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Information Gap Activities: A Standards-Based Strategy for Promoting Oral Proficiency in a Thematic Context

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This article demonstrates how the sustained use of standards-driven information gap activities (IGAs) supports and enhances the development of speaking skills. In the first section, we define the IGA. We then discuss recent research showing how IGAs promote focused student-student interactions. In the third section, we provide a blueprint for implementing the IGA in a standards-based thematic context. We conclude with content-based models from a thematic unit on Argentina that are appropriate for both secondary and post-secondary classrooms.

Introduction and Definitions: Task Performance, Research, and the IGA

IGAs are student-centered communicative tasks. One student, "A," has information that another student, "B," must obtain in order to complete a specific task. Students must then report on the findings of this task. The IGA is one of several performance-based strategies that have the potential to develop students' speaking abilities from Novice- to Intermediate- and to Advanced-level discourse.¹ We recommend that the IGA be used within a specific context, one that integrates the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (National Standards, 1999) with specific cultural content. A thematic unit becomes the central feature for class activities. Further, once practiced and having thus become a "known" technique, the IGA gives students a scaffolded point of departure for using all modes of communication in lesson activities.

We illustrate the benefits of the thematic IGA with examples taken from a unit created by the authors, "¡Ahora, Argentina!"² These models are easily adaptable to both local curricular needs as well as other languages. In these tasks, students continually respond to each other. They increase their individual in-class "air time" or frequency of second language (L2) use, and thus reduce their language anxiety (Wilbur, 2007). The extensive, mandatory,

and repetitive nature of student rehearsal that is characteristic of the interpersonal IGA encourages movement toward an L2 "usage automaticity." This approach—vis-à-vis the presentational nature of traditional teacher-fronted classroom questions/responses, that do not afford all a mandatory role in oral/aural activities—provides an L2 experience where all students participate (Lee & VanPatten, 2003, on the "Atlas Complex"). They employ their background knowledge to respond with appropriate structures, such as discourse markers ("luego" or "primero," for example) that produce greater mean length of utterance. Students may even differentiate between types of interlocutors. They become familiar with different voices or accents in the class—and beyond—depending upon the creation of the particular IGA.³ They thus transfer their partner-based, interpersonal discussions to a gradually increased presentational mode while engaged in thematically-related assignments.

Recent studies advocate the use of IGAs and similar strategies to promote language acquisition. Doughty and Pica (1986), Lee and VanPatten (2003), Lightbrown and Spada (1993), Pica (1992, 1994), and Porter (1986) view student-student tasks as more effective than teacher-fronted exercises in creating optimal conditions for student use of the target language. In IGAs, students ask for clarification, request information, and negotiate

meaning within a communicative context. Swain (1985, 1995, 2000) further argues that task-based activities—such as the dictogloss, in the case of “form consciousness,” increase student-generated opportunities to produce meaningful output. She considers them to be a critical component of the language learning process, suggesting that producing language improves L2 skills in a three-step phase: students notices a gap in their L2 knowledge; thereupon, they modify their output in an attempt to communicate with an interlocutor; finally, they revise their hypotheses about the L2 after receiving feedback.

Based on these insights, we add the role of the automaticity feature of the IGA as a contributory force in L2 usage improvement. The interpersonal format of the IGA provides the learner increased linguistic confidence and builds good language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990) in a knowledge-specific and knowledge-limited, straightforward context. Students’ critical thinking and problem-solving abilities are practiced, that is to say, within

a clearly marked domain or aspect of the L2 culture. The connection between learning language usage as a technique and using the language itself produces better language.

Information Gap Activities: A Description and Blueprint for Creation

In performing an IGA, students are required to use the target language to acquire new, real knowledge. Figure 1, our first example, depicts how IGAs promote student interaction. Student A is a traveler who must make bus reservations from Buenos Aires (Capital Federal) to the city of Rosario. Student B, who “works at an information kiosk,” must provide “A” with departure and arrival times as well as gate numbers at the Retiro Bus Terminal. “A,” the student seeking the information completes a form created by the instructor. “B” has a second form containing the relevant data that is to be shared.⁴

Figure 1.

Student A (The Student who has the information)

Origen [Origin]	Destino [Destination]	Salida [Departure]	Llegada [Arrival]	Puerta [Gate]
Buenos Aires, Retiro	Rosario	0700h (sólo lunes y viernes)	1030h	8
Buenos Aires, Retiro	Rosario	0925h (todos los días)	1215h	4
Buenos Aires, Retiro	Rosario	1030h (sólo martes)	1415	6
Buenos Aires, Retiro	Rosario	0845h (todos los días)	1200h	3
Buenos Aires, Retiro	Rosario	0715h (sólo domingo)	1010h	7

Student B (The Student who must obtain the information)

Origen [Origin]	Destino [Destination]	Salida [Departure]	Llegada [Arrival]	Puerta [Gate]
Buenos Aires, Retiro	Rosario			

IGA Blueprint

In Figure 2, we provide the teacher with a five-step procedure for implementing an IGA. The example, "Buscando un departamento en Buenos Aires," is from our thematic unit on Argentina (see Appendices A and B).⁵

In Step One, we activate students' background knowledge to enhance their understanding of the content and the task. Students' background knowledge or schemata is accessed through a series of schema-building activities that introduce the topic of the IGA, the purpose and context of the interaction, and the intended outcomes. This

first step should include authentic reading and listening tasks such as a short newspaper article or a video or audio segment. The instructor should then ask students to complete activities based on these authentic items in order to prepare them for the subsequent speaking task. These activities include completing a Venn diagram to compare and contrast cultural information, responding to a questionnaire, and filling in a chart with the correct information.⁷

Step 2: Provide students with a model

In the second step, the instructor provides students with a model IGA in preparation for the

Figure 2

<p>Step 1.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activate background knowledge to prepare students for the task. • State the purpose, context, and intended outcomes of the task. 	<p>Example.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students read authentic apartment ads from a Buenos Aires newspaper.⁶ • Students assume role as a real estate agent. Students then read about prospective clients and choose best apartment for each one. • Students describe their own ideal apartment. <p>National Standards addressed are: 1.1, 1.2, 2.2 and 3.2.</p>
<p>Step 2.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students with a model. • Direct students' attention to linguistic structures needed to complete the task. • Provide students with guided practice opportunities. 	<p>Example.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students view video of a conversation between a client and a real estate agent. • The instructor reviews with students question formation and communication strategies. <p>National Standards addressed are: 1.2, 2.1, and 4.1.</p>
<p>Step 3.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a time limit. • Students perform the task. • Monitor student performance and provide assistance. 	<p>Example.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Class reviews directions for the IGA task. • Students complete the IGA task (See Appendices A and B). • The instructor reminds students to complete the chart with the correct information. <p>National Standards addressed are: 1.1 and 1.2</p>
<p>Step 4.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students to re-enact the task. 	<p>Example.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students re-enact the conversation between the client and the real estate agent.
<p>Step 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide corrective feedback. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The instructor provides students with feedback.

task. If this is the first time the students have performed an IGA, the instructor introduces them to IGA procedures in order to maximize student participation and L2 production. The instructor might want to show a video of students performing an IGA to reinforce the appropriate use of strategies to sustain L2 communication—such as how to negotiate meaning and how to circumlocute.

The instructor then directs students' attention to new language features and provides them with brief explicit instruction⁸ in the use of the forms needed to perform the IGA. Students engage in guided practice.

Step 3: Students perform the task

The instructor establishes a specific time frame for task completion, monitors student performance of the IGA, and provides assistance.

Step 4: Comprehension-check activities

Students demonstrate their work through re-enacting the task for the entire class.

Step 5: Corrective feedback

The instructor provides students with corrective feedback. He or she can further have students demonstrate successful completion of the IGA through activities that require use of the new information.

El subte de Buenos Aires

Our final activity is designed so that students navigate the cityscape of Buenos Aires through its metro system for subsequent thematic assignments.

Conclusion

IGAs are one of several strategies that enhance students' oral abilities. Their use within a thematic context such as our unit on Argentina provides the instructor with a strategic, procedurally-sound approach for integrating both language and culture into the classroom while simultaneously adhering to the tenets of the National Standards. In addition to promoting improved language acquisition, research indicates that using IGAs has the potential to enhance motivation, which, in turn, further improves student achievement.⁹

Notes

1. Consult the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (1999) for a complete description of Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior level language performance.
2. The reader can contact the authors to obtain this thematic unit. See also Hernández and García (2006) for a discussion of the use of sponge activities within the context of a thematic unit on Argentina.

Student 1	Student 2
<p>• You are a participant in a study abroad program in Buenos Aires and you want to use the subte to visit different places in Capital Federal. Your task is to ask for directions. Follow the model. Be sure to complete the chart (see Appendix C) with the directions.</p> <p>Model: Estudiante [Student]: ¿Cómo voy desde la estación "Plaza Italia" hasta "Uruguay?" [How do I get from "Plaza Italia" to "Uruguay?"]</p> <p>Argentino [Argentine]: Tiene que usar la D, dirección Catedral. Luego, tiene que tomar la combinación 9 de Julio, para la línea B, dirección Federico Lacroze. [You have to use line "D" toward "Catedral." Then you have to transfer to line "B" at "9 de Julio" going toward "Federico Lacroze."]</p>	<p>• You are a native Argentine. A U.S. student will ask you for assistance with directions for the subte. Your task is to answer the student's questions using the subte map (see Appendix D). Follow the model.</p> <p>Model: Estudiante [Student]: ¿Cómo voy desde la estación "Plaza Italia" hasta "Uruguay?"</p> <p>Argentino [Argentine]: Tiene que usar la D, dirección Catedral. Luego, tiene que tomar la combinación 9 de Julio, para la línea B, dirección Federico Lacroze. [You have to use line "D" toward "Catedral." Then you have to transfer to line "B" at "9 de Julio" going toward "Federico Lacroze."]</p>

3. As part of our thematic unit, students visit www.radiomitre.com.ar to find out the weather forecast for Buenos Aires and other cities in Argentina.
4. Student "A" and Student "B" can then reverse roles with a new set of information.
5. The sequence of activities presented in this blueprint introduces students to renting an apartment in Buenos Aires. Extension activities include: students use the Internet to obtain information about apartments; students write an e-mail to an Argentine real estate agent and request information; students compare and contrast apartments in the United States and Argentina; and students this information to other classes. Together with the activities outlined in the IGA blueprint, these performance-based tasks encourage students to link language and culture as well as use the three modes of communication. National Standards addressed are: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.2, 5.1
6. Activities are adapted from a thematic unit on renting an apartment in Paris that appears in Theisen (1997).
7. See Lee and VanPatten (2003) for additional information.
8. Recent research has found that brief explicit instruction is needed for students to acquire high levels of accuracy in the target language (DeKeyser, 1995, 1997; Robinson, 1996; 1997; Terrell, 1991; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993). In addition, researchers have demonstrated that students benefit from explicit instruction prior to communicative activities because such instruction assists them in activating their previous knowledge of the target structures and then focuses their attention on these forms (Cadierno, 1995; Hinkel & Fotos, 2002).
9. This approach will of course be beneficial to FL education majors who achieve "Advanced Low" on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview for their institution to meet ACTFL/ NCATE accreditation requirements (ACTFL Program Standards, 2002) and avoid the dilemma we often face of beginning FL teachers whose

language skills are lacking (García & Petri, 2000).

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Biographical Statement

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Appendix A. Buscando un departamento en Buenos Aires

Student 1

	<i>Departamento 1</i> [Apartment 1]	<i>Departamento 2</i> [Apartment 2]
Barrio [Barrio]		
Alquiler (\$) [Rent]		
Dirección [Address]		
Muebles [Furniture]		
Aire acondicionado [Airconditioning]		
Número de ambientes [Number of rooms]		
Número de baños [Number of bathrooms]		
Metros cuadrados [Square meters]		
Teléfono [Telephone]		

Appendix B. Buscando un departamento en Buenos Aires

Student 2

Departamento 1: Barrio Norte. \$700 por mes. 3 ambientes. 40m². Aire acondicionado. 2 baños. No tiene muebles. Santa Fe 350. Tel: 3445-5287

[Apartment 1: Barrio Norte. \$700 per month. 3 rooms. 40 square meters. Air conditioning. 2 bathrooms. Does not have furniture. Santa Fe 350. Telephone: 3445-5287.]

Departamento 2: Belgrano. \$650 por mes. 2 ambientes. 38m². Aire acondicionado. Amueblado. 1 baño. Las Heras 540. Tel: 4826-5230

[Apartment 2: Belgrano. \$650 per month. 2 bedrooms. 38 square meters. Air conditioning. Furnished. 1 bathroom. Las Heras 540. Telephone: 4826-5230.]

