nerves may not be as big a factor as some instructors believe (Levine 354-55) and it may not be about students' sense of proficiency either (Pellettieri 286).

Perhaps students don't learn how to communicate orally because instructors don't specifically teach them how to learn from oral conversations (Naughton 171, 178). Placing "communication strategies with appropriate metacognitive strategy training" in a course curriculum can help develop students' oral proficiency (Nakatani 78).

Instructors must "provide students with guided experience speaking in situations outside of the classroom" so that they will speak the TL whenever possible in the future. Particularly to beginning and intermediate students who may not continue their language study, we must teach how to practice speaking and listening (Pellettieri 295).

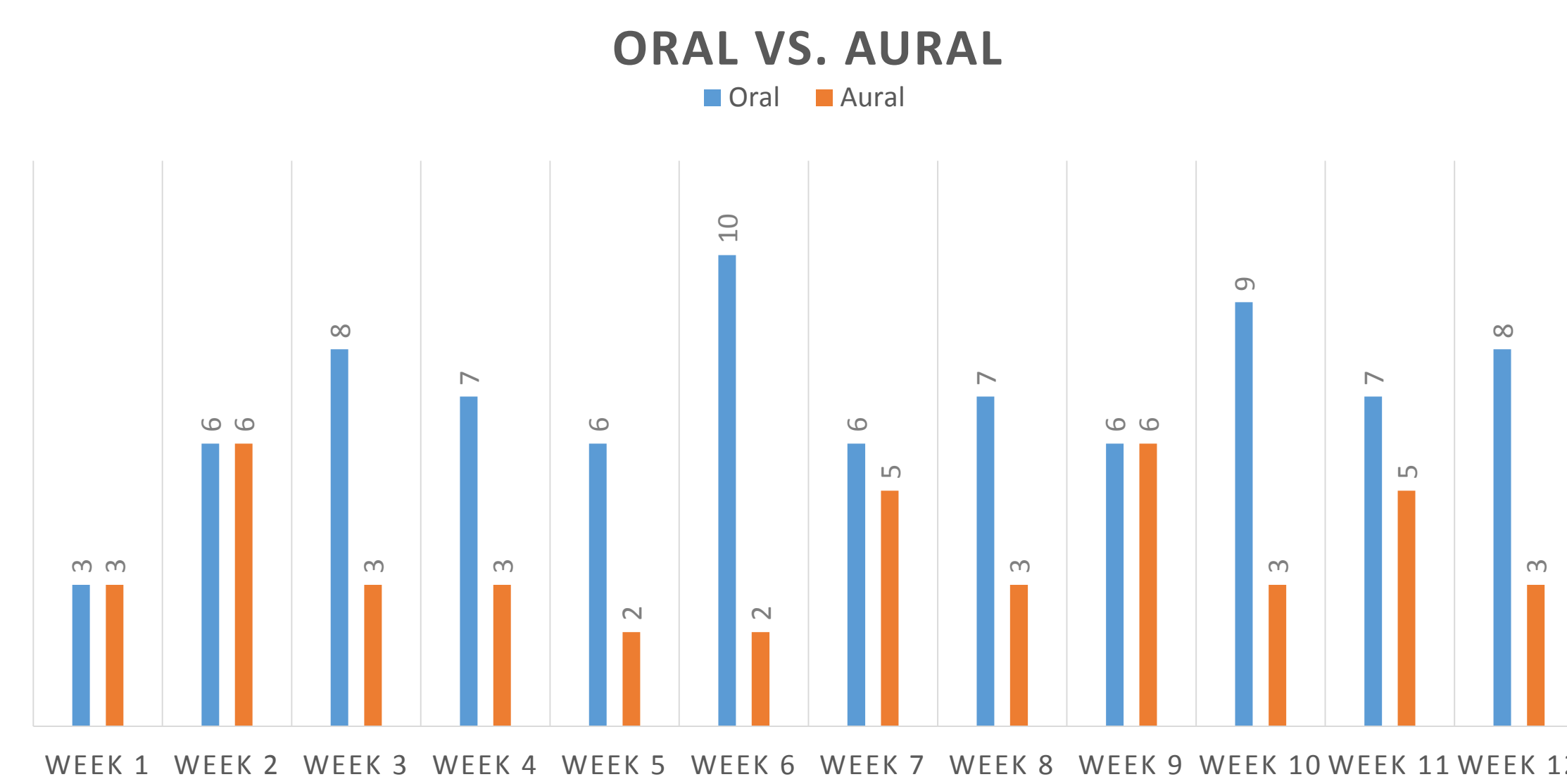
The Plan: Weekly Conversation Practice & Reflection

1. Students read two essays about conversation and language learning.
2. Students use the ACTFL Can-Do Benchmarks for "Interpersonal Communication" and "Interpretive Listening" to self-assess their current level and set goals.
3. Students complete two weekly activities for twelve weeks, such as
 - Rehearse a conversation alone out loud (minimum 4 minutes)
 - Read aloud from a Spanish text (minimum 5 minutes)
 - Converse outside of class with one classmate (minimum 10 minutes)
 - Converse outside of class with instructor (minimum 5 minutes)
 - Converse with a Spanish speaker (minimum 3 minutes)
 - View a video of a Spanish speaker (minimum 5 minutes)
 - Listen to music in Spanish with or without written lyric available (3 songs +)
4. Each time, students answer questions based on Bonny Norton's research on learner investment and Zoltán Dörnyei's research on the ideal self and ought self:
 - ✓ Which item from the menu did you choose? Why did you choose it?
 - ✓ What went well?
 - ✓ What risks were involved for you?
 - ✓ What resources did you use and how did you help your partner?
 - ✓ What communication problems arose and what strategies did you use to address them?
 - ✓ What did you learn about yourself as a speaker of Spanish?
5. Students use the ACTFL Benchmarks to re-assess at the end of the semester.



Results: Type of Practice Students Chose

Initially, one concern was that given choices, students would choose more passive aural activities over more active oral activities. However, averaged over the project, students chose active, speech-producing options at a higher rate than more passive, speech-receiving options. The blend helped them see component skills.



Results: Component Skills Identified by Students

Questions on the weekly self-assessments helped students *independently* break down the component skills of interpersonal communication, developing a nuanced understanding of what it means to speak/listen. Students identified numerous component skills in self-assessment answers, including

- Speaking pace/speed variation
- Grammatical elements
- Understanding accents from various countries
- Pronunciation
- Fluidity
- Understanding the general idea the other speaker says
- Verb tense identifiers & conjugation
- Communication of meaning
- Voice: "I am learning my personality and my voice in this language"
- Language switching
- Vocabulary as context specific
- Self-confidence
- Knowing more of certain types of words: adjectives, verbs, etc.

Results: Strategies Students Used

Questions on the weekly self-assessments showed the diversity of strategies students uncovered and began to regularly use. Students identified and used these strategies:

- Vary speed depending on difficulty of word
- Ask other speaker to repeat what is said/ask questions/ask for help
- Record self to hear and learn
- Choose an alternative verb to communicate idea
- Let go of need for perfect grammar/focus on communication
- Talk about topics that are comfortable
- "Take a deep breath"/pause and think
- Read text while listening to text
- Use context clues
- Use gestures & visual clues
- Listen for other key words to determine verb tense
- Look up words even in conversation
- Skip words while listening to get gist
- Work around/describe words you can't remember
- Look up words of a specific type later: "I need to learn more conjunctions and transitions!"
- Laugh at your mistakes
- Practice listening and speaking in isolation

Students are arguably more likely to use strategies they uncover themselves.



Results: Improvement Seen by Students

Sample Self-Assessment statements at the beginning of the semester:

- "I do not feel confident speaking in Spanish right now."
- "I feel like speaking is especially hard for me."
- "The pressure of speaking the language stops me from excelling beyond my goals."

Sample Self-Assessment statements at the end of the semester:

- "What this semester gave me was the realization that I CAN. I learned that I can go out and talk to people in Spanish."
- "Even when I don't quite understand something or recognize a word, I'm usually able to get the gist of what I'm listening to."
- "Once I finally started having conversations with other people in Spanish, I learned more than I could have imagined. I was able to speak with a native speaker more than once while at work."

Summing Up

Recognizing the component skills to speaking/listening empowered students to practice them in isolation and make progress towards goals.

Using the ACTFL "Can-Do" Benchmarks, all students saw improvement in themselves in speaking, moving up an average of 1.5 levels, and listening, an average of .833 levels. Also, students' self-assessments correlated with instructor assessments more accurately at semester end.

Students began to see themselves as speakers of Spanish, not just students of the language.

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