Developing
oral expression during confinement
with very young learners

EVA ALCALÀ ARXÉ

ESCOLA LLORIANA

evalcar1@gmail.com

As teachers, we are aware of the fact that hundreds of unexpected things can occur in our day-to-day lives with our students and that being flexible and able to adapt to new situations is one of the most important features of our jobs. But having to deal with a confinement due to the severe COVID-19 pandemic in the whole world was far from expectable. This new and unpredictable situation has obliged us to reconsider our roles as teachers during a long lockdown period and to devise new plans to offer our students effective and motivating distance learning. Needless to say digital technologies take a vital role in this new teaching learning situation, but what happens when the learners are very young and their digital autonomy is not yet developed enough? Moreover, taking into account that the development of oral communication competences is crucial at these young ages when learning a foreign language, how can the teacher foster a distance learning that requires the learners' oral productions? This article presents two oral activities that were carried out with very young learners during the confinement period and it deals with the strategies and the digital tools used, as well as the procedure followed by the teacher to provide the pupils with the right input and models in order to help them produce good quality outputs in a foreign language. The linguistic demands involved differ substantially from one another, but both activities required a joint effort to create a collective video in which each student's oral productions were shared with the rest of the group.

Els mestres som plenament conscients del fet que en el nostre dia a dia a l'aula poden passar centenars de coses inesperades amb els nostres alumnes i que ser flexible i capaç d'adaptar-se a noves situacions és una de les característiques més importants de les nostres feines. Però haver d'enfrontar-se a un confinament degut a la greu pandèmia mundial de la COVID-19 era difícil d'imaginar. Aquesta nova i imprevisible situació ens ha portat a reconsiderar els nostres rols com a mestres i a idear nous plans per oferir al nostre alumnat un ensenyament a distància efectiu i motivador. No cal dir que les tecnologies digitals tenen un paper fonamental en aquesta nova situació d'ensenyament aprenentatge però, què passa quan els alumnes són molt petits i la seva autonomia digital encara no està prou desenvolupada? A més, tenint en compte que el desenvolupament de les competències de comunicació oral en llengua estrangera és crucial en aquestes edats, com es pot promoure un aprenentatge a distància que requereixi les produccions orals dels alumnes? Aquest article presenta dues activitats orals que es van dur a terme durant el període de confinament amb alumnes dels primers cursos de primària. S'hi exposen les estratègies i les eines digitals emprades, així com el procediment que es va seguir per tal de proveir als alumnes amb inputs i models adequats per tal d'ajudar-los a produir textos orals de qualitat en llengua estrangera. Ambdues activitats consisteixen en crear un vídeo col·lectiu on les produccions orals dels alumnes són compartides amb la resta del grup, tot i que les demandes lingüístiques d'una i de l'altra difereixen substancialment.

KEYWORDS:

confinement; young learners; distance learning; foreign language learning; oral expression; digital tools

PARAULES CLAU:

confinament; alumnes de primària; aprenentatge a distància; aprenentatge de la llengua estrangera; expressió oral; eines digitals

Introduction

The Catalan Curriculum for Primary Education (2015) establishes three competences[1] that make up the oral communication dimension in Foreign Language Education. These competences promote the elaboration and expression of ideas, opinions, feelings and the construction of individual thinking, and consequently, the linguistic development of the students. Taking into account that oral communication is an interactive and multidirectional process that implies producing, receiving and processing information, it is stated that these three competences should be treated in an integrated way.

Considering the fact that during a period of confinement the interactional aspect of oral communication is less present than in an ordinary classroom situation or even not present at all, we must try to find alternative possibilities for our students with regards to oral communication and, especially in relation to oral expression in a foreign language (FL). As it is exposed in the Catalan Curriculum, it is crucial to find space and time in the classroom to implement well planned and carefully designed activities that make students improve and be aware of their own progress regarding oral communication competencies. If we read the previous sentence again, but this time ignoring the words *in the classroom*, we might think that, even though the children are not attending school, there must still be chances to create activities that foster the development of oral communication competencies in a foreign language. Needless to say, the scaffolding strategies that were used in class will also have to be rethought and new ways of supporting the students during their learning process (especially if they are very young learners) will have to be "reinvented".

As stated by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) the scaffolding process "enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (p. 90). According to Gibbons (2015) "this assisted performance leads learners to reach beyond what they are able to achieve alone, to participate in new situations and to tackle new tasks, or, in the case of second language learners, to learn new ways of using language" (p. 14). In a situation in which students cannot attend school for a long time, it will not be possible to offer this face-to-face assistance while the children are performing certain tasks, but other types of support can be provided in order to help them produce good quality output in L2. As it will be presented later on in this article, one of the conditions to help students produce accurate and rich oral productions is to first provide them with rich and comprehensible input.

Krashen (1982, as cited in Gibbons, 2015, p. 24) stated that learners need to understand what is said to them and that *comprehensible input* is essential for learning language successfully. However, Gibbons (2015) emphasizes the fact that comprehensible input should not be seen as "simplified" input and that learners should have access to language that is ahead of what they are able to produce on their own. Gibbons (2015), for instance, proposes that some strategies that could be used by the teachers to make input more comprehensible without simplifying the language are using practical demonstrations, using visual support, expressing the same idea in different ways or even using the mother tongue, if necessary.

As it might be expected, digital technologies are crucial when the teacher needs to supply face-to-face assistance to the pupils and, thus, the confinement situation requires the use of modern and advanced tools that learners need to master and that help teachers with the creation of instructional materials that enable new ways for students to learn and work collaboratively. Lai (2017) examined the effects of digital technologies to promote autonomous language learning outside the classroom. In this sense, she emphasizes how language educators can support autonomous learning through technology beyond the classroom, and the relevance of establishing connections between in-class and out-of-class learning experiences. Felip (2016) states that "when learners are allowed to use web 2.0 tools and apps, lessons become more interactive, engaging and motivating and tasks become increasingly relevant and real for students" (p.46).

However, although it might be thought that the advances in technology could replace teachers in the future, without an expert teacher capable of engaging students and scaffolding their contributions in FL, learning would be limited. According to Felip and Lobo (2014), digital technologies offer opportunities to build knowledge collaboratively and increase students' motivation and participation, but the role of the teacher is also of a paramount importance in the learning process.

Taking all this into account, the activities presented in this article show the importance of offering an appropriate support and a rich and comprehensible input to the students through the use of digital tools in order to continue developing their oral communication competencies, despite the fact that an important amount of the ingredients that the students need to succeed in their interactional competence were left in the classrooms.

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Context

Both activities were carried out with young learners from Escola Lloriana, a state primary school located in Sant Vicenç de Torelló, a small town in the north of Osona county. The town has got an extension of 6,60 square kilometers and it is composed by three populated areas or villages: Sant Vicenç de Torelló, Borgonyà and Vila-seca, with 1500, 355 and 159 inhabitants respectively, according to IDESCAT[2] 2018. Nowadays there are a total of 161 students in the school and there is only one group in each grade. The number of pupils per group vary from 14 to 25 but, in general, the amount does not exceed 20 children.

The first activity presented is called "*Chocolate Mousse for Greedy Goose*" and it was developed with the first cycle primary students (grades 1 and 2). It is relevant to mention that all the teachers taking part in this cycle decided to create a *Google sites* linked to the school web page in order to present the weekly confinement tasks to the students. It was taken into account that the design of this site had to be attractive and simple for the students to access and each task had to present clear steps to follow for both the students and the families that were in charge of helping their children at home. Moreover, it was of a paramount importance to provide the families with the directions to follow in order to send the tasks to the teachers and to provide them with clear feedback to make the pupils aware of their own learning process.

The second activity presented is called "*Commotion in the Ocean*" and it was developed with grade 3 students. In this case, all the teachers taking part in this cycle decided that *Google Classroom* would be the platform used to present the weekly confinement tasks to the students and one week was devoted to introducing the pupils to this new way of working. Several tutorials were created and the first tasks (only in L1) focused mainly on helping students get familiarised with this digital tool. In this new context, pupils were also shown how to access different types of materials (videos, forms, documents…), how to send their tasks and how the feedback from the teacher was provided.

With regards to English language learning, the tasks planned for the first two weeks of confinement in both groups were related to the last projects and stories presented in class. These oral comprehension tasks were designed as interactive worksheets created with the *Wizer.me* platform and also included the videos of the stories (videos from *YouTube* and also videos in which the teacher recorded herself telling the story). In order to help the pupils with the completion of these tasks, video tutorials were created for the families showing how to access the worksheets, complete the different exercises and send the work to the teacher.

However, with these types of tasks, the oral competence of the pupils was lacking an essential part: oral expression. For this reason, the idea of creating a collective video in which all the children could participate in telling a part of a story could be a good option to supply the lack of activities that require the oral productions of the children. Thus, the following are examples of activities thought to overcome the challenge of creating spaces for very young learners to express orally and work collaboratively during a period of confinement.

Procedure

In order to explain the strategies and the digital tools used, as well as the procedure followed by the teacher in both activities presented, it has been considered to divide their development into three main parts:

- **Part 1: Before implementation.** This part refers to the planning and the design of the activity and, taking into account the confinement situation, it had to be considered how to provide the pupils with good quality input and models in order to enhance their confidence and help them throughout the process, as the ordinary teacher-pupil interaction that usually occurs in class would not take place in this case.

- **Part 2: Implementation and outcomes**. This part refers to the execution of the task and, needless to say, it had to be done at home, with the help of the families. In this part, the pupils' productions are presented with the links to the collective videos that were edited by the teacher.

- **Part 3: After implementation**. This part makes reference to the type of activities that the teacher planned and designed after presenting the collective videos to the students. This further work was planned and designed to consolidate the language worked in both stories and to make children focus on their classmates' contributions.

Activity 1. "Chocolate Mousse for Greedy Goose" collective video. Grades 1 & 2.

Part 1
Before implementation

The steps that were followed before presenting the activity to the students are explained hereunder:

Step 1: The story

Choosing a story in which all the children can take part and which contains the different language items that we want the children to understand and reproduce was the first step to be taken. In this case the story chosen was "*Chocolate Mousse for Greedy Goose*", by Julia Donaldson and Nick Sharratt. This story presents some animal names, food and several daily expressions related to meals and good manners in a rhyming way, which allows us to focus especially on pronunciation.

Step 2: Story presentation

The second step was to decide how to present the story to the children. Taking into account that this was a new story that had never been presented to the children before, the teacher video recorded herself and made sure that input was comprehensible by using visual support, non-verbal resources and emphasizing certain pronunciation and intonation aspects (see **Figure 1**; teacher's video-recorded presentation of the story is available here: **https://youtu.be/ h9NRTzdz6no**).

Figure 1. Teacher's video-recorded presentation of the story

Step 3: Who is who?

To assign a character of the story to each student can be sometimes tough, as it is rare that we can find a story with exactly the amount of children in our group. In the case of Escola Lloriana, there are a total of 36 pupils in grades 1 and 2, so it was considered that the best option was to divide them into two groups of 18 pupils each. In the story there are a total of 16 characters, so this means that 2 children in each group would be in charge of presenting the story and saying goodbye.

In order to let the children know which character they were in charge of, a *Google* document (available here: **https:// tinyurl.com/ydy37zpt**) was shared with them in the *Google sites*. In this document they could check which part of the story they had to tell and they could listen to an audio file recorded by the teacher in order to help them with the pronunciation of their text.

Step 4: Models and support

Taking into account that the teacher-students interaction was going to be unavailable during the implementation phase, it was crucial to provide the pupils with the right support for the pronunciation, intonation and non-verbal aspects of their texts. In order to help the children with all these aspects, the teacher video recorded herself telling each part of the story, offering each child a personalised model to follow and giving them some tips and ideas to record their own

videos (things they could use and things they could do while saying the text) (see **Figure 2**). Teacher's video-recorded presentation with tips and ideas is available here: **https:// youtu.be/i7fkD21oBVI.** Obviously, the success of the task depended widely on the type of support given to the students beforehand.

Figure 2. Example of a personalised model

Step 5: Task presentation

In order to present the task to the students, the directions and the materials were uploaded to *Google sites.* Given the fact that the parents would help the children with the development of their weekly tasks, the directions to follow were written in Catalan by the teacher, so that all the families could understand what had to be done. The materials (videos and "Who is Who?" document) were uploaded (available here: **https://sites.google.com/escollalloriana.cat/tasques- cicle-inicial/tercera-setmana/english**) and the way to send their videos to the teacher was also made clear.

Part 2
Implementation and outcomes

After watching the videos with the models presented by the teacher, the children had a full week to practice at home and send their videos to the teacher. Needless to say, in such a situation, classroom interactional competence (CIC) strategies could not be used by the teacher while developing the task, so it was essential to give the children all the necessary language support and provide them with the models of pronunciation, intonation and non-verbal strategies beforehand. The teacher could not see the pupils practising and she could also not give them feedback on their oral performances during this phase but, at least, they could watch the recorded models offered by the teacher as many times as needed.

After receiving each pupil's recording, the teacher edited two collective videos (one for each group of pupils) using *Windows Movie Maker,* putting all the videos together using the order of appearance of the characters in the original story.

These were the final products (available here: video Group 1: **https://youtu.be/nm1HYgkiPAU**; video Group 2: **https://youtu.be/W3loh0tP604**):

Figure 3. Video Group 1

Figure 4. Video Group 2

Part 3
After implementation

By all means, it was crucial that the children could watch and listen to each other in the collective videos. So, for the following week of confinement, the teacher planned a related task in which the pupils had to watch their classmates' contributions and complete an interactive worksheet (available here: **https://app.wizer.me/preview/U4CGR7**) that dealt with the oral comprehension of the story and that aimed at consolidating the language worked in the story.

This worksheet included a last assessment activity in which the families and the children could add their comments regarding the collective videos and the oral comprehension task. It also gave automatic feedback to students regarding the multiple choice questions, but in this case the teacher also gave all the students personalised feedback concerning their oral performance in the collective videos. This was done through an email that was sent to each family.

Activity 2. "Commotion in the ocean" collective video. Grade 3.

The steps that were followed before presenting the activity to the students are explained hereunder:

Step 1: The story

In this case the story chosen was "Commotion in the Ocean", by Giles Andreae and David Wojtowycz. Due to the length of each character's text and the complexity of the language presented, it was decided to adapt the story taking into account the level of the pupils and the content and language that had to be consolidated: sea animals, their body parts and expressions to describe these animals in a genuine and original way.

Step 2: Story presentation

Considering that this was a new story that had never been presented to the children before, the teacher decided to present both the real story and the adaptation created especially for their oral tasks. The real story video (available here: **https://youtu.be/9pRhgZ8Jffs**) and the videos in which the teacher recorded herself offering the adapted models for the children were uploaded in a *Genially* presentation, the tool chosen by the teacher to present this task to the students. This type of presentation also offered the teacher the chance to display in a very attractive way the steps to follow, the materials needed and the directions to upload their videos in *Google Classroom*.

Step 3: Who is who?

In Escola Lloriana, there are a total of 14 pupils in grade 3 and there are a total of 14 characters in the story, so this means that each child could be assigned a different animal. In order to let the children know which character they were in charge of, a *Google* document (available here: **https://tinyurl.com/y98yoy6f**) was shared with them in the *Genially* presentation. In this document they could check which part of the story they had to tell.

Step 4: Models and support

As said in the previous activity, the fact that teacher-students interaction was going to be unavailable during the implementation phase made it crucial to provide the pupils with the right support for the pronunciation, intonation and non-verbal aspects of their texts. In order to help the children with all these aspects, the teacher video recorded herself telling each part of the story, offering each child a personalised model to follow and also providing them with subtitles with the written text. Again, as in the activity developed with the pupils from grades 1 and 2, the success

of the task depended widely on the type of support given to the students beforehand. The video recordings of the teacher offering the personalised models were uploaded to the *Genially* presentation (available here: **https://view.genial. ly/5eb28e4b06dde00d3f430aa5/presentation-commotion-in-the-ocean**) that was created to present the task to the students and can be watched in step 5.
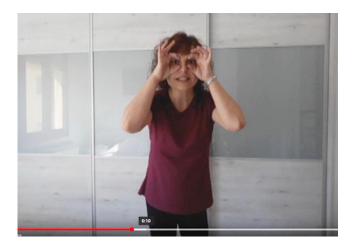

Figure 5. Example of the teacher's personalised model

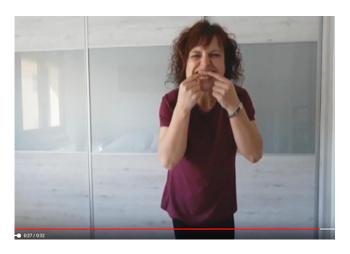**Figure 6.** Example of the teacher's personalised model

Figure 7. Example of the teacher's personalised model

Step 5: Task presentation

This task and all the materials mentioned above (videos and "Who is who?" document) were given to the students through a *Genially* presentation (available here: **https://view.genial. ly/5eb28e4b06dde00d3f430aa5/presentation-commotion-in-the-ocean**) that was uploaded in their *Google Classroom*. Given the fact that the parents would help the children with the development of their weekly tasks, the steps to follow in order to complete the task were written in Catalan in the *Genially* presentation, so that each familiy could understand what had to be done. Besides, in this presentation the pupils could check the directions about how to upload their videos to *Google Classroom*.

Figure 8. *Genially* presentation with the task presentation and all materials

Part 2
Implementation and outcomes

After watching the videos with the models presented by the teacher, the children had a full week to practice at home and send their videos to the teacher. As in the activity developed with the pupils from grades 1 and 2, the confinement situation made it impossible for the teacher to use classroom interactional competence (CIC) strategies during the development of the task at home. Thus, again, it was essential to give the children all the necessary language support and provide them with the models of pronunciation, intonation and non-verbal strategies beforehand. It was not possible for the teacher to see the pupils practising and, consequently, she could not give them feedback on their oral performances during this phase but, at least, they could watch the recorded

models offered by the teacher as many times as they needed. After receiving each pupil's recording in *Google Classroom*, the teacher edited the final collective video (see **Figure 9**; video available here: **https://youtu.be/R68ztm01wCw**).

Figure 9. Final collective video

Part 3
After implementation

As mentioned before, being able to watch and listen to the oral contributions of all their classmates was of a paramount importance for the pupils. First of all, because it increased their sense of achievement in completing the task and, second, because they needed to watch the collective video several times in order to successfully complete the interactive worksheets designed by the teacher for the two following weeks of confinement. These tasks dealt with the oral comprehension of the whole story and also included a last assessment activity in which the families and the children could add their comments regarding the collective video and the oral comprehension tasks. Needless to say, this further work was planned and designed to consolidate the language worked in the story and to make children focus on their classmates' contributions:

- Interactive worksheet "Commotion in the Ocean - Part 1 (available here: **https://app.wizer.me/preview/G5ZNKD**)

- Interactive worksheet "Commotion in the Ocean - Part 2 (available here: **https://app.wizer.me/preview/I51OK0**)

This type of worksheets gives automatic feedback to students related to the multiple choice questions or the "fill in the blanks" exercises, but in this case the teacher also gave all the students personalised feedback through *Google Classroom* concerning their oral performance in the collective videos.

It is important to highlight that two students in the group did not participate in this activity and did not upload their videos to *Google Classroom*. For this reason, the teacher added two of her previously recorded models to the final collective video in order to supply the two missing contributions.

Conclusion

The pupils' outcomes presented in this paper show that, even when there is no possibility to offer students face-to-face assistance, teachers still can create activities that foster the development of oral communication competencies in a foreign language.

Watching the pupils' oral performances in the collective videos, we become aware of the importance of providing them with rich and comprehensible input beforehand in order to help them produce accurate and rich oral productions. Actually, their pronunciation, intonation and use of non-verbal strategies are very similar to those used by the teacher in her video recorded personalised models that she offered to the students.

In addition, the use of several digital tools (*Genially, Windows Movie Maker, Google sites, Google Classroom, Wizer.me* and *YouTube*) was essential for the creation of instructional materials that enabled the teacher to offer the pupils the necessary support to develop their tasks successfully as well as to allow them discover new ways to learn and work collaboratively. Undoubtedly, in this case autonomous language learning outside the classroom was supported by technology, although the role of the teacher was essential to engage students and scaffold their contributions in FL.

With regards to the motivation and participation of the pupils, the comments received from the students themselves and their families in the last assessment activity in the interactive worksheets support the idea that the digital technologies used offered a great opportunity to share students' contributions and undoubtedly increased their motivation and participation in the activities proposed.

Thus, taking into account the results achieved in the development of the activities presented, we can conclude that it is not impossible to develop oral expression activities outside the classroom and that all the knowledge that both teachers and pupils have acquired during this last period of confinement should not be ignored in the future. Actually, it opens up a new wide range of possibilities that all the actors taking part in the educational system will have to consider in relation to the out-of-class learning experiences. ■

Notes

1. Competències bàsiques de l'àmbit lingüístic. Llengües Estrangeres. Identificació i desplegament a l'educació primària (2015)

2. Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya.

3. The use of images of all children appearing in the videos has been authorised by their parents to be published in this journal.

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