

Teaching Interactive Skills

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Abstract

This article aims to report on the application of a new teaching method, Strategic Interaction (SI), at the University of Jordan. SI is built on the principles of group dynamics. It advocates the use of both directive and non-directive teaching modes, casting the teacher in the role of a guide. The author taught and developed instructional procedures representative of SI for teaching conversation skills through open-ended scenarios.

Strategic Interaction (SI)¹

SI is a recently developed teaching method which can be characterized as predominantly communicative. This approach, which stresses language use and interaction in discourse, underlines the fact that learning can best be promoted if students use language strategically in a purposeful way (Khanji, 1993). Furthermore, it emphasizes that learners rather than teachers or syllabuses are the ones who decide what learning needs are in a foreign language instruction. By giving equal importance to both language forms and functions the SI classroom activities depend on the open-ended scenario in which students have a stake in achieving a desired outcome. To do this, learners are given distinct communicative goals to achieve. They are free to follow different solutions in order to reach these goals.

Di Pietro (1987) identifies three dimensions of conversational language:

- 1- informational, which contains the grammatical and the semantic elements;
- 2- transactional, the means by which actions are motivated in order to achieve a goal through the use of strategies and counter strategies in solving problems and
- 3- interactional, which shows what to send in a message in order to fulfill a need and execute roles of various types.

An example of the three dimensions at work simultaneously in a linguistic encounter may be seen in the following exchange:

Would you like to eat at a restaurant?

(1)	(2)	(3)
Yes, Why not?	I can't, I'm too busy	I don't know; let me think

Each response above embodies all three dimensions of language use as outlined by Di Pietro. On the informational level, the replies suggest the necessity for knowledge of linguistic forms that are used for accepting or

declining invitations. The transactional dimension colors the response of the speaker, and assigns to it a role reflecting either a willing, enthusiastic

companion (response 1), and unwilling but polite friend (response 2), or an indecisive but probably unwilling acquaintance (response 3).

The most basic point of SI is that group activity promotes the learning of language in significant ways. Therefore students work together to find solutions to matters which they all regard as learning problems. The group, when it is of manageable size, is always more resourceful than individuals working alone. The opportunity for students to pool their knowledge of English as members of a group of peers cuts down considerably on the teacher's need to drill the entire class indiscriminately. As members of small working groups free of the tension caused by trying to meet the teacher's expectations at every turn, students can ask any question they wish and share in the knowledge of their classmates. As Earl Stevick (1981) points out, fear in the classroom makes new languages difficult to learn. According to Stevick, this fear stems both from students' constant evaluation by the teacher and their memory of past failures. In light of these observations, there are at least three benefits to small-group activities in the EFL classroom:

- (1) the teacher is relieved of being the authority figure;
- (2) students become relaxed and less self-conscious about making errors;

- (3) large classes are better managed since each student is more fully engaged in the learning activity.

As a rule of the thumb, it should be kept in mind that groups numbering over nine individuals tend to become too large for the effective exchange of ideas. The second basic point is that the classroom activity must provide a challenge to the students. There must be some problem either chosen by them or presented to them which draws their attention away from the English language as an object and towards viewing it as a means to communicate. If the teacher suggests a problem, it must be one which leads the students to involve themselves personally in creating a scenario around it. Generally stated themes such as "defend yourself against a charge by the government that you owe money to the tax division" are usually not very effective, since they do not present a choice to be made which is personal. Preferable would be a theme like the following: "the tax division of the government has sent you a check for J.D 200 with the explanation that you overpaid your taxes last year. You believe that they have made an error and that you have paid what you really owed them. However, it would be easy for you to keep the money. What would you do? What kind of conversation would you have with the tax authorities regarding this J.D200 that they sent to you? In choosing such a theme, the English language becomes a means to a realistic end, involving the use of the student's personal opinions.

The third of our basic points is that literature, as a 'high' use of language, is best understood by those readers who become involved in at least a minor aspect of the same creative processes that produced the literary masterpiece they are reading. By creating their own scenarios as derivatives of the episode from literature which the teacher has assigned to them, the students become minor authors and playwrights themselves. They may rarely, if ever, achieve the heights of the literary sample given in class. However, they come to appreciate the talent of the original writer. Most importantly, they will be led to write and enact lengthy discourses in English. In the defense that they must give of their scenarios as derivations of the original piece, they are forced to be clear about their analysis of the original piece.

Why bother with putting drama in the EFL classroom? This question must linger in the minds of any English teacher working in a country where English is not commonly spoken. Indeed, why build a dramatic base for teaching any foreign language to students who might never travel to the country where that language is spoken natively? The answer to this question is that with a dramatic base, students come to think of the language they are learning as a means to verbalize human needs and solve problems which come up in all human interactions, regardless of the language spoken. In the absence of this activity, students tend to 'objectify' the language, thinking of it only in formal terms of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

Dramatic enactment as an enhancement of the learning process leads one to realize that context, shared and unshared information, kinesics (i.e., facial expressions and body gestures), intonations of the voice, etc. are all vital to the understanding of messages exchanged between humans. These matters are not seen as accompaniments to language but as equal parties with language in effective communication.

The conversation course: SI was introduced into the instructional core of the Oral Skills course. At the beginning of the lesson, students are divided into small groups in order to act out a scenario with some type of dramatic tension which requires decision making on the part of the players. For example, the following is a scenario which has been used several times during the past two years:

Title: Give me the news straight!

Role A: You've just had a rather serious heart attack and are confined to the hospital. Your doctor seems hesitant to tell you about your condition. Work out a plan to get him/her to tell you what your chances for a complete recovery.

Role B: You are a doctor who is treating a patient with a heart condition. This patient has just had a heart attack and is in the hospital. He doesn't know it yet, but he has just won the national lottery and is a rich man. How will you tell him this news without exciting him so much that he might have another heart attack?

As can be observed, these roles involve a problem-solving situation, and often a misunderstanding. They are roles many people could find themselves in. Moreover, this scenario is open-ended in the sense that it presents alternatives to players while acting, and the exact course of the scenario can not be predicted.

The interaction between students playing the two roles often begins in a state of ambiguity. For example, students with the role of the patient need to use strategies and counter or tactics in order to get the information desired about his/her health. At the same time, the doctor-player needs to think of ways to give the patient the news about winning the lottery very carefully. Language, then, is generated from the use of strategies the counter strategies in order to motivate actions to personal goals. I have found out that scenarios having a lot of tension can be very interesting and challenging to students. For example, the following scenario is a favorite one among my EFL students:

Title: Let me go home, please!

While traveling abroad, you hired a car from a rent car agent. After driving for several days in the foreign country, you are stopped by a traffic officer who discovers that your international driving license has expired. He wants to take you for investigation at the police department, but you are bound to fly back home in two hours' time. How can you convince him that you must return the rented car first, and then catch your plane?

By working through this kind of international confrontation in the target language, students need to find verbal expressions and conversational

Psychological & Educational Studies Review, *Laboratory Of Developing Psychoeducational Practice, Num 1, 20008* features appropriate to the scenario strategies. Different personalities of students will emerge when they work together in assigning roles, discussing plans for winning the encounter, and solving problems. Competent and extrovert students will likely to support the work of the weaker and quieter ones by explaining to them the content of a message, or by creating for them minor roles to be played during the rehearsal stage.

. Phases of instruction 2

In a very general way, the activities of classroom can be divided into performing and non-performing phases. The performing or 'on-stage' phase comprises those tasks which are subject to evaluation by the teacher. In the traditional EFL classroom, these include pattern-practice, recitation of dialogs, responding to teacher's questions and reading aloud from a passage in a textbook. Off-stage activities are any which promote learning but are not directly evaluated by the teacher. Traditionally, silent reading, working out drills and exercises in private, and memorizing vocabulary are off-stage. In our strategic interaction approach, the on-stage phase is equated with the performance of scenarios. These performances are given before the entire class. In the off-stage phase, students confer among themselves, get advice and help from the teacher, and discuss the effectiveness of their performances. The allocation of time to the two phases is not necessarily equal. The off-stage phase is usually the longer one.

The significance of the two phases lies in the psychological effect this division has on students. Being 'off-stage' allows them to make errors, ask question which may be irrelevant, and do other things which contribute to the learning of English without incurring the tension brought about by the threat of evaluation.

The following are the general instructional procedures followed in teaching through SI. Classtime activities can be divided into three stages of instruction: rehearsal, performance, and debriefing.

Rehearsal: At this stage, students are presented with a scenario and work in groups of no more 8-10 (a class of 30 students can be divided into three groups, and each group meets with the instructor once a week). Students then start developing roles they choose to play. They plan possible strategies or counter strategies that could be used effectively during interaction. As an instructor, I only act as an advisor at this stage, answering language questions which deal with the scenario situation-----questions regarding vocabulary items, structures, or verb forms. The rehearsal period can last from five to ten minutes with advanced level students such as in the case of our students at the University. However, intermediate or beginning students may need a longer period of time.

Performance: Each group of students performs its scenario, while the rest of the students observe performance. The teacher's role at this stage is that of an

Psychological & Educational Studies Review, *Laboratory Of Developing Psychoeducational Practice, Num 1, 20008* evaluator. The teacher is also joined in the evaluator role by those students not performing. Observing students are given worksheets to help with the task of role analysis, language use, or any remark about performances. Their remarks on the answer sheet require answering questions such as: 1) was the scenario conversation realistic? What changes should be made? What language errors were observed?

These remarks are later brought up for discussion at the debriefing stage in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the scenario played, or to see how well speakers played their assumed roles. I sometimes asked non-participating students to write down their reactions to a performance in a form of a paragraph to be given as homework in case there was no time to discuss all their comments during the debriefing stage.

It should be emphasized here that on no account must the performance be interrupted by the teacher for correction in language use. Furthermore, the teacher must expect breakdowns in communication while students are performing, but he/she must not interfere in order to avoid creating a threatening class atmosphere. To handle communication breakdowns, I always allow performing students to consult others in the class for help or advice. This kind of consultation may provide a good opportunity for group learning process. The teacher may also observe some students experiencing a feeling of nervousness when performing in front of the class when they act for the first time. I usually tell my students to expect this kind of feeling since it is normal at the beginning of acting, but things can get better later. Experiencing

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a feeling of nervousness when performing could also be attributed to the conflicting nature of the roles in the scenario, which usually require a spontaneous verbal reaction.

Debriefing: This is a stage for evaluating performance and for learning. The teacher's role at this stage is more directive in nature than his /her role in the other stages.

Activities at this stage may take a variety of forms:

i) A guided discussion of different group performances in terms of language structure and content. Discussion of language includes suggested changes to make structure reflect the informal level of spoken English. It also includes suggested changes for using appropriate words or expressions. On the other hand, discussion of content is meant to pull scenarios closer to real-life roles in case there were inappropriate actions for a particular role. The discussion can also include suggestions for alternate directions a specific scenario could have taken. The worksheets prepared by non-participating students during the performance stage can be used as a basis for discussion. This kind of guided discussion in itself provides all students with another opportunity for speaking in the target language in addition to playing roles in a scenario. Therefore, if carefully planned, the debriefing stage can escalate into useful doses of language input. The writer's experience suggests that students can acquire considerable language abilities via the scenario discussion alone. I usually ask my students to keep a personal notebook in order to write vocabulary and

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grammar items, idioms, and speech expressions which they have learnt, or which were significant to them.

- ii) The teacher can go over serious language errors which he observed in student performances. Moreover, the teacher must explain grammar points when and as they relate directly to the communicative content of the performed scenarios.
- iii) Written follow-up requiring students to write down their reactions, comments, and observations about a particular scenario in a paragraph form. In this homework writing task, students can write what they liked or disliked about the scenario. In other words, students are asked to write their critique of what they have observed during the performance stage.

It should be added also that during the debriefing stage, students were given an opportunity to evaluate their performances and to ask questions related to any aspect of the language as well as the content of the scenarios presented. Students were encouraged to think of alternative solutions produced. During this stage, the teacher supplied answers to students; questions that the students could easily understand, answers that did not include elaborate grammatical explanations, unless the instructor felt that the students both showed an interest in analyzing certain structures in more detail and were able to understand the complexities involved in such grammatical analysis. As for the total time devoted to discussion in the debriefing stage, no effort was made to stop students from asking questions as long as they were motivated enough

Psychological & Educational Studies Review, *Laboratory Of Developing Psychoeducational Practice, Num 1, 20008* to ask questions and were able to understand the explanations. Thus the traditional roles of teacher and students ---- which usually give more opportunities to the former to ask question than to the latter ---- were reversed, with beneficial effects on learner motivation.

Role shifting: The teacher who uses dramatic techniques in a classroom must be ready to go through several 'role-shifts.' She (or he) is not always the 'authority,' imposing her will on her class and expecting them to please her. Once the teacher establishes his authority, he goes through a role change in which he becomes the facilitator for the learning process. As far as SI is concerned, this learning process begins with the students' recognition of a problem to be solved or a choice to be made among several alternatives in a situation. Learning continues as the students work through the problem or situation and finally create a scenario in English which is based on their solution. The teacher who does not engage in role shifts from authority to coach to consultant, and so on, will find it difficult to promote the learning process in his students.

According to short (1980) there are at least eight different roles which the teacher can play in the classroom. Using some of our own labels, these roles can be identified as follows:

Convener—getting the class together,

Facilitator—explaining how a task should be done,

Advocate—defending positions on issues from one task to another,

Adversary—taking opposite stands from those of the students

Reviewer—listening to students as they practice,

Evaluator – giving opinions on students' performances,

Expert authority – providing information and data.

To the above roles, we can add that of the 'coach,' as the teacher gives advice on how scenarios in English should be performed.

3. Why Acting in the Classroom.

Some teachers might feel uneasy about giving so much freedom to the class. To the outsider, the strategic interaction class may sometimes seem disorganized and noisy. Each little group working by itself is not as easy to monitor as one large class all paying attention to one teacher. Yet the advantages to group work far outweigh the apparent disadvantages. Speaking in groups is different in many ways from conversing with just one other person. First of all, the change back and forth between listener and speaker can be done by several persons in a group, with less predictability than when talk is shared by only two. Students working in groups learn to make sudden shifts as the topic changes. They also become accustomed to adjusting their speech so as to be understood by many others. It is unfortunate that conversational materials given as dialogues in text books rarely address many features of group talk

Psychological & Educational Studies Review, *Laboratory Of Developing Psychoeducational Practice, Num 1, 20008* such as turn-taking, change of topic, overlap, and self-repair. Organizing students in small groups at least allows for the opportunity to try out the rudiments of talk with multiple partners. The sharing of ideas and impressions can be of instructional value in itself. It is interesting to observe that in this method, small groups of students become cohesive and self-supporting when faced with a common problem to solve. Once this cohesion is established, the teacher can present himself as an outside consultant without seeming to be a threat. Participating in a small group is especially good for the shy or timid student who is not likely to perform well before the larger audience of the full class. Muhaisen (2007) rightly says that learners need less threatening learning environment (as in SI) in order to lower their anxiety and worries.

As a variant on the assignment of full scenarios to the groups, the teacher may choose to charge separate groups with parts of the same scenario to prepare. For example, one group might be asked to prepare the lines that a landlord might use to collect the rent from a tenant who has not paid for months. A separate group might have the responsibility of preparing the tenant's defense. Then, after each group has had a chance to write some lines for their part of the dialog, the teacher may call upon representatives from each group to perform before the rest of the class. After the performance, the class can talk about who was more successful – the landlord or the tenant. They might also suggest other lines which could have been used by either party.

4 . Conclusion

The scenario is the means by which we promote the creation of strategic discourse. Within the context of scenes built around dramatic confrontations of various kinds, students are led to put into action the verbal devices which are best suited to solving human problems. Literature can be a great resource for scenario. The teacher who would like to make his teaching of literature more interactional can find much basic material in plays, novels, and short stories. Here are some suggestions: Examine the plots of all literary selections which you are presently using in your classes. Determine the points at which the action could have taken a different turn. Work out some alternative endings which would result from taking these different turns. Next, you are ready to present the plot to your students, stopping at the point where several developments are possible. Let them pick their own conclusions.

In this way, you would be assured of the students' familiarity with the base from which to work. Yet another possibility would be to take plots from human-interest stories printed in current newspapers. After all, literature itself has its start in the happenings of every-day.

I have often noticed that the SI design has a capacity to renew class interest and enthusiasm at each scenario. The dramatic tension and conflict presented in each scenario gave my EFL students an opportunity to experience emotional depth and personal involvement in using language especially when playing roles that fit their personalities. A good scenario based on real life roles

Psychological & Educational Studies Review, *Laboratory Of Developing Psychoeducational Practice, Num 1, 20008* can always create deep involvement in acting. My students, for example, extremely liked scenarios about how one can react when a marriage partner was chosen by parents, or how to deal with a noisy neighbor in the middle of the night. In these and other scenarios (see the appendix), students were given a chance to solve difficult problems, and to devise strategies which reflect their way of seeing things. We agree with Walsh (2006:133) who believes that “for the teacher, understanding classroom communication, being able to ‘shape’ learner contribution and making strategic decisions ... are regarded as being crucial to developing SLA in L2 classroom context”.

Finally SI is adaptable with regard to its ability to incorporate different teaching techniques from other approaches, especially during the debriefing stage. Even instructors who opt for eclecticism may find this flexibility quite possible to incorporate. Eclecticism may be pleasing to many foreign language teachers, but we should keep in mind that the significant point is an underlying coherent theory of how languages are learned. In the case of SI that theory requires the personal involvement of the learner in the instructional process.

Appendix

The number of the scenarios to be covered during a semester is not usually planned in advance. The average is between 9-12 scenarios per semester. The appendix includes nine scenarios which were used during the Spring term of 2007 for the Oral Skills course at UJ.

(1) Scenario title: Let me go home, Please!

While traveling abroad, you hired a car from a rent car agent. After driving for several days in the foreign country, you are stopped by a traffic officer who discovers that your international driving license has expired. He wants to take you for investigation at the police department, but you are bound to fly back home in two hours' time. How can you convince him that you must return the rented car first, and then catch your plane?

(2) Scenario title: Military service

Just as you arrived at Amman International airport, you discover that you have forgotten to bring your military service postponement certificate. Only a few minutes were left for the take-off of the plane. How can you convince the security officer to believe you before you miss your plane?

(3) Scenario title: I need to work

Nawal thinks that the husband is old-fashioned. They've only been married a few months and he wants Nawal to quit her job as a bank employee. He doesn't want his wife to work at all. He thinks he makes enough to support them both, but Nawal's job is very important to her, and would not enjoy sitting home all day with nothing to do. How can both of them solve this problem?

(4) Scenario title: A test-tube baby?

A husband and a wife have been married for ten years. They have no children. Some of their friends talked to them about having a child through test-tube baby techniques, but the wife is confused. She is worried about the moral implications of this genetic operation. Her husband, however, likes the idea and has no objection to this at all. How can he talk to his wife's parents about this matter even if they disagree with him?

(5) Scenario title: My grade is unfair, sir!

You are a high school teacher. You gave a student a low grade on his paper, and he becomes very angry. The student's parents are also angry, and think that the grade is quite unfair. The student suffers from a heart problem. The parents try to exert pressure on the teacher to raise the

grade, but the teacher doesn't want to make any change. The parents and the teacher argue about this problem. How can they solve it?

(6) Scenario title: A job outside Amman

You have been offered a new job and a promotion at the University of Yarmouk in Irbid. This means that your family will have to leave to Irbid with you. Your wife and children do not want to move. Should you accept the position in Irbid and advance in your career or should you stay in Amman to please your family without any job promotion for the rest of your life? How can you convince your family about your plan?

(7) Scenario title: Going to college

You have just graduated from high school and your parents expect you to attend the University of Jordan. Since your parents didn't have a chance to go to college, they want very much for you to get a good education in order to be a doctor or an engineer. However, you want to work on your family farm because you think that university education is not as promising as working on a farm. Try to convince your parents about your point of view.

(8) Scenario title: The nursing home

You live with your father who has recently suffered a stroke and is confined to bed. He needs a lot of care and this has become very difficult for you since you only both live together. Your friends advise you to put him in a nursing home. If you don't, then you will have to quit your job. You finally decide to talk to him about the nursing home, but you are quite worried about his reaction to the idea. What are you going to do when you discuss the matter with him?

(9) Scenario title: How can I say "NO"?

You are on a study program abroad in Italy and become close friends with an Italian friend, who invites you to his/her house for dinner. When you arrive, your friend's mother greets you with great kindness and proudly announces that she has prepared her specialty just for you. You discover that it is impossible for you to eat this kind of food for some reasons. How can you explain that to your host. Your hostess insists on you to try to eat since they are not convinced about the reasons you give for not being able to eat. What do you say to get out of this difficult situation?

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