

FALAR - SPEAKING

A Competência Oral no Ensino de uma
Língua Estrangeira

-

Teaching Oral Communication Skills in
Foreign Languages

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Spoken discourse acquisition in multimedia learning environments

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1. Introduction.

Learning a foreign language has always been a difficult task. Not surprisingly, there have been many theories about how to learn them throughout time. All of them attempt, in one way or another, to focus the learning of foreign languages through the lens of contemporary philosophical trends. All of them try to adapt the actual experience of students – or learners – and of observers to a position of the alterity of the acquisition process. From all of them, however, we can take ideas or visions that could be useful in the implementation of acquisition techniques. For this reason we believe it is appropriate to apply a holistic vision of learning in which there is no one single or exclusive perspective regarding learning. We know that in the process of perception and assimilation of content many factors play a key role, among these are; repetition, connection to other contents, and affectivity or self-creation/production. (Pérez Ruiz, 2008) We do not believe that discarding any of these techniques, from the various schools, is a valid option if what we want is to position ourselves within the framework of rigorous and scientific investigation.

Thanks to techniques such as neuroimaging we have been able to transcend the field of mere external and subjective observation and arrive at internal and objective observation of the cognitive processes and mechanisms underlying learning. We are much more aware of how the brain acts and reacts to certain stimuli. The information we have about perception and about how such information is reconstructed and how it is related to production has advanced far indeed. Nevertheless, the research relating to perception processes, assimilation, organization and later production of the contents still presents several challenges since much of this research is ongoing or in the process of being verified by others

This is why the acquisition of foreign languages is a fascinating field, one which we believe deserves special attention. It seems evident that the components of language acquisition go beyond simple neuroplasticity. From birth we naturally acquire our mother language, forging senses and the particularities of our linguistic system. When learning a foreign language we have to add, to those structures which are in constant modification since our birth, new connections related to our environment¹. In contrast, this process of acquisition is more radical than that of other disciplines. While in history or in pure sciences concepts are acquired in a significant way and from the point of view of the construction of knowledge, the particular idiosyncrasy of language demands not only excellent control of content but also allows very few mistakes or variations. This requires of the brain a very large degree of neuroplasticity, far beyond that required for other disciplines. Nevertheless, the effort is inversely proportional to the mechanization of language structures through its use.

If, additionally, we take spoken discourse as a fundamental and essential competence of language, we add the difficulty of knowing a field different from the written language in which oppositional phonemic realization, improvisation and time are fundamental for adequate communication. Thus, we are faced with one of the most demanding disciplines for the brain.

However, we know that, though they are difficult, there are techniques which help us to productively optimize the time dedicated to this discipline.

In this work, through the use of multimedia and social networks, we will provide some techniques which can be implemented in a face-to-face learning, b-learning or e-learning classes.

2. What is spoken discourse?

Before we begin with our object of study it is preferable to briefly define what we mean by spoken discourse². Spoken discourse is the linguistic production realized through sounds and coded writing and that which is considered characteristic of a speaking situation³. Within this definition we should also include the diaphasic as well as the colloquial variations of language, which encompass a good portion of the real practice of speaking Spanish⁴.

An essential element of spoken discourse as text is conversation. Conversation contains within itself most of the characteristics of spoken discourse and it would be very reductionist to limit ourselves exclusively to the auditive component of language. According to the work of experimental

psychology (Botvinick & Cohen, 1998; MacDonald & McGurk, 1978) or that of the Gestalt school, the context (visual or spatial) provides the information necessary to complete message interpretation including that needed to modify this information⁵. These concepts, when applied to phonetics, give the phonetics the necessary opposition in order to bring semantic meaning to an entire text. We can, therefore, deduce that the understanding of oral messages requires that we pay attention not only to linguistic but to paralinguistic and extralinguistic elements.

It is certainly the case that when we refer to the field of spoken discourse we are referring not only to the lexic or phonetic cognitive distributions but also to the communicative situation in which they take place, that is, conversation understood as a holistic action in which a large variety of factors may intervene.

Spoken discourse and conversation.

The relation between spoken discourse and conversation is one of inclusiveness and interconnectedness. Oral texts are based on conversation: we speak with the goal of communicating with someone. However, within the frame of a foreign language teaching session, spoken discourse should not only be based on conversation. Lately, we have forgotten that one of the most important things, when it comes to establishing a conversation, is not only the ability to classify concepts, maintain the subject, answer in an semantically and pragmatically appropriate manner in a communicational action, but also to cause the least possible stress on the native receptor. Thus, correct pronunciation takes on a crucial role. For example, entering a café and ordering a “caffee”⁶, does not mean that the communication was incomplete, however, the quality of information transmission has been affected. The receptor will most likely know what we are asking for, but he will have to put in place phonetic grouping processes in order to arrive at a correct interpretation of the message. That is, he will have to make more of an effort than usual to understand what is being asked of him, which can potentially increase the stress level of the communication and can even frustrate it. If this process is repeated frequently, the receptor can tire and the communicative experience can be impoverished.

Leaving the phonetic-phonological level, to which we will come back later, we would like to focus on the characteristics of the conversation and its didactic implications within the frame of a non-native speaker.

Briefly, since it is not the objective of this work, we will consider as positive conversation characteristics those presented by Briz (2000). According to this author, a conversation is «[...] a type of oral discourse, [...] dialogical, characterized by the communicative immediacy, its dynamism and cooperative character and by the non-defined turn-taking alternation» (Ibid: 225)

This description may lead to the idea that we are excluding written conversations, however, as we mentioned above, nothing is further from the truth. When we refer to an oral discourse, we understand that such written conversation includes spoken discourse's idiosyncratic components, such as lexical poverty, in order to gain immediacy; compensatory elements of the conversational written expression such as onomatopoeias; or interjections; turn-taking; pertinent transition moments, etc.

For this reason it seems obvious to us that writing is the reflection of spoken discourse and that we should, therefore, pay much more attention to it than is common within the European school of foreign language didactics.

3.The importance of spoken discourse in the learning of foreign languages.

Before we begin with the description of the recommended practices prior to the work of spoken discourse in foreign language classes, we think it is necessary to draw an essential distinction, which can be helpful in making us more aware of this fundamental component. We will distinguish spoken discourse as a cognitive process in knowledge acquisition and spoken discourse as a reception process.

3.1.Spoken discourse as a cognitive process

We do not know for sure how a foreign language is learned. Learning and the subsequent acquisition remains unknown in the fields of foreign languages pedagogy as well as any other acquisition field. Nevertheless, we do have some clues that lead us to think of certain attitudes and methodological features that may be an advantage in the productivity and speed of the acquisition of a foreign language. One of the clues is the production itself, free and significant (Diamond, 2001). That is, we know that the acquisition of a foreign language will depend on how much the speaker speaks/practices spontaneously and on how significant that production is for him, if he is involved in

what he is saying, in short, if he wants to express his opinions to his listener. Through Piaget's constructionism and later that of Seymour Papert, we know that action (doing, and in this case, speaking) is necessary to achieve the learning moment. On another note, it seems evident that a person can retain certain concepts temporarily more or less easily, depending on how familiar the person is with the concept or on the relations that can be established with it. The result of this memorization will depend on the individual himself and on his personal experiences⁷. Moreover, the chemical and physiologic brain composition also plays an important role in learning productivity (Ezquerro, 2012). In short, the acquisition of a concept as well as of a sound structure results from a combination of many factors both idiosyncratic and physiologic (Catalina, Gallego, & Honey, 1994; Pérez Ruiz, 2008; Romaní & Moravec, 2011; Tamayo, 2007).

Following this line of thought, the implementation of spoken discourse in a significant manner is one of the determining factors for the transformation of a work memory into a short term memory and subsequently into a setting in the long term memory. Also, we know that visual memory does not operate in the same manner as the auditory memory, just as visual reception does not operate in the same manner as the auditory. (Ballesteros, 1999). The reception of visual conditioning factors offers much more information than auditory reception. However, the auditive memory is much more precise since less entering elements must be processed and reorganized⁸.

3.2. Spoken discourse as a reception process

According to the aforementioned classic postulates of the Gestalt school, in both processes (visual and auditory) there are conditioning factors that suggest an interpretation of reality as a whole different from the sum of its parts, that is, what we process is not all that we perceive. These processes should be taken into account by the teacher at the time of proposing an educational activity in order to optimize the learning time.

In this we find an explanation for the fact that the native speakers of a language are surprised when reading or attempting a phonetic transcription of a real conversation. In it there will be elements that our brain orders and classifies as elements of conversation that are not essential for survival (using the terminology of neurosciences). However, linguists know of the importance of those resources that disappear from the brain's consciousness. In the same way that when we drive we are not conscious of all the movements that we do to drive the vehicle, when we speak we are not aware of certain

conversational elements, such as vocatives, elements of turn-taking, the constant interruptions in phrases or, in order to mention a very significant and recurrent example in the foreign language manuals, confirmation structures such as ‘you know?’ ‘right?’ Using the same analogy, when we learn to drive we are aware of everything we do, we give conscious orders to our brain in order for it to carry out the actions, we are extremely attentive to all the elements and factors that appear on the road, however, with practice, driving becomes a mechanical action and we are only conscious of it in an unusual or dangerous situation (traffic jam, accident, rain, etc.) Exactly the same thing happens with the learning of a foreign language. When we start learning a language we want to know what each one of the elements in the conversation mean. We are conscious of them and our brain organizes them as useful. When the acquisition process is completed, we understand that they are no longer useful and even though we process them (in the same way as in the initial driving of a car) they no longer make their way into our awareness and therefore, go unnoticed for the speaker.

The aforementioned neuronal mechanisms become particularly significant when perception happens through audition. Listening brings the brain into a state of tension and stress, since, contrary to what happens when we’re reading a text, we are trained to hear what we are listening to all at once. Therefore, the brain has to learn to choose what is truly important and how to classify as “uninteresting” elements that are not essential. Evidence of this has been shown in the Cocktail Party Effect (Cherry, 1953) in which we select what we want to hear from among many conversations.

The spoken discourse process is a complex one from the point of view unifying attention, reception, and decodification in the best conditions. This is why the brain has to save time and energy (which translates to information intake) in order to make the most of the information. Let’s say that our brain is not perfect, in fact, mistakes are much more frequent than we imagine; however, the brain is extremely functional and adaptive. It is perfect for survival since it allows the selection of what’s most important, while simultaneously remaining alert for all the other vital functions.

In this sense, we know that the auditory memory is extremely adaptive and, therefore, very efficient when it comes to selecting the audio, organizing the concepts by creating synaptic connections and, consequently, greatly helping to transform the learned contents into acquired contents (Krashen, 1981). Even though learning a language orally is more difficult because of elements which may be particularly demotivating for the learner, it is better in the long term since it provides better

instruments for knowledge acquisition. Not without consequence our brain is designed to acquire a language through auditory channels and not through written ones⁹.

Teachers are therefore obliged to optimize the learning results, becoming not only the facilitators of learning, but also an affective part of the language.

3.3. Language as linguistic description.

From the point of view of the spoken language as descriptive matter, there are certain oral elements which should receive special attention in the acquisition of a foreign language.

Though it is not limited to these, we can highlight the following as the most relevant:

- Oral frequencies in oral conversation. Often confused with a diaphasic variety of the language. There are certain appearances or frequencies of linguistic character that are much more common in an oral context than in a written context. For example, according to studies carried out by Terrádez relating to peninsular Spanish (Terrádez Gurrea, 2001) we know objectively that the verbs *ser*, *decir* y *tener*¹⁰ are those most used in oral and conversational Spanish. (Ibid:80), whereas the most common adverbs are *no*, *sí*, *ya* o *más*¹¹ (Ibid:80). In regards to nouns, for example, the ones appearing most often are *día*, *cosa*, *vez* u *hombre*¹² (Ibid:86). We have to highlight the characteristics of this kind of appearances, the massive use of which is due to discourse speed, the necessity to express as much as possible in a very short period of time. This would explain the salient use of structures, the semantic range of which is larger, with an inversely proportional degree of precision.

When seeking a method of learning optimization we should take into account these statistical studies in order to achieve maximum performance in the shortest time possible.

- Discourse particles. This is one of the points we believe to be critical to conversational objectives in a foreign language class. These connectors operate from different inescapable levels in order not only to normalize the communication from the point of view of the receptor by reducing the impact of the foreign speech, but they also determine the direction of the communication. For the work with this kind of structure in Spanish as a native and as a foreign language, the *Diccionario de partículas Discursivas*¹³, which accounts for the different uses, variations, positions, registries,

conversational formulas or similar particles, will be very useful. This dictionary is meant to be used by teachers and researchers as well as expert learners¹⁴.

- Order and turn-taking according to courtesy in certain cultures¹⁵. To know, recognize and respect the rules of turn-taking can be critical, not only to correctly interpret the use of turn-taking, but also to look for the relevant transition moment, in which the speaker can interrupt a turn and impose his. The incorrect use of these elements may carry implications not only from a point of view of the language as a system, but also from a pragmatic and polite point of view, when understood as a phenomenon inherent to culture and, therefore, reflected in the language.

- Natural intonations. Depending on the native language (and on other interlanguages held by the speaker) these may be important, because although they are usually not contextually oppositional, intonations have a normalizing and naturalizing function which lessens stress for the receptor.

- Gestures with explicit semantics. Despite not being an oral communication, but a kinesic one, gestures are an inescapable part of a face-to-face conversation. Working with spoken discourse without paying attention to these compensatory elements could result in a communicational impoverishment that we, as stringent teachers, must not allow ourselves.

- Phonological oppositions. We know that phonological oppositions can play a key role in the understanding of the oral component in speakers whose language object is not their native language. Contrary to what happens in native speakers (R. M. R. Warren & Warren, 1970), the innate use of phonemic restoration in the absence of auditory information by foreigners, can become a problem for a correct decoding. In a study conducted with Portuguese students at beginner level (Chenoll Mora, 2013), it was found that the biggest problem when having to write what they heard was precisely this phonemic substitution¹⁶ (66.7%) well above other common mistakes in this level of student, such as the discrimination of the interdental sound, fricative and deaf (/θ/) and the alveolar fricative deaf (/s/) with an error rate of 14%¹⁷. This problem in the decoding even led students to ignore the sense of the phrase and to give a bigger importance to the phonological interpretation rather than to the semantic interpretation of the message¹⁸. Thus, depending on the phonological oppositions that the learner himself possesses (from his native language and from other second languages), it will be more or less difficult for him to understand a certain message. The use of recognition on the phonetic-phonological level will assist in lexical acquisition, since the mental image of the written word helps us not only to understand its meaning, but also to memorize the word itself. Not

surprisingly, once these oppositions were worked through using the oral practice of recognition, the level of phonological substitutions was reduced by 53% leaving only 35.4% and the lack of contextual sense virtually disappeared.

- **Training Allophones.** In the case of Spanish, there are certain phonetic realizations that may risk the correct interpretation of the text. Cases such as the fall of the intervocalic position¹⁹ or of the final “s” in certain regions of the southern peninsula are well known even in formal oral contexts. Knowing how to recognize these realizations in the oral continuum, has a major impact on understanding.

To conclude, seeing how important oral production and understanding are in foreign language classes, both from a descriptive and a procedural point of view, we consider it imperative to endeavor to compensate for the lack of continuous exposure (just as it happens in acquisition by inversion) as well as for the lack of significant production in a face to face class and particularly in an online class.

We will see what tools we have and what are the practices which we consider best suited to achieving the best results in the teaching and learning process.

4. Spoken discourse practice.

As has already been stated, spoken discourse is not exclusive to the phonetic-phonological level. On the contrary, spoken discourse is also overwhelmingly present in print media. This seems obvious in an age when written social media are a standard pattern in communication, both in personal and professional relationships. In this sense, and consistent with the trends developed in the diaphasic use of Spanish, in which the colloquial traits are present in many of the communicative contexts, we can't but recommend their use. This, of course, with the logical reservations of the foreign language student's lack of knowledge about courtesy itself in a certain culture.

So, among the common tools of the written oral language, we find chats and formal and informal forums and often integrated within those, the online social networks understood as the text produced by the user. In what follows we will see a summary of these communication spaces as well as the various didactic exercises and consequences for acquisition in formal and informal learning.

In this section, we shouldn't forget the importance of mobile applications such as the popular Whastapp (chat), Viber (chat and video-conference) or Line (chat and video-conference) which lately have come to constitute large private social networks. The obvious drawback of these social networks, which as mentioned are private, is that in most of them the mobile phone number of the user is necessary, with all the ethical implications that this may entail.

4.1. The chats

Chats are more or less synchronous conversations that can be performed in private or in public, while currently the former is most common. The chat is a transposition of an oral and face-to-face conversation in which there are also rules that must be observed, such as the typical deixis of face-to-face learning. With no overlaps, the operation of turn-taking has different rules to spoken discourse. However, the speed in the message transmission is also important, revealing typical instruments of spoken discourse. In this sense, the communication is not usually as fast as a purely oral conversation, which is an advantage for speakers of a foreign language, since there is more time available to think of the exact word or structure without having to hurry because the receptor is waiting for an answer. However, even though there is a lower demand for a response, the waiting time is also quite brief.

The use of an informal learning environment can be a good way to practice oral conversation, since it simultaneously combines the speed element that we mentioned above with some flexibility.

In this sense, the student or non-native speaker has some extra time, which is necessary for correct use of the object language, as well as the pressure for a quick answer. This turns the chat into a text with oral elements that bridges the synchronous conversation and the asynchronous text.

Furthermore, the use of emoticons (in a colloquial or proximity context with the speaker) or other mechanisms (like the use of capital letters to yell) turns into a compensating element, which substitutes the tone and objective of the message²⁰. In the same line, in this case courtesy plays a critical role, since the interpretation of a text with characteristics of spoken discourse needs other paralinguistic elements such as tone and intonation with which we give more or less emphasis to a word, irony in the voice, etc. We could say that an expert speaker (not only in the semantic production of the language, but also in its pragmatic transition) wouldn't need these compensatory elements, but it would be naive to think that all native speakers can be considered experts in this

field. In the case of a non-native speaker, even more unaware of these rules, the work with mitigating elements of the language becomes critical, especially in texts that attack the mental image or face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) of the receptor or that simply present a disagreement.

From an educational point of view, we recommend the use of platforms such as Facebook, which include chat tools in a very natural way for the student. In this sense, and from the point of view of informal learning, we recommend that the teacher who is a regular user of this type of social network, maintains a high degree of availability and direct contact with students. If this relationship is not to the liking of the teacher for one reason or another, a certain schedule for chatting can be arranged. In this type of media, the participation of the student is common since it is not framed within a formal learning context, but is located midway between the formal and informal learning. In the end, students are still talking to their teacher (formal learning) in a social network environment (informal learning).

4.2. Oral forums

The fundamental difference between a forum and a chat is to be found on three levels: full significance in themselves, they are a part of a more complex text and there is no immediate pressure as in the synchronous text.

So, forums are texts that have full significance in themselves, that is, they are messages that don't need further parts in order to be considered closed. They contain greetings, developments and farewells. However, they have their own rules, depending on whether they are considered a formal or informal forum.

On the other hand, they are part of a larger text which joins the asynchronous participation of other elements. This characteristic allows the use of the deixis and permits more extension than in a forum, since it is asynchronous the receptor doesn't have to wait for an immediate answer. The fact that forums deal with very concrete themes also helps raise reflection, coherence and cohesion, since the objective is to make an opinion clear. Thus, argumentative texts are better suited.

The fact that the pressure of immediacy is absent helps to focus the efforts in a correct transmission of the message from a formal point of view.

Didactically, it is obvious that the more traditional forums are more useful from the point of view of written and argumentative practice in Spanish. However, the web currently offers many possibilities to transform a written forum into an oral one. For example, through sites like Voxopop²¹ specifically dedicated to this purpose, or alternating with other possibilities through the inclusion of YouTube or Vimeo videos, or any other video repository instead of the written text. Through their use, the text can be transformed into a videocast²².

If what we want is to work only with the audio, without the visual component of the videocast cognitively contaminating the auditory elements, we could include a podcast (online audio recordings) or oral recordings of the students that want to participate in the forum. Through web and mobile apps such as Soundcloud²³ which enable previously recorded and rehearsed audio uploading – or even recording using the page itself – it is possible to practice spoken discourse from a phonetic standpoint.

Obviously, in this type of text the improvisation and unpredictability of a real conversational text is often lost. In order to avoid this – if it is convenient to avoid it – it is possible to ask the students not to use any written support²⁴. In this way, the resulting oral text will be more natural and it will test the cognitive skills in the target language through improvisation.

In the case of using forums through LMS²⁵ like Moodle, the importance of this type of video and audio practice lies in the fact that messages are to be properly embedded. That is, the receptor shouldn't leave the Moodle page in order to be able to hear or see the comments, but will have to have a player in the same page where the forum comment is inserted in order to keep not only the aesthetics (an extremely important factor in online learning) but also the continuity in the conversation, from a thematic and temporal standpoint. Having to leave and enter the page merely to listen to the comments can only entail a distraction and removes us from the objective of the exercise. However, if the exercise is carried out through the forums of a social network such as Facebook, the video addresses are automatically transformed into players and this problem disappears. Another advantage of the social network Facebook (besides the obvious ones) is that it offers the possibility of giving a little feedback with one single click on “Like” or through short written comments.

A curious effect of this kind of oral and recorded texts on the students themselves is that it gives them the chance to listen to themselves and to be aware that their level of proficiency is lower than they think. This result makes them aware of the fact that the level of quality perception of their

interlanguage is usually lower than what they conclude when listening to themselves in a holistic self-evaluation. It is critical to warn them of this, because though this may motivate them to improve their oral proficiency, it can also have the opposite effect.

From the point of view of the practice of different levels of the language, it is advisable to propose several themes to be worked on at the same time and always to state the level (formal – informal) on which it must be performed. Proposing an informal and a formal theme will lead us to work on elements of a formal and an informal spoken discourse, practicing various languages registers which will most likely be useful in real life.

Finally, we should take into account that the subjects that we propose for the forums should have as a starting point themes of interest for the students according to their age groups, the work environment in which they are or will be involved and, in general, themes about which we believe students already have an opinion they are willing to express. In this way we assure that the meaningful factor will be covered (Ausubel & Fitzgerald, 1961)

A good solution for the meaningful problem is the proposal of several varied themes, through which the students are offered the possibility of choosing among the wide range of possibilities at their disposal. Thus, we believe in the diversification, not only of the objective, but also of the thematic contents and of the choice of their own path, which is of great importance in maintaining the motivation to learn foreign languages and to work in various semantic fields.

4.3. The podcast

Podcasts are audio recordings that, in principle, are part of a collection of more files and which form an entire thematic series.

We can, however, work with isolated podcasts. The applications that can be drawn from them are closely related to the aforementioned videocasts.

One of the advantages, as mentioned before, is that they are single-channel (audio as the exclusive message transmitter) and therefore allow us to focus exclusively on oral production. Unlike videos or, as we will see later on, the video-conference, the fact that we are focusing exclusively on the audio makes the mistakes of the students more apparent, since attention is focused in the auditive element.

There is not much to say that won't be repeating what has already been said. We can use podcasts in several ways: phonetic practices, input or real audio recordings and free production in some subjects²⁶.

Furthermore, a practice to consider is the creation of a closed group in Facebook in which the student will have the chance to exhibit his Spanish without the pressure of being face-to-face with the rest of the class. In this kind of practice, the students feel positive learning pressure, not in regards to time but to the quality of their interjection. Depending on the type of student and on their own personality, we could obtain very positive results, not only from a linguistic point of view but also from an oral and affective point of view. This exercise helps create a group feeling, since it exposes each students work to the others in an asynchronous way and without an immediate external reaction that can condition the oral expression through linguistic, affective and social factors. This task can include an option for collaborative work, by asking the students to carry out a podcast in collaboration with one or more class-mates. Depending on the objective, we will design the activity using different communicative strategies.

Another advantage of this type of oral production and language input files is their portability as well as the ease of creating them from mobile phones or tablets. Pages such as Soundcloud or Ivox, have their own mobile applications through which we can not only download the content we want but also record the content we want to upload. In this way, and because most of our students already own a SmartPhone²⁷, the digital gap ceases to exist since everyone will be able, once the application is downloaded, to record their own podcast avoiding the uncomfortable complications of having to sit in front of a desktop in order to be able to listen to the audio.

Finally, one of the most difficult tasks for the teacher is the correction of the mistakes that may appear in these audio files, since correction at the exact moment in which the mistake occurs is virtually impossible. One solution is to write down the time when the mistake appeared, though this remains very cumbersome for the students and especially for the teacher. That being said, the Soundcloud application offers the possibility of inserting written comments throughout the audio. That is, if we hear that the student has made a mistake in minute 1:15", we can leave a comment in that exact place, which will then appear in a window when the student or their classmates listen to the audio again.

4.4. Synchronous VoIP calls.

There are classic solutions in working with online elements, such as computer to computer calls (VoIP²⁸) through web applications such as Skype. While the other multimedia applications we have previously mentioned are meant to improve upon or eliminate the conceptual defects of a face-to-face class, in an online learning environment their use is inescapable.

This type of applications presents a few practical problems. The teacher will have to spend more time preparing the class and assuring that it functions normally. However, we believe these practices are critical and essential, both in a face-to-face class as well as in an online class.

As we have mentioned before, it is in conversation that all the skills required for the development of oral proficiency are holistically implemented. It is in these conversations that improvisations are revealed and here where most of the student's mistakes and virtues emerge in the target language. In them, the speakers not only express their opinion but also react to the attitudes of their interlocutors. We consider this unpredictability critical to the learning process of a student, not only from a practical standpoint (few times in real life will students actually have to prepare an audio text) but also from a cognitive one.

This section will be completed in the following one in which we will discuss the use of videoconferences or hangouts.

4.5. Videoconferences.

From the standpoint of synchronous and video communications, both the videoconferences made popular by Skype as well as the Hangout tool integrated in Google+, have given and continue to give a new perspective to the teaching and learning of foreign languages around the world. As we have already mentioned, the use of this type of tool has become essential in an online teaching environment or in mixed environments, and they are complementary elements of face-to-face classes. The use of these tools offers us the possibility of improving our oral proficiency not only by putting into practice what we have learned in the past, but also in making us aware of the mistakes we may make when expressing ourselves in a foreign language. From a cognitive standpoint, becoming aware of these mistakes activates certain mechanisms that help us wonder how and why the communicative act went wrong. These mechanisms reinforce the synaptic connections in our

brains and will only be considered in the long-term memory when we face a similar situation and know how to correct the mistake.

Apart from the obvious advantages of the substitution of face-to-face conversation, this type of instrument offers the possibility of recording a conversation and of sharing it with other people. In the case of the Google+ application, we can include it in YouTube privately and then review the conversation in order to carefully analyse and evaluate the mistakes and correct the answers of the students. This instrument – that is not new but is much easier to use – has several advantages, both for the student and the teacher. On the one hand, as we said before, the scoring system of a spoken discourse evaluation becomes more objective. Teachers can focus more on having a regular conversation with the student instead of paying attention to all the mistakes in order to be able to write them down. On the other hand, the visual component comes into play in which the facial expressions and the kinesic elements of the face-to-face conversation complete and support the transmitted message.

In short, with this tool, oral expression and oral skills practice can be considered complete with all the elements that define it in an holistic way.

5. Oral comprehension practice: *Internet* as real corpus.

The use of the *Internet* as a real corpus of the language is not at all novel. However, we find it convenient to highlight here the importance of balancing the oral texts we offer our students, due to the fact that expectations are often created about a certain text, the theme or linguistic contents of which can seem interesting to us for its use but which is not appropriate to the actual competence or control of the student.

As many studies about perception show, (McGowan, Stephens, & West, 2009; Simons & Chabris, 1999) we are not able to perceive everything that appears in a text, be this visual, auditory or textual. In a domain as demanding as the auditory, the effort is far greater. In the same way we saw before when referring to spoken discourse as a perception process, the native speakers of a language do not always listen to everything they hear and this occurs even more for a foreign speaker. That is why, in the initial levels, when a text includes an auditory element, the preparation or activation of the learning object is recommended, making clear what is meant to be found. A new element of spoken discourse should, for this reason, work through the audio in written form first.

This does not mean that we need to have a transcription of the audio, but that the students have to be able to find what is asked of them in a conceptual way, with the help of written images. For example, if we want to work through conversational connectors that appear in a text, it is advisable, from a perceptive and cognitive standpoint, to identify what we want to find. Without these instructions, as observed by Gestalt, we see the text as a whole, as a sum of its parts. However, despite the fact that understanding the holistic sense of an oral text is an indicator of a certain competency level of the student, it is not the objective of a foreign language class. That is the objective of a real evaluation inserted in a formal learning situation. In planned learning, in which the time spent can be optimized, recognizing the structures which are used is critical. We believe that to be aware of them helps in remembering them and enabling their later use in a more active way. Seen from a cognitive standpoint, this makes for more favorable acquisition regarding the fields of production and function recognition.

Nevertheless, we have to keep in mind that exposure to the target language offers the students the possibility of coming into contact with the reality of a certain linguistic community. We should always offer and support texts that represent that reality in informal learning (by using social networks such as Facebook or Twitter), and combining them with level-appropriate texts in formal learning activities (Moodle or face-to-face class).

Ultimately, the text choice depends on the level of the students, even though it does not affect the overall meaning of the content, it can determine what students are able to differentiate in an oral text and, therefore, may prove to be a significant instrument for the acquisition of a foreign language.

6. Conclusion.

At this point we would like to summarize this work in several elements that we believe to be of utmost importance:

(a) An oral text is not exclusively an auditory text. As we have seen, there are many written contexts in which spoken discourse characteristics are present and these, therefore, must be taken into account when covering the entire spectrum of spoken discourse.

(b) Spoken discourse perception processes are subject to general perception processes in which meanings are completed and reinterpreted. These perception processes may be of a personal

or group nature within a community united by some common feature which, in the case we presented, could be the shared language.

(c) Phonological opposition can be very important when differentiating signifiers, even more so than the contextual and semantic logic of the message.

(d) From the different elements that characterize the oral and conversational component, we should give priority to certain elements that are especially significant for the learning environment of our students.

(e) The various online and multimedia tools available to us today can and must be perfectly modified and adapted to both formal and informal teaching processes.

In conclusion, as we have seen, the didactic use of the oral component from an online learning environment can compensate and even, in some cases, successfully improve learning in a face-to-face class.

However, we must remember that the natural learning method, with the most optimal results, will always be that of face-to-face learning. In this context is where the human brain acquires knowledge in the most significantly and productively way, not only concepts but particularly in the field of work at stake here, foreign languages.

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NOTES

1 We refer to a context in an holistic way. In this case, the fact of speaking Spanish to one person (X) and Portuguese to another (Y) changes the context and the brain must adapt to that contextual change, which is not always easy.

2 Obviously we do not intend to exhaustively define what can and cannot be considered as spoken language (written text with features of the spoken language vs. oral text), but we intend to limit our field of work to certain limits within which we can work from a foreign language didactic standpoint.

3 Note the inclusion of texts expressed through sounds and written texts recognized by the community as its own as an oral style.

4 We are referring to spoken Spanish in Spain.

5 In this regard we recommend the reading of the classic experiment carried out by Macdonald and McGurk entitled “Visual influences on speech perception processes” available to download at <http://link.springer.com/article/10.3758/BF03206096>

6 coffee.

7 We know that an Asian person, from the standpoint of strategies used, does not learn the same way as an European person.

8 Image and audio processing, even though it works in a very similar way to auditive processing, it does not vary depending on the original source of stimulation {delRosarioSantallaPenaloza:2000wj} (p.35) The problem lies in the fact that recovery of the memory is much more complex in the visual field than in the auditive field, since there are many more elements that intervene to complete that image than the ones intervening in a auditive recollection.

9 Let’s remember that we acquire our MT through audio and that only later do we learn how to write. However, written literacy changes our learning strategies. We lose most of our capacity to understand words that we don’t mentally envision in a written form, if we haven’t learned them before. This does not mean that it is impossible to learn a word that hasn’t been written, only that this requires more effort

10 Be, say and have

11 No, yes, already and more

12 Day, thing, time or man

13 Dictionary of Spanish Discourse Particles

14 Can find de diccionario in the online site: <http://www.dpde.es/>

15 We are referring to Brown and Levinson’s terminology {Brown:1987tg}

16 Understanding X when Y has been said. An example of this is: “hacer tú que adoptes” instead of “acepto que adoptes”.

17 Understanding “iso sesión” instead of “hizo cesión”

18 Understanding “Hizo cesión ante no tallo” instead of “hizo cesión ante notario”

19 /dáo/ instead of /dáo/, /regaláo/ instead of /regaláo/, etc.

20 We can consider these as the gestures in a face-to-face spoken conversation

21 Online tool of oral forums <http://www.voxopop.com>

22 Thematically unified short video texts

23 <https://soundcloud.com>

24 With tools such as teleprompters for more natural texts, however, this doesn’t seem to be a feasible solution for the student, since they are expensive and handmade ones don’t offer the same results.

25 Acronym in English of Learning Management System

26 Pages such as Ivoox (ivoox.com/) or www.audiria.com are very useful. The first one for inputs of real material and the latter as real material, in many cases as didactic material. In this case, all audio and video files come with comprehension exercises and with the audio transcript.

27 Phone with *Internet* access and the possibility to download online applications.

28 Acronym in English: Voice Over IP.