GENERATING LANGUAGE THROUGH MEDIA
AUDIO-VISUAL PRODUCTION BY THE ESL STUDENT

By Linda New Levine

As a language teacher, my definition of the nature of language is necessarily different from that of the linguist or the anthropologist. Rather than perceiving language as a system, as linguists do, I see language as a method of communication within a social context, a vehicle for getting things done, a set of skills useful for completing specific tasks.

With this definition in mind, the job of the language teacher acquires new meaning. Teachers can no longer teach language in the abstract as a body of knowledge that students must absorb, rather they must teach students to *use* language. Bernard Spolsky made this point in his article "The Limits of Language Education" in *The Linguistic Reporter* (Spolsky 1971:2) when he said, "language teachers have seen their task as teaching language; they have not realized that it is teaching students to *use* language."

The ability to use a new language within a social setting for the purpose of completing tasks is sometimes termed "communicative competence." Wilga Rivers refers to this ability as "spontaneous expression." Both terms imply a student's linguistic competence in the language or his ability to produce grammatical sentences. Communicative competence also implies a student's grasp of the social meaning of language, an understanding of the cultural and social amenities as well as the non-verbal behavior that occurs in language contexts.

For my discussion, I prefer the term "conversational competence" used by Bruce Fraser in his paper "The Development of

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Communicative Competence in Second Language Acquisition" at the 1974 TESOL Convention. Conversational competence excludes the area of non-verbal behavior which I will not be focusing on in this paper. Rather, I will discuss some general methods for developing conversational competence in second language students and then some of the specific methods involving task completion and the use of media which I have employed in my own middle schoool and high school ESL classes.

In my attempts to teach students how to use language, I have made several assumptions about developing the most efficient system of learning. To maximize learning efficiency I assume that:

1) Learning is an individualized procedure. Students differ in intelligence, achievement levels, rates of learning, interests, and styles of learning and cognition. Therefore the most efficient learning situation takes these differences into account and attempts to provide various ways for learning a particular skill.

2) Language learning is socialized behavior. To learn to use a language a student must have ample opportunity to practice using language as a skill. Therefore, the most efficient language learning situation must provide a high density of interpersonal communication.

3) Learning is most efficient when it is self-directed. The language learner who is actively involved in the selection, sequencing, and timing of his own learning program will use his learning time in the most efficient way. Tourists traveling abroad are proof of this assumption as they quite easily learn the corresponding phrase for "How much?" in as many languages as they find necessary. Therefore, the most efficient learning system should provide for student input.

In my own middle school and high school classes of Italian and Spanish students, I have found that these three criteria may be met by implementing a program for student production of media. Students who produce their own slide shows, filmstrips, and movies are learning to use language to complete tasks and they are working on these projects according to their own individual styles within a

social context of cooperating with others. and to a large extent, under their own direction. I will discuss six specific techniques which second language teachers can employ and adapt to their own curriculum in order to increase the conversational competence of their students.

Student photography is a good way in which to introduce second language

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students to the world of media. They quickly learn how to use an inexpensive Polaroid camera and are highly motivated by the fast 15-second results to produce. more pictures. The job of the teacher is to suggest appropriate topics as photographic subjects. When students are involved in a language lesson concerning a school building, they can take a Polaroid camera and shoot a roll of eight black and white or color pictures of their own school and the facilities within the building. Other language lessons which focus on the community, the house and the furniture within the house, the family, or the drugstore provide a good setting for photography. Conversation necessarily occurs as an offshoot of the assignment as students must interact verbally in planning sessions prior to the actual photographic session. The newly taught vocabulary and structures are more likely to be used by students during the planning session if the photographic topic is specific and directly related to the original classroom presentation of the new material. Therefore, if students are planning to photograph their community, they will be likely to use the target vocabulary and structures identified by the teacher if these structures have been questioned during the student planning session.

After the actual photography is finished, students must then cooperate on an appropriate means of sharing their project with the others in the class. This involves the

student in a form of peer teaching and provides a goal for the completion of the photographic assignment. They must write a story on the assigned topic and use the pictures as a visual accompaniment. This becomes an attractive photo book if the students write the story neatly on unlined paper, cover the book with an attractive cover, and bind the pages together with a plastic punch binding or with brass fasteners. The book can now be included in the classroom library for other students to read.

Another method of sharing student photography is the photographic wall chart. Here, students write a story on a large sheet of chart paper in letters large enough to be read by the class. The photographs are placed on the chart as a visual accompaniment to the text. These charts can be shared by the entire class. Here again, the conversation that occurs as part of the planning and completion of the project enables the student to use the newly acquired language skills for the completion of a task. This is, in my view, the real goal of language learning.

Student photographs can also be used to create decorative and informative bulletin boards on particular subjects. Again, the bulletin boards are created to be shared by all the students in the class. Because these projects are really a variety or experience chart, they are especially effective for those students in the class requiring reading remediation as the reading involved is usually well within the student's aural-oral command.

Polaroid photography requires few equipment demands on the part of the teacher. However, the next technique I will discuss, student made slide shows, requires more equipment but produces more satisfying results. Slide shows may be of two types. One type of slide show is in the form of a picture story. The student may select a topic such as "My Neighborhood," and then represent the topic pictorially. Ideas for shows of this type are endless, for example: "My Country," "My Family," or a slide show on jobs and occupations. Another type of slide show may be prepared to provide practice of a particular grammatical structure. For example, the present progressive or the simple present tense may be illustrated in a show titled *What People Do*

All Day. Here, pictures will show the teacher teaching, the children playing, the farmer working, and so on. Slide shows may also be produced to illustrate comparative adjectives such as *big, bigger,* and *biggest* or the plural of nouns.

A slide show project involves either the use of a 35 millimeter camera or an Instamatic camera and roll of color slide film for twenty or thirty-six pictures. Students must again plan their photographic session before they begin to photograph so that they can cover the topic thoroughly and not waste their film allotment. The teacher can aid in these planning sessions by appropriate questioning. In this way students may be directed toward using the target structures and vocabulary to accomplish their planning task.

After the slides are returned from the processer, students may arrange them in a logical sequence and write a script accompaniment which they can then tape on a tape recorder for presentation to the class. Another method of presentation is to ask students to relate the slide show extemporaneously. This is a more difficult skill, however, and most students will require many practice sessions before they can extemporize before a class.

If the teacher has access to a Kodak Ectagraphic Visualmaker, students may produce slide shows of more extensive subjects than those found in their immediate environment. The Ektagraphic Visualmaker consists of an Instamatic camera with a close-up lens attached to a camera stand.

The camera is permanently focused onto a table top background. Using this device, students can produce quality slides from pictures found in magazines and books. Thus, students can produce slide shows on a wide variety of topics: zoo or farm animals, scenes from their native countries, various kinds of air, land, and water transportation, biographies of famous people, and many others. These slide presentations and their taped accompaniments may be shown on a slide projector and then made a part of the ESL classroom library or catalogued in the regular school library.

The concluding installment of "Generating Language Through Media" will appear in the next issue of the *TESL Reporter*.