Chapter 40
Second Language Strategic Interactions Using Emerging Technologies and Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT

The affordances provided by technology for increasing efficacy of foreign language education have been a major research area within applied linguistics over the past thirty years or so (see Levy & Stockwell, 2006, for an overview). In a Japanese context, there are culturally-based issues with foreign language education at the tertiary level, such as large class sizes and low student motivation, that present educators with specific challenges where technology may provide effective mediational means to improve practice and learner outcomes. In this chapter, the authors describe an eight-week teaching intervention that was designed, through digital and web technologies readily available to teachers, to improve the communication skills of Japanese university students of English. The strategic interaction framework, developed by Di Pietro (1987), was enhanced by use of digital video and a freely available wiki site. Performances were digitally video recorded and uploaded to a private wiki and participants used this to evaluate, transcribe, and self-correct their performances. The instructor then used the video and text to focus post-performance group debriefing sessions. The results suggest that a wiki, digital video, and strategic interaction-based experiential learning cycles can be effectively integrated to mediate Japanese university EFL students' oral communication development. Technical and pedagogical recommendations are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Strategic Interaction (hereafter, SI) was proposed by Di Pietro (1987) as an approach to second language instruction that is organized around scenarios based on real life events that require students to use their second language "purposefully and artfully in dealing with others" (p. vii) to achieve a fixed goal. The scenario, a key component in SI, is exemplified in the following instructions to two students (each of whom does not know the others' role):

Scenario Title: Surprise! Surprise! (Di Pietro, 1987, 50)

Role A: You are preparing for a final exam, which will be given tomorrow. It is evening and your friend calls you to invite you over for a while. What will you do? Should you keep studying? Do you need a break? You know that this friend loves to talk and may keep you there for hours.

Role B: It is close to the end of the college semester and today is the birthday of your friend (A). You and your other friends have organized a surprise birthday party for A. You know that A may be studying for finals, but it is your job to call him or her up and extend an invitation to come over to your place, where the party will be. Of course, you cannot reveal the real purpose for your invitation.

For di Pietro, "a scenario is a strategic interplay of roles functioning to fulfill personal agendas within a shared context" (1987, p. 41). A scenario requires a language learner to listen intently to what another student says, and to share information while pursuing individual goals. Di Pietro urged teachers to create and use scenarios based on daily occurrences but to move students beyond "routinized performances" (p. 80) by creating dramatic tension through participants' interlocked conflicting goals (such as a restaurant customer having dietary restrictions and a waiter needing to recommend a chef's special dish). Di Pietro argued that "without the element of dramatic tension, a scenario is not likely to be successful, no matter how relevant its theme might be to learners' functional needs" (p. 3).

Di Pietro (1987) expected language learners to "rise to the challenge of human interaction, with all its uncertainties and ambiguities" (p. 3) and designed a supportive learning network with multiple roles for the instructor ("teacher, coach, consultant, observer, evaluator" (p. 21) and numerous opportunities for help and guidance as students (also functioning as "role players, advice seekers and givers, performers and evaluators" [p. 21]) work together on language and strategy development. SI is a meaningful and collaborative approach to language teaching and learning; Di Pietro placed students in "situations where the motivation to think is translated into the challenge to reach goals through verbal exchanges with others" (p. 10). He wanted the classroom to function as both a "proving ground where challenges are faced and overcome" (p. 10) and a "refuge for the learner" (p. 12) with the assistance from the teacher and other learners. For Di Pietro, debriefing involved more than a teacher correcting students' errors; students were expected to collaboratively find ways to improve their own and others' performances.

Di Pietro's core SI language teaching and learning approach involved four steps (1987, p. 2):

- **Pre-Class Preparation:** Teacher selects or creates appropriate scenarios and prepares the necessary role cards.
- **Phase 1 (Rehearsal):** Students form groups and prepare agendas to fulfill the roles assigned to them. Teacher acts as adviser and guide to student groups as needed.
- **Phase 2 (Performance):** Students perform their roles with support of their respective groups while teacher and remainder of class look on.

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