

# Let's *all* monologue!

**Teresa Ting** shares a simple strategy for involving all the students with complex content.

In Issue 41 of *ETp*, I published an article entitled 'Let's *all* dialogue!', in which I suggested a strategy for involving all the students of a large class in a spontaneous dialogue. That was my attempt to replace the traditional boring, artificial dialogue taking place between two students, while everyone else looks out of the window. Here, I would like to share another strategy, this time for replacing boring, artificial student *monologues* where only one student talks, while everyone else looks at their mobile phones.

## The seed of the strategy

This strategy came to me during a CLIL-science lesson that I was conducting with some high school students, and it is incredibly simple to implement. Imagine that the students have just learnt the amazing fact that plants follow a 'survival of the species policy' by producing seeds that will be dispersed as far away as possible, thus ensuring that the species can survive elsewhere in case of a localised problem where the parent plant is (eg drought, floods, etc). So there are seeds with feathery extensions designed for wind dispersal (eg those of the dandelion), prickly seeds that attach themselves to animal fur, and seeds surrounded by sweet fruit that are ingested by birds and then excreted somewhere far from the parent plant.

So, how can we evaluate our students' learning without entering the 'IRF-zone' where the teacher *interrogates* by asking a question to which they already know the answer, one student *responds*, often with one or few words, and the teacher gives *feedback* on the quality of the answer, before calling all the others back from the window or their mobiles, in order to move the class forward. And, when it comes to CLIL, how can we extract complex language about complex concepts from *all* the students? Of course, this is a concern which is relevant not only for CLIL but also for regular language learning.

## The strategy

The strategy is simple. Once the class has enough information or content to talk about, you start a monologue. This monologue will be continued by the class, one student at a time, but each must contribute only five words: no more and no less. Each student has only three seconds to formulate their contribution, and this must link coherently into the content and the language of the five words uttered by the previous student. They can decide to say just one or two more words to conclude the previous sentence, indicating this with *period* (which also counts as a word) before starting a new thought. Likewise, a student might use one of their words to say *comma*, but all punctuation must be linguistically correct and make sense. Everyone is, therefore, contributing to the same monologue. For example, in the lesson on seeds, you might get the following:

Teacher *All plants produce seeds to ...*  
 Student 1 *try to disperse themselves as ...*

Student 2 *far away from the parent ...*  
 Student 3 *plant as possible (period). So ...*

Although we know the topic, nobody can predict the direction the speaker is going to take in their five words, nor can we predict what word they will end with. So nobody can prepare an answer in advance: everyone must pay attention and rely on their understanding of the topic and what they know about the language to formulate their contribution when their turn comes.

## Variations of the strategy

It is also possible to set up a competition by dividing the students into small groups that are close enough to each other for them to hear what members of the other groups are saying. After each five-word utterance, the teacher points randomly to a member of one of the groups, who must then continue the monologue. Good utterances win the group a point. It is not a good idea to give the groups time to discuss what the next five words could be, since that slows the process too much and makes the reasoning too difficult to follow.

I have also tried the technique with three words and eight words: three words seems to be too short to generate content, with students uttering senseless fillers such as *so, therefore it ... or and this means ...* which makes the task useless for those speakers who are not using language in a meaningful way. Eight words seems to be too much to manage, and the utterances tend to flatten into an incoherent mumbling string of words.



This technique is powerful for two reasons. First of all, everyone pays attention to what is being said and everyone seems to be creating a mental monologue of what might be the best way to start and then continue the next block of five words. Secondly, the utterances are almost always correct from the point of view of both language and content. As shown in the example above, having five words seems to set up a 'low-cloze' situation in which there are very few options for the next word. This obliges the next speaker to start with a specific word, but where the next four words will take us, we don't know! What we *do* know is that everyone is so busy using complex language to monologue mentally about complex content that nobody is looking out of the window or consulting their mobile. ■



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