

Full-Scale Theater Production and Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract: *This article reports a case study designed to explore the effectiveness of full-scale, authentic-text theater production for second language learning. Based on the results of preproduction and postproduction tests completed by cast and crew members, as well as the observations of all involved, the authors maintain that the diverse communication tasks necessary for the project, and the motivation generated by a common and public goal, make foreign language theater production particularly conducive to learning. The findings in this study indicated general tendencies toward improved proficiency in speaking and reading and very positive student perceptions with respect to the gains they made individually in various skill areas. Finally, the study revealed increased levels of comfort in using the foreign language.*

Introduction

Many aspects of foreign language theater production make it an effective means of teaching a foreign language and encouraging the continued study of the language and its culture(s). It involves students in a variety of communicative tasks on a daily basis throughout the numerous phases of production: auditions, rehearsals, textual analysis and discussion, set and costume preparation, performances, and postperformance reflections.

The Italian Theater Workshop (ITW) was a pilot study aiming to explore the various types of interaction and modes of communication that could take place between members of a foreign language theatrical troupe—actors, stage managers, designers, and directors. In this first, pilot year, it was designed as an immersion experience with a limited number of participants in order to gauge its qualitative potential within a postsecondary curriculum, and its quantitative potential for measuring students' proficiency. The ITW proved to be a positive and multifaceted experience that contributed to students' linguistic progress and cultural understanding. First, the long-term focus on a single text provided the opportunity for an in-depth and intricate study of authentic literature. Second, if only in very general terms, the immersion experience helped improve students' proficiency in different skill areas. Third, the physical representation of characters' ideas and values as well as the regular use of gestures and idioms allowed participants to gain an insider's view of certain cultural norms. Fourth, since students took great pride in the project and in its final, public goal, they were highly motivated to devote themselves to competent and accurate communication. Finally, the ITW inspired a true team spirit for learning about language and culture, leading to great satisfaction for individual participants, the theatrical troupe, and the university department as a whole.

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Foreign Language Theater Production and the Communication Standard

While full-scale foreign language theater production promotes all five Cs (communication, culture, connections, comparisons, and communities) put forth by ACTFL in the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1999), its greatest potential for proficiency building concerns the numerous communicative functions that theater production necessitates. “Communication is at the heart of second language study, whether the communication takes place face-to-face, in writing, or across centuries through the reading of literature.” And since “the acquisition of the ability to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with users of other languages” is deemed the ultimate goal of today’s foreign language classroom, the authors designed the ITW to investigate the extent to which the process of bringing a dramatic work to life on stage could engage learners in all three subcomponents of the “communication” standard (p. 31).

For one, the ITW required students to “engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, exchange opinions” (Standard 1.1) on different topics, far beyond the contents and context of the theatrical text they were learning to perform. While the general umbrella context of the project was “theater,” conversations delved into the details of costume and clothing, fittings and body parts, body movements and facial expressions, the timing of movements and gestures, the use of stage props, the tone or volume of voice, general phonetics, the meaning of individual words or puns, and the expression of emotions according to script details. Moreover, students often had to discuss their daily routines in order to, for example, confirm rehearsal times or justify lateness or absence.

Next, the functions and discourse levels of the interpersonal communication taking place in the ITW also varied notably. Students had to agree and disagree, request, command, and invite and decline offers in different contexts and with different levels of formality. Each member of the troupe had to make suggestions and comments during discussions, set up appointments, provide explanations and clarifications, and execute endless commands. Designers and managers had additional interpersonal communication tasks regarding banking (e.g., withdrawing money, making payments), hunting in secondhand stores for props, buying and building set materials, transporting materials, and gathering props from cast members. Though the real-life interlocutors with whom they engaged in public places most often did not speak Italian, they planned and discussed these responsibilities with one another in Italian. The discourses of speech ranged from simple list making, to sentence-length dialogue contributions, to paragraph-length descriptions and explanations.

Next, the ITW required students to “understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.” (Standard 1.2) In addition to understanding and interpreting the primary authentic text with which they were working and the directors’ spoken language pertaining to the text, students were also expected to work with a variety of topics and text types. These ranged from the numerous handout supplements provided by the director containing biographical/historical information, to organizational information about rehearsals, to detailed lists of stage vocabulary and costume and set elements, to notes on acting.

Finally, the ITW required students to “present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners and readers on a variety of topics.” (Standard 1.3) That is, in addition to the final and collective project, which was the presentation of Dario Fo’s (1958) play *La Marcolfa* to an audience of Italian students, instructors, and members of the surrounding community, workshop participants had presentational responsibilities throughout the 10-week experience. Actors had to present themselves from time to time in terms of their character’s state of mind, mood, or reaction to another character on a given day or for a given scene. Stage managers and designers had to compile and present to the whole ensemble their research findings, ideas for costumes and props, and the drawings they made during different stages of conceptualization and construction.

In sum, members of a foreign language theater troupe spent one to two hours a day interacting with one another and with authentic literary and cultural materials, both at rehearsals and design meetings. These spontaneous daily interactions were based on a broad variety of information exchanges that represent all three subcomponents of the communication standard and were all essential to the success of the production.

Drama Techniques and the Foreign Language Classroom

Drama techniques have comprised an important aspect of foreign language teaching methods for several decades. From the direct methods of the early 20th century to the communicative methods of more recent years, mini-skits and “situations” have played an invaluable role in helping students pool their resources, exchange information, and achieve greater oral proficiency in the language of study. Generally speaking, teachers, researchers, textbook writers, and students alike find drama techniques beneficial because they provide learners with opportunities to speak in less controlled and more creative ways. Within a classroom setting, they bring learners closer to what real-life use of the target language might entail. It is through the dramatic worlds of situations and role-plays, therefore, that learners truly begin to explore the sociopragmatic uses of verbal as well as nonverbal language, and have to employ

strategies to avoid the breakdown of communication or “collapse” of their skit. (Bancheri, 1996; Haggstrom, 1992; Schewe & Shaw, 1993).

Foreign language professionals continue to explore the benefits of theater techniques. Their interests range from the incorporation of brief drama-based activities for spontaneous language use into beginning-level and intermediate-level classes (Di Pietro, 1987; Dodson, 2000, 2002; Joy, 1994; Lederer, 1981; Maley & Duff, 1982, Whiteson, 2002), to process drama, which is a teaching method that involves an ongoing role-play component in the class periodically over a given period of time (Kao & O'Neill, 1998; Liu, 2002; Moody, 2002; Schewe, 2002), to full-scale play production and its benefits for language community building and/or interdisciplinary learning (Bancheri, 1996; Faulhaber, 1973; Shier, 2002; Lys, Meuser, Paluch, & Zeller, 2002; Semke, 1980; Schultz and Heingck, 2002; Smith, 1984). Some scholars offer invaluable “how-to” information for colleagues who aspire to the smaller scale, in-class goals involving drama (Dodson, 2000; Maley & Duff, 1982; Smith, 1984; Via, 1987) while others talk specifically about larger scale, out-of-class theatrical production goals (Bancheri, 1996; Lys et. al., 2002; Moody, 2002; Savoia, 2002; Schultz & Heingck, 2002).

Research has also considered the importance of drama techniques to introduce learners to the target cultures' literary canon (Di Pietro, 1987; Essif, 1995; Haggstrom, 1992; Little, Devitt & Singleton, 1994; Mather, 1989; Savoia, 2002. Di Pietro (1987) pioneered the regular practice of skits and “scenarios” for this type of literary-analytical purpose. In *Strategic Interactions*, he encouraged a process whereby students create, rehearse, and perform short scenarios in front of the class, followed by a discussion of the performance with the instructor. Di Pietro suggested this activity as an introduction to authentic literary works, wherein students are given the outline of a literary plot as their scenario. In this case, the scenario was an advanced organizer-type prereading activity which activated appropriate schemata and tapped students' background knowledge prior to engaging them in the study of a more complex literary text.

Full-Scale Theater Production in the Foreign Language Curriculum

The juncture between language and literature studies in the foreign language curriculum has been the subject of various studies in recent decades and many such works discuss the role that drama and drama techniques can play (Haggstrom, 1992; Rivers, 1987; Savoia, 2002; Schultz & Heingck, 2002; Shier, 1990, 2002). In her touchstone work on interactive learning strategies, for example, Rivers (1987) noted that many professors trained in literary scholarship rather than L2 instruction ignore students' need for continued help in the areas of grammar, fluency, and pro-

nunciation. Any real improvement of language skills at the advanced level is thus a very difficult task (p. 34). Savoia (2002), too, addressed the stark transition in many present-day curricula. She noted a return to “the teacher-as-expert” model in most literature classes for which the teacher is an authority figure who explains concepts and theories to the class (p. 511).¹ As a result, students generally interact less among themselves and revert to a one-on-one question/answer relationship with the professor. To tackle this problem, both Rivers and Savoia promoted more creative and collaborative approaches to literature courses, aiming for more consistency in terms of teaching methodology throughout the curriculum. Rivers suggested the use of small analytical and presentational projects that engage students in dialogue more completely and spontaneously in language use than do teacher-fronted conversations, and Savoia suggested the incorporation of mini-dramas and play production at the transition point between language and literature in a curriculum and in the content courses beyond that transition point.

Haggstrom (1992) asserted that a theater workshop, culminating in the production of a play, can accomplish all of the major goals for an introductory literature course: The experience helps students improve their reading skills, teaches them how to discuss literature intelligently and confidently, and helps them to strengthen their writing abilities. (p. 18). Mather (1989) concurred, stating that various analytical tasks in the form of written character descriptions and analyses to be presented and discussed at regular intervals during the production period can foster a better understanding of character motivations, personalities, and interactions, as well as the subtleties of dramatic irony (p. 59).

Haggstrom (1992) maintained that where reading is concerned, a theater workshop teaches students to identify main structures of certain literary genres and develop a sense of how the smaller parts of a given text relate to the whole. Furthermore, she noted that each actor develops a unique relationship with the text depending on his or her role, thus becoming more attentive, curious and involved as a reader. Students' close interpretative and physical involvement with a challenging literary text makes it more interesting to them than if they were analyzing it from the perspective of an audience member or reader (p. 14). In postproduction interviews, students said that the process of producing a play gave them “a greater understanding of the choices and the process involved in creating a literary work and that this knowledge helped them to analyze the plays they read for class” (p. 12). Savoia (2002) added that student motivation is also affected in a positive fashion because taking on the role of another person can break down psycholinguistic barriers in the individual learner to advance language acquisition and cultural knowledge (p. 512).

Clearly, theater continues to be a topic of great interest in the field of foreign language education. One of the most

comprehensive publications to date is Bräuer's (2002) collection which reports the experiences and findings of educators in various countries who use theater games, techniques, and productions for foreign language teaching. Current scholarship, however, is by no means exhaustive; researchers have yet to study in detail linguistic gains made by students who participate in the complex process of producing an authentic play in a total immersion environment. Moreover, no study has discussed the effect of students' participation in other production roles, such as assistant directors, stage managers, and costume, set, and lighting designers. Finally, to date no study has discussed the benefits of theater for proficiency development or student motivation in any sort of quantitative terms.

Study

The directors postulated that students would benefit greatly from participating in a full-scale theatrical production of an authentic dramatic text in a total immersion environment. The authors predicted that the wide range of communicative tasks necessary for actors, stage managers, and designers alike would lead to improved competence in interpersonal, interpretative, and presentational modes of communication. Furthermore, they hypothesized that the collaborative nature of the project, and the satisfaction to be derived from achieving a common, public goal would reduce students' inhibitions and help them feel more confident communicating in the target language.

Experiential Description

Participant Selection Criteria and Profiles

The 11 participants in the ITW were at various stages of foreign language study and had various levels of proficiency.²

The only prerequisite for auditioning was a minimum of two semesters of language study. Graduate students and heritage speakers were not eligible. The multilevel design allowed the authors to examine whether the experience was particularly effective for any one specific level. But more importantly, this heterogeneous-grouping approach was the most efficient way to utilize the script; the more experienced students took on the demanding lead roles, while the less experienced ones had slightly smaller or less challenging roles. Had the experience been limited only to advanced students or only to beginning/intermediate students, some participants would have had roles that were either too difficult or too easy, making it more difficult to gauge their progress. Furthermore, the directors postulated that mixing the linguistic levels would provide for the creation of a tight-knit language community in which the more experienced students would serve as models for the younger community members not only in the context of the theatrical production, but also with regard to their Italian studies in general.

Once chosen, participants completed profile sheets with information about their backgrounds. The profiles revealed that two of the 11 subjects had studied Italian in high school. The rest began with their university career and ranged in terms of experience from two to seven semesters. Six of the 11 subjects had chosen Italian as one of their major or minor degree tracks, and six had studied abroad in Italy for at least one semester prior to the ITW experience. Nine of the 11 participants were enrolled concurrently in an Italian language or literature course and none of the subjects had L2 theater experience. The highest levels of oral proficiency, as determined by unofficial oral proficiency interviews conducted during the preproduction

Table 1

PROFILES OF ALL STUDENT PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR ROLES

Participant Category	Semesters of Study Abroad	Current Course 0 = no course 200-level = language/culture 3/400-level = literature/film	Years of Italian	Major/Minor Area of Specialization for BA Degree
A	2	499	7.5	major
A	2	385	1.5	minor
A	0	201	0.5	0
A	1	0	3.0	minor
A	0	236	1.5	major
A	2	499	2.5	major
SM	0	0	1.5	0
SM	1	499	3.5	major
SM	2	385	1.5	minor
D	0	385	4.5	major
D	0	201	0.5	major

Note. A = actor; SM = stage manager; D = designer.

assessment phase (see Table 1) were Advanced-Low to Advanced-Mid. The lowest levels of oral proficiency were Intermediate-Low to Intermediate-Mid.

Selection of Text

The text for the pilot ITW was *La Marcolfa*, a one-act comedy by Nobel Prize winner Dario Fo (1958). It was selected by the directors (the authors of this study) for several reasons. First, the length of the script lent itself to a manageable rehearsal schedule for all involved. The directors estimated a one-hour running time for the final performance and deemed it ideal for the group. Another influential factor was the text's linguistic accessibility to nonnative speakers. The language in the text was broad in range and very useful for communication in a variety of contexts. It contained a high number of colorful and useful vocabulary words as well as numerous idiomatic expressions that occur regularly in modern spoken Italian. It was rich with cultural and historical information about the Italian unification period, social customs, and even legal issues. Finally, an important criterion for the select of this play was the even balance between male and female roles (three of each). Each role was of equal importance in the play, despite small discrepancies in the number of lines, stage time, and emotional complexity. There was no single character that dominated the piece, nor were they any "bit roles" (characters who appear for only a few minutes and have very few lines).

The Preproduction Phase

At auditions in late November, students filled out paperwork in Italian, had time to look over a few short selections from the audition piece, and then performed these selections with other prospective participants. Students were asked in what capacity they preferred to participate: as actors, stage managers or as designers of sets, lighting, sound, costumes, and makeup. This eliminated the problem of having to find a play with exactly the same number of parts as interested students, and it allowed language learners who did not feel comfortable on stage as actors to still participate fully in the immersion environment.

The Rehearsal Period

The rehearsal period was the lengthiest section of the ITW experience. It included 27 rehearsals ranging from an hour and fifteen minutes to two hours, with the length and frequency of rehearsals increasing significantly in the final stages of production. It also included several design meetings. Actors attended rehearsals, stage managers attended both rehearsals and design meetings, and designers, because of the significant outside work demanded by their duties, attended design meetings and about one third of the rehearsals.

Rehearsals and design meetings alike commenced with 10 to 15 minutes of warm-up—stretching routines and theatrical games in which all members of the troupe took part. Some of these exercises were inspired by Maley and Duff's (1982) work on theater and foreign language teaching methods, some were invented, and others were common theater games used by professional actors to target particular skills. Each game was chosen carefully based on specific linguistic goals (see Appendix A). As Haggstrom (1992) had found, warm-up games were instrumental in responding to students' linguistic difficulties. Whenever students were having particular problems with the language, the directors could address them at the very next rehearsal with a warm-up game focusing on that problem area.

Warm-up exercises in the initial phases were meant to establish a comfortable immersion environment by breaking down barriers and creating a sense of unity between participants. So as not to seem daunting, they typically did not require large amounts of verbal output and tended to employ the use of comical and improbable situations that combined linguistic and corporeal elements. Warm-ups soon progressed to target more specific areas: more spontaneous communication and reactions, pronunciation, certain grammatical constructions, or vocabulary expansion. One exercise stressed correct pronunciation of imperative forms, for example, while another focused on the intonation of exclamations. Often warm-ups combined linguistic goals with acting goals, such as one that called for experimentation with the vocal cadence of question-and-answer dialogues with different emotional tones. Later on in the production process, warm-ups targeted character development, the appropriate use of new expressions outside the context of the script, and analyses of the relationships between the characters and their environment.

Putting It All Together: "Tech Week"

"Tech week" is a theatrical term that denotes the very final stages of rehearsal during which light and sound cues are rehearsed and perfected and all scenic elements and props are used. Dress rehearsals take place during this week, allowing actors to practice under performance conditions with costumes and makeup. For the participants, this period was the most language-intensive and labor-intensive of the whole workshop experience. Yet it was also one of the most exhilarating. The actors continued to refine their performances physically and linguistically, while designers and stage managers finally saw all of their preparatory work in action. The energy of cast and crew increased visibly as the various components of the production came together and everyone prepared for opening night.

The Performances

The two evening performances and Sunday matinee of *La Marcolfa* took place in a flexible black box theater, an inti-

mate space with a capacity of around 100. Each of the three performances was oversold including 30 spots of standing room. Italian professors encouraged their students to attend the show, and some made attendance mandatory. One even included the script in the class syllabus, while others offered extra credit for writing reviews of the show. The play also drew the attention of administrators and faculty from other departments of the university, as well as members of the local community who were interested in Italian culture.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Actors

The actors' main tasks were to learn and deliver their lines and to develop their characters based on information in the script. Actors worked on delivery, gestures, pronunciation, and rhythm at every rehearsal. Midway through the rehearsal period, they were asked to submit a written character analysis discussing the character's motivations and personal history. During warm-ups and rehearsals, actors were routinely called upon to explain the motivating factors behind their behavior, share their character's unspoken thoughts or emotions, discuss their character's personal history, or comment on cause and effect relationships in their exchanges with the other characters. Actors had to collaborate with the costume designer to choose attire appropriate to their personalities, and be measured and later fitted for their costumes. They also collaborated with the set designer on the logistics pertaining to the use and storage of props and other scenic elements.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Stage Managers

Stage managers had the widest variety of tasks throughout the process. In the beginning phases, they were responsible for keeping a detailed record of all instructions given by the director to the actors concerning blocking and stage business.³ Thus in the beginning, accurate listening comprehension was crucial to the stage managers' role, as the directors often altered blocking and stage business from rehearsal to rehearsal.

Once general blocking was established and actors had begun to memorize their lines, the stage managers' duties shifted to include "feeding lines" to actors as they struggled to remember them, while modeling correct pronunciation. Once actors had memorized their lines and were able to run through the show without requesting prompts, the role of the stage managers again changed slightly. During each run-through at this stage in the process, the stage managers took careful notes on missed lines, mispronunciations, mistakes in blocking, forgotten gestures or stage business—in sum, they were responsible for keeping a critical eye on the production in much the same way as the directors did. At the end of each rehearsal in this phase, the stage managers would read all of their notes for the actors' and directors' consideration.

Other extremely important responsibilities for stage managers were the creation, assembly, and proofreading of a program for the show, as well as posters and other advertisements such as flyers and ads in the student newspaper. Finally, during tech week and during the productions themselves, stage managers had to coordinate the setup of scenic elements, the placement of props, the welcoming of audience members, and the sale of tickets. They were available to attend to any problems that the actors or designers encountered. And they were in charge of organizing the striking of the set immediately following the last performance.

Roles and Responsibilities of the Designers

The costume designer was responsible for makeup as well as clothing, while the set designer saw to the details of the set, lighting, and sound. The designers attended about one third of the rehearsals in order to participate in daily warm-up exercises, further their comprehension of the text, and learn the nuances of actions and lines, which were crucial to the timing and precision of their work. At design meetings, they presented and discussed their ideas in the target language, using vocabulary specific to their tasks. The designers researched the trends in clothing and furniture in Italy in the historical period in which the play was set. The costume designer presented a collage of pictures and sketches for the costumes for each character, while the set designer presented a ground plan of the theater with placement of scenic elements included.

The designers were also responsible for seeking out needed materials and assembling their projects. This included constructing, borrowing, renting, or buying the necessary materials, according to projected budgets. Both designers spent one-on-one time with the directors searching for various costume or scenic elements in local stores, discussing merits and disadvantages of their findings in Italian.

Experimental Description

Preproduction Assessment

The preproduction testing phase included oral and written exams. First, each participant sat for an oral proficiency interview (OPI) with the faculty advisor/co-director trained in this field. Though they explored the variety of content and contexts typical of official OPIs, the interviews in this study were unofficial because they were not double rated by two certified testers. Second, each participant completed a written exam testing grammar, reading, and writing. It was based contextually on a five-page excerpt from another short comedy by Fo. The text selected was similar in style and structure to *La Marcolfa* (which they had not yet seen or read) but different in plot, social context, and vocabulary.⁴ Students' knowledge of vocabulary was assessed broadly by asking them to circle every word they certainly did not know or could not guess by context

during their first reading of the excerpt. Then, after reading the passage a second time, they had to respond to two sets of questions. The “language structures and expressions” section aimed to garner a general sense of students’ previous knowledge of some difficult grammatical features such as subjunctives, object pronouns, and their ability to produce formal versus informal forms or the equivalent of some Italian expressions in English. The reading questions examined their ability to comprehend basic plot events (e.g., “Who told Z that the ladder was missing?”) and character motivations (e.g., “Why did X slap Y in the face?”) in an authentic literary text. The final element of the preproduction test was an essay. Students were asked to summarize the dramatic excerpt in their own words, and to aim for a final length of 150 words (more or less would be acceptable). No time limits were imposed; exam time lasted from 26 minutes to 77 minutes.

Postproduction Assessment

Approximately one week after the three public performances of *La Marcolfa*, the 11 subjects sat for a posttest that was parallel in content and structure to the pretest. It began with an OPI, conducted by the same tester for the pretests. Again, as they were not double rated by two certified testers, these exams must be considered unofficial. They aimed to gain a general sense of students’ abilities to speak on a variety of subjects without previous preparation, and to employ verbal and nonverbal communication strategies. After this, the participants took another written exam based on a third theatrical text by Fo. For the sake of consistency, the chosen text was a one-act comedy that was similar in level of difficulty, but different in context and events from both the preproduction test sample and the production

script. As in the preproduction test, students read a five-page passage, marking unknown words with a circle, then answered grammar and reading comprehension questions. Finally, students aimed to write a 150-word summary of the passage. Once again no time limits were imposed and test times ranged from 24 to 69 minutes. One important addendum to the posttest was a student perceptions survey (see Appendix B). All participants rated on a scale from 1 (no improvement) to 10 (much improvement) how much they felt they had improved in various skill and subskill areas as a result of the ITW experience.

Findings

Generally speaking, this pilot study showed broad but consistent tendencies toward improvement in a variety of skill areas. Despite the numerous uncontrolled variables pertaining to participants’ educational and experiential backgrounds, and their different levels of proficiency at the start of the ITW, a comparison of pre- and postproduction tests nevertheless showed general trends of improvement in oral proficiency, reading comprehension, knowledge of language structures and idioms, and writing proficiency. Moreover, the students’ perceptions survey indicates an overall positive influence for the affective benefits of theater for L2 learning.

Oral Proficiency

A comparison of pre- and postproduction (unofficial) OPIs, in which students were prompted to speak on a variety of subjects, in different contexts, and with different levels of discourse, reveals that 4 out of the 11 subjects made notable improvements during the 10-week immersion workshop (see Table 2).

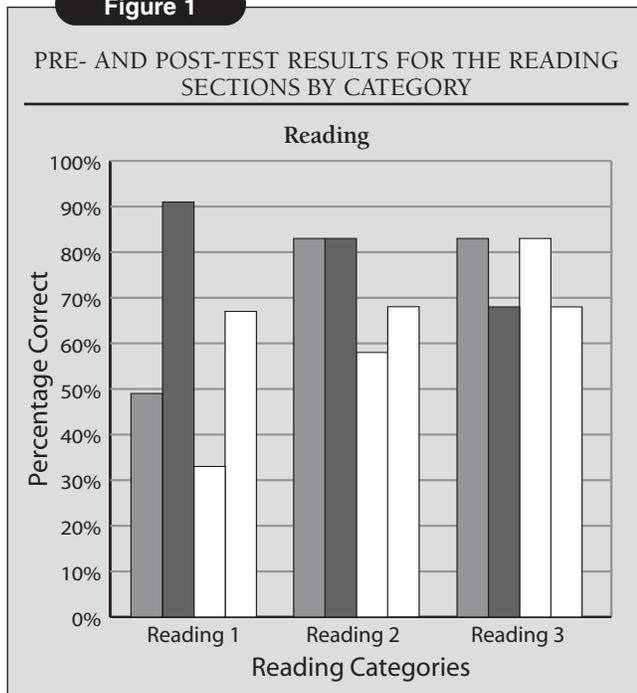
Table 2

OPI RESULTS WITH BREAKDOWN OF ROLES, LEVEL OF IMPROVEMENT AND CURRENT STATE OF ENROLLMENT

Role	Pre-OPI (unofficial)	Post-OPI (unofficial)	Improvement	Enrolled Concurrently in a Language or Literature Course
A	Intermediate-Low	Intermediate-Low	—	Yes
A	Advanced-Mid	Advanced-Mid	—	Yes
A	Intermediate-High	Advanced-Low	Yes	No
A	Intermediate-Mid	Intermediate-Mid	—	Yes
A	Intermediate-Low	Intermediate-Low	—	Yes
A	Intermediate-Mid	Intermediate-Mid	—	Yes
SM	Advanced-Mid	Advanced-Mid	—	Yes
SM	Intermediate-High	Advanced-Low	Yes	Yes
SM	Intermediate-Low	Intermediate-Low	—	Yes
D	Advanced Low	Advanced-Mid	Yes	No
D	Intermediate-Low	Intermediate-Mid	Yes	Yes

Note. A = actor; SM = stage manager; D = designer.

Figure 1



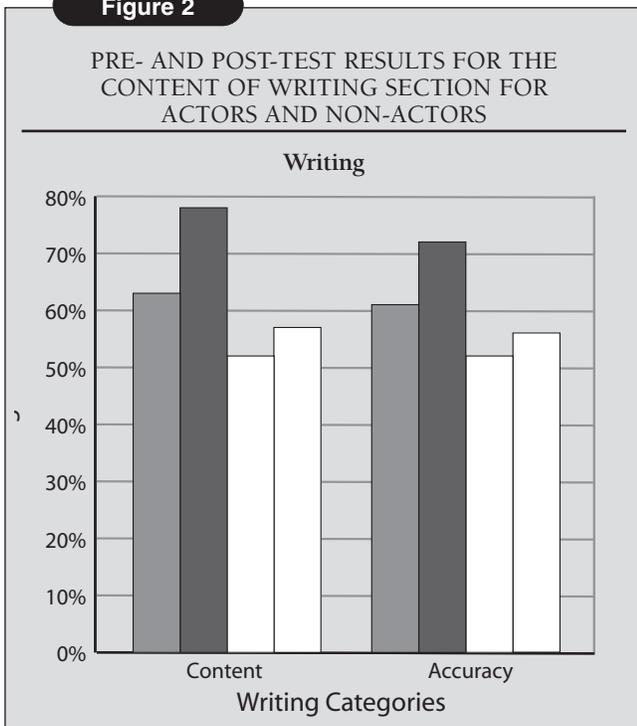
Reading Comprehension

This portion of the pre- and postproduction tests examined participants' ability to understand basic character motivations (Reading 1), plot details (Reading 2), and character identification (Reading 3). (See Figure 1.)

Writing

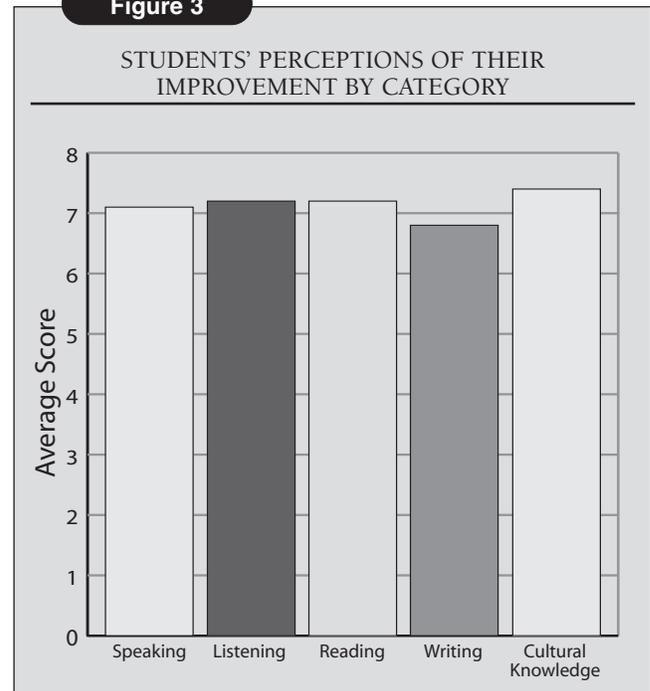
The writing segments of the pre- and postproduction tests

Figure 2



consisted of a 150-word summary of the same literary excerpt. Scores were based half on content (number and accuracy of points made about the characters and plot) and grammatical competence (number and type of errors made). Generally speaking, actors and non-actors showed tendencies toward improvement in both the content and accuracy of their writing. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 3



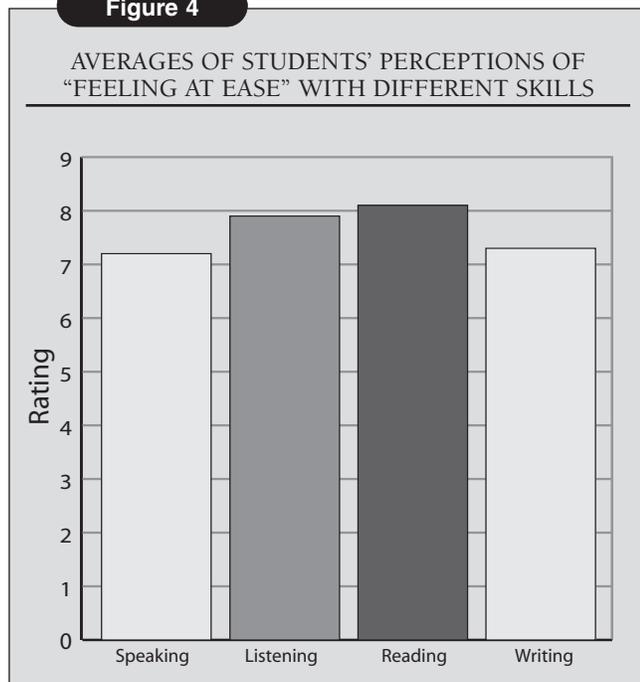
Language Structures and Linguistic Expressions

The sections of the pre- and postproduction tests devoted to language structures and linguistic expressions included grammar questions focusing on the formal and informal register, the subjunctive mood, and object pronouns; pronunciation questions asking where the stress fell on certain words, and translation questions based on idiomatic expressions. These results of this segment proved difficult to quantify and assess. Noteworthy, however, was the fact that non-actors (designers and stage managers) scored highest on the translation of idiomatic expressions in the posttests (50–70% improvement), and that the non-actors had better results even though they were not engaged in the memorization and use of such phrases on a daily basis.

Students' Perceptions of their Improvements and "Feeling of Ease"

Participants rated their perception of how much improvement they made in 27 different categories pertaining to speaking, listening, reading, writing, and culture. Unanimously, they gauged their individual improvements in every skill and subcategory of that skill (see Figure 3) as

Figure 4



improved to much improved (averages for all participants ranging from 5.8–8.25 on a scale of 1–10).

Students also perceived a noteworthy level of improvement with regard to their feeling of ease with different skills. The averages as shown range from 7.25 to 8.1. This accurately reflected the directors' general observations of decreased hesitancy and reservation on the part of students to experiment more spontaneously with language and to use their bodies in the expression of meaning, whether while working with the script or during other aspects of rehearsals.

Discussion

The authors/directors had hypothesized that full-scale theater production of an authentic text could be a beneficial way of bringing together language and literature within the foreign language curriculum. Specifically, they hypothesized that students' oral and reading proficiency would improve and, furthermore, that the experience of collaborating with others to accomplish an initially daunting task would foster students' self-confidence as well as their general enthusiasm for the language and culture. The discussion that follows focuses on these three elements.

With regard to oral proficiency, the fact that four students showed notable improvement on the unofficial interviews admittedly seems rather unfeasible, given the limited time span of the ITW. However, the daily immersion in the target language continually provided numerous contexts, topics, and functional tasks in and out of the workshop that students strove to master or complete with success. Moreover, the importance and urgency of accurate communication in order to move the production process for-

ward as a group provided a powerful motivating factor. Since students realized that the success of their show, to be represented in front of professors and fellow students, depended on their concentration when listening and speaking, they were highly motivated to put forth their best effort. The experience required them to gradually use more extended discourse and employ language for a variety of real and/or simulated, sociopragmatic purposes.

In conducting the postproduction OPIs, the tester treated the plot and characters of the play as well as the subject of theater in general as "hot topics" to be avoided during the interviews because of frequency of use in the subjects' recent past. Interviews faithfully reflected the ACTFL Guidelines for Oral Proficiency, spanning a rich array of content and context areas (e.g., family, daily routines, politics, travel, geography, the environment, youth culture, study abroad). In the preproduction OPIs, the borderline subjects who later showed improved oral proficiency were able to converse about a variety of topics, but their lack of accuracy and fluidity made it impossible for them to attain the higher of two sublevels. Particularly in the case of those subjects showing improvement between Intermediate-High and Advanced-Low, postproduction OPIs showed greater fluency of speech, fewer pattern errors in past tense narration, and greater control over the three main time frames in paragraph-length discourse. The authors of this study therefore concluded that what possibly allowed borderline students cross from the Intermediate-High to the Advanced-Low level was a combination of improved accuracy, fluidity, and confidence in communication.

The OPI tests were consistent with the directors' general perceptions of the students' progress; students who, at the first read-through, had difficulty seeking information or clarification were, after weeks of real-life practical information exchange in Italian on almost a daily basis, speaking much more fluently and accurately by the end of the ITW. The students themselves, according to averages on the perceptions questionnaire, also noted significant improvement in their own speaking abilities (average rating = 7, indicating "much improvement").

One particularly interesting finding from the OPIs was that two of the students who showed strong signs of improvement over the 10-week production period were not concurrently enrolled in an Italian course (see Table 1). This meant that their only practice with the language was coming from the theatrical workshop immersion experience. It was also interesting to note that three of the four subjects who showed improvement were designers and stage managers. This indicates in broad terms the efficacy of the ITW's communicative environment for those who were not working as actors.

With regard to gains in reading comprehension, while both actors and non-actors showed a general trend for

improvement on questions about character motivations in the reading categories 1 and 2 (see Figure 1), they surprisingly scored lower on the questions about plot details (i.e., “who did what and when”) in the postproduction test. This result, however, was likely due to a fault in the wording of the questions, since the students’ writing samples suggest an improved ability to accurately summarize the plot of a theatrical excerpt (see Figure 2). Students’ self-perceptions also indicated a general improvement in their ability to read and comprehend literature. They reported perceiving much improvement in their reading skills (a general average of 7.5 with subskills such as “improved understanding of new vocabulary” and “feeling at ease reading” ranging from 7–8).

The most encouraging aspect of the various posttest results was the students’ overwhelmingly positive response to the ITW experience as a whole. There was no skill or subskill for which participants did not find the ITW to be helpful; all ratings ranged from “some improvement” to “much improvement” (averages of 6.75–8.25). Examining individual categories, it becomes apparent that the highest ratings were given to: (1) knowledge of cultural gestures, (2) use of new vocabulary in speaking, (3) knowledge of idioms, and (tied) (4) feeling at ease with reading, and feeling at ease with listening. The students’ responses pertaining to questions regarding their “feeling at ease” with each skill were also high (see Figure 4).

The notable scores for cultural gestures can be attributed to the fact that theater production made language living, dynamic, and physical. Foreign language play production required the use of countless gestures, whether to accompany one’s lines or to react to the lines or comments of others.

It is probable that students perceived improvement in their own ability to use new vocabulary first because new words and expressions were used with great frequency, and second because full comprehension of the words was essential to successful completion of their daily tasks. Students also perceived a high level of improvement in their knowledge of Italian idioms. This is substantiated by their gradual incorporation of expressions gleaned from the authentic text in their everyday conversations during “down time” at rehearsals and design meetings.

The authors maintain that students’ consistent practice with one text over an extended period of time helped them gain confidence in their ability to understand advanced, authentic materials. In addition, the authors postulate that the students’ comfort level with reading improved because of the depth in which the troupe studied the script, and the level of detail that characterized daily discussions about specific scenes, sentences, or character reactions.

Finally, students’ feeling of ease with respect to listening is attributable to the daily immersion environment. Since instructions, explanations, and discussions pertain-

ing to the text as well as to the details of play production always took place in Italian, students grew more confident in their ability to understand near-native Italian spoken at a regular pace and on a variety of subjects.

More generally speaking, the fact that students reported that the experience made them feel more at ease with all skills is revealing (see Figure 4). At the heart of the ITW was the fostering of a safe language community environment, which allowed participants to trust, inspire, and help each other in their shared struggle to master the difficult and sometimes rather abstract task of “becoming more fluent” in another language. Their comfort levels with using the language grew not only within the microcosm of this theatrical project, but also among Italian speakers in the broader university community. At the reception following the last performance, for example, the participants were enthusiastically chatting in Italian with faculty members about their experience. Several participants remarked that the ITW had prepared them very well for study abroad or for participating more freely in class discussions. And, very tellingly, every single ITW participant from 2002 who had not graduated or gone abroad returned for auditions in 2003, stating that in terms of personal achievement, the ITW was the best experience in their Italian “career” thus far. Their unflinching enthusiasm for the experience underlines its educational value and its potential for inspiring ongoing study of a language and its culture(s).

Limitations and Suggestions

The pilot study production of *La Marcolfa* in March 2002 was an important first step that gave the authors insight into the manifold components of a full-scale foreign language theater production. Working with a small number of participants gave the authors a clear idea of how to balance the number and scope of activities that each category of participant (i.e., actor, stage manager, designer) could be expected to fulfill, and they found that certain roles could be expanded or changed by the alteration or addition of production responsibilities. The authors discerned that in a future production, a longer time frame would allow for the incorporation of written analyses of the literary work collected in a writing portfolio, and in-depth discussions of the play’s place in the literary canon.

The pilot study also made apparent several ways in which the pre- and postproduction testing could have been rendered more controlled and accurate, thereby lending itself to more statistically oriented analyses. As the nature of the ITW lends itself to the use of a cast and crew with various levels of proficiency, certain variables related to participants’ backgrounds, previous language study, or concurrent enrollment in another Italian course will always be present and are difficult to address. However, the authors suggest more fine-tuned testing with regard to grammatical structures, choosing, for example, one or two specific

structures such as present subjunctive forms or object pronouns rather than attempting to test a wide variety of grammatical concepts and tasks.

In addition there was a crucial dimension to the experimental design that remained unexplored. The authors had underestimated the essential role that vocabulary and expressions would play in the numerous communicative tasks students were completing from day to day. After the postproduction tests, however, it became clear that it would have been particularly useful to have examined students' knowledge of general and specialized vocabulary before and after the experience. It would seem from the students' responses on the perceptions survey and from the gradual fashion in which students quite spontaneously incorporated words and expressions from the text into their speech (i.e., *Questa me la paghi! Ci diamo un taglio! il trucco, la regista, il palcoscenico*) that the ITW provided a dynamic and enjoyable forum for learning vocabulary in context.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of full-scale theater production for foreign language learning at the university level, with students participating as both cast and crew. The results have clear implications for foreign language curricula in terms of their practical (proficiency), affective (confidence/feeling at ease), and cultural/literary (interpretation, appreciation, analysis of texts) goals. The project described was an extracurricular experiment intended to provide the groundwork for a future theater workshop of larger scope and for course credit.

Based on the positive trends illustrated by pre- and postproduction tests, as well as the students' perceptions of their own achievements, the authors maintain that the theater workshop would best be conducted as a semester-long course within the foreign language curriculum rather than a ten-week extracurricular activity carrying little or no degree credit. Moreover, its comprehensive syllabus should include not only the text of the play to be produced, but also a variety of secondary sources for cultural, historical, and language study. In addition, it should include a well-defined writing curriculum with tasks ranging from simple character histories to daily or weekly journals to more formal literary analyses of the piece being performed. It became clear during the ITW pilot that a full semester and an expanded course outline would offer even greater benefits for the development of foreign language skills, while still fostering a high level of student motivation, creativity, and confidence.

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Notes

1. Savoia added, "We, as foreign language literature professors, are probably all aware of how inaccurate and counterproductive it is to assume that—having had a few semesters of foreign language instruction, or even having studied some literature in their own native language—students come adequately prepared for their first literature course . . ." (2002, p. 510)

2. Beginning learners can certainly benefit from a variety theatrical techniques in the foreign language classroom, but producing an unmodified, authentic-text play calls for slightly higher levels of comprehension and communication than those of typical beginning-level classes. For example, in order to be able to interact with other participants during rehearsals and design meetings, students must have acquired for recognition and use enough grammar structures and vocabulary to maintain basic conversations on different subjects, even if much of the vocabulary and many of the tasks are new for all. The lowest level of oral proficiency (as per the unofficial OPI) for participants was Intermediate-Low. Likewise, play participants must have a similar level (Intermediate-Low/Intermediate-Mid) as a starting point for reading and writing.

3. *Blocking* refers to the characters' physical position on the stage, including any movements, entrances, and exits, while *stage business* is a term for actions other than physically moving from one place to another (e.g., scratching one's head, looking at one's watch).

4. The two pieces selected were *Gli imbianchini non hanno ricordi* for the preproduction test sample and *I cadaveri si spediscono e le donne si spogliano* for the postproduction test sample (*Le Commedie di Dario Fo*, 4th ed. 1977. Torino: Einaudi).

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Appendix A

Sample Warm-up Exercises or Theater Games

(invented by director or adapted from various theatrical-pedagogical resources)

Imaginary Tug of War

Purpose: Energize group, create a sense of unity among students, develop an awareness of movements of others, release tension

Time: 5 minutes

Description: Students are divided into two teams and must pantomime a tug of war, with an imaginary rope.

Room Full of “Stuff”

Purpose: Energize group, get students used to working in an environment crowded with furniture and props, improve agility and reaction time

Time: 5 to 7 minutes

Description: In this variation of tag, one student is “it” and must tag someone else, who then becomes “it.” However, students must stay within given boundaries in the room, within which the director has placed various furniture items and props. In fleeing their classmates, students are not allowed to touch the items, and must be agile to avoid the obstacles and the chaser at the same time.

Trust Falls

Purpose: Create a sense of unity, promote trust between participants, and get used to the feeling of falling backwards without bending the knees (useful in most farces)

Time: 7 minutes

Description: Students are divided into pairs; it is best if they are relatively equal in height. The pairs stand one in back of the other (both facing forward). The person in back braces him/herself to catch the other student. The student in front calls “Ready?” to which the catcher replies, “Ready. Fall!” The first student then lets him/herself fall backwards, keeping very stiff and not bending the knees. This is repeated, letting the person fall further and further backward each time before he or she is caught.

Switch If . . .

Purpose: Practice the imperative form, use verbs in various tenses, work with vocabulary words, energize group and improve agility

Time: 5 to 7 minutes

Description: The director arranges chairs in a circle; one for each student. Standing in the middle of the circle, the director gives the students a command: switch places if . . . (e.g., you have a brother, you have ever been to Rome, you and your family go out to eat often, etc.). Students who meet the given criteria must get up and run to find another seat. The director, as well, runs to find a seat, leaving one student standing. That student chooses the next criterion. Students will often be very creative in singling out one classmate by coming up with a criterion that only one person meets (i.e., switch if you are wearing a red shirt, a black watch, sandals, and a beaded necklace).

Free Association

Purpose: Encourage creativity, get participants thinking in the target language, let students’ ideas flow freely

Time: 3 to 5 minutes

Description: With students seated in a circle, the director begins the game by saying one word. The person next to the director is instructed to say the very first word that comes to mind, based on the word that the director gave. The next student says the first word that they think of when they hear not the original word, but that of the student next to them. One progression might be: pepper—salt—ocean—fish—gold—money.

Adverbs and Imperatives

Purpose: Practice giving imperatives, work with adverbs (alternatively, the game could be done with adjectives), create a sense of unity among students

Time: 10 minutes

Description: One student leaves the room and the director whispers an adverb to him or her (or they may choose their own adverb). When the person re-enters the room, the other students must give orders, using the imperative form. The person performs these orders according to the selected adverb. For example, let us say that Marco has chosen the word “nervously.” He re-enters the room, and Anna tells him, “Shake Patrizio’s hand!” Marco must shake Patrizio’s hand in a nervous manner. The class must guess the chosen adverb. Alternatively, the class itself may choose the adverb, and when Marco shakes their hands, the class members are the ones to respond according to the adverb. When Marco shakes Patrizio’s hand, Patrizio is then the one who gives a nervous handshake. In this case, it is Marco who must guess the adverb.

Alibi

Purpose: Practice with the past tense, work with vocabulary words, encourage students to pay attention to details of the environment in which a work of literature is set, encourage spontaneous communication

Time: 10 to 15 minutes

Description: Two participants leave the room and must decide upon a story to explain what they were doing from 9:00 to 11:00 p.m. the previous night. They return to the room (one at a time) and are cross-examined by the “jury,” composed of the rest of the class. The jury asks specific questions to try and discover discrepancies in their stories (e.g., “But what color was the car?” “What did you order at the restaurant?” “How many minutes of previews were there before the movie?”).

Create a Story

Purpose: Practice with past tense (in Italian, with the *passato remoto*), encourage spontaneous communication

Time: 5 to 10 minutes

Description: The group sits in a circle, and the director starts a fairy tale. Moving around the circle, each member must add to the tale. This can be done on the level of individual words, sentence fragments, full sentences, or even paragraphs.

Distractions

Purpose: Teach basic principles of farce, force students to think on their feet

Time: 5 minutes

Description: Two volunteers are selected. They begin a scene in which one person has a strong desire to impress the other—a first date, perhaps. The other groups’ members interfere in the scene, moving chairs, scattering papers, making strange noises, etc. The actors in the scene cannot “see” physical people causing the distractions, only their effects. The person desirous of creating a good impression must try to smooth-talk his or her way out of the embarrassing situation.

Minefield

Purpose: Energize group, practice giving accurate directions, emphasize the importance of specificity, and provide a starting point for a discussion about the art of theater in general

Time: at least 15 minutes

Description: Students are divided into two teams and separated by an empty space of perhaps 10 to 15 feet. All participants take off their shoes and toss them into the central space; each shoe now represents a land mine. One team is made up of soldiers who have been captured by the enemy, the other students are their comrades who are trying to free them. The enemy has performed medical experiments on the soldiers, however, so they are now blind (that is, blindfolded!) One at a time, students must talk a companion across the field, being very specific with their directions (e.g., “Now take a very tiny step to the right”). If the student touches a shoe, they are eliminated. The stakes can be raised by imposing a time limit, by having two pairs go at once, or by having other students create distracting noises (e.g., barking dogs, shouting prison guards, machine guns).

Expressions Out of Place

Purpose: Help students understand idiomatic expression in the text and to incorporate them into their own working vocabulary, improve their ability to interact naturally and spontaneously

Time: 15 to 25 minutes

Description: The director makes index cards that have one idiomatic expression or exclamation taken from the script of the play per card. The director then breaks the students into small groups of three or four, and invents a simple situation for each group, assigning roles, if desired. Students then have to invent a scene and spontaneously incorporate the expression in an appropriate way into the dialogue. The scenes are improvised, not written out.

Situations

Purpose: Emphasize the importance of details in a scene, encourage spontaneous communication

Time: 15 to 20 minutes

Description: The director makes a few piles of note cards containing various pieces of information: one pile of character cards, one pile of location cards, and one pile of time of the day or month of the year cards. In small groups, students pull a character card, then each group picks one location and time/month card. They must improvise a scene, including details that will help the rest of the group guess the “who, where, and when.”

“I don’t understand!”

Purpose: Improve students’ ability to use circumlocution to explain themselves

Time: 7 to 10 minutes

Description: In pairs, one student plays the receptionist at a hotel, a server at a restaurant, or a secretary in a doctor’s office. The other student plays a person with a specific request. They must improvise a scene in which Student #2 makes his or her request known to Student #1. Student #1, however, can only respond with “I don’t understand,” or a variation. This forces the student to continue trying to express him/herself in new and creative ways, using circumlocution to convey the message.

Appendix B

Italian Theater Workshop Postproduction Questionnaire

Name: _____ Date: _____

Role in the production: _____ Years of formal Italian study: _____

Are you currently enrolled in a class? No _____ Yes _____

Title: _____

What classes have you taken at Notre Dame in Italian? _____

Have you studied abroad? No ___ Yes ___ How long? _____

What classes did you take during this program (offered in Italian)? _____

Please rate the improvement level you perceived of your own Italian proficiency:

(S = speaking; L = listening; R = reading; W = writing; C = culture)

	Much improvement			Some Improvement			Slight Improvement			None	
S- General pronunciation	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- Intonation	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- Accent	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- Use of new vocabulary	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- Use of grammar rules	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- General accuracy	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- General fluency	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
S- Feeling at ease	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
L- General comprehension	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
L- Vocabulary recognition	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
L- Grammar recognition	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
L- Inference skills	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
L- Feeling at ease	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
R- General Comprehension	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
R- Grammar recognition	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
R- Vocabulary	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
R- Inference skills	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
R- Feeling at ease	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
W- General fluency	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
W- Use of vocabulary	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
W- Use of grammar rules	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
W- General accuracy	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
W- Feeling at ease	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
C- General cultural knowledge	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
C- Knowledge of idioms	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
C- Knowledge of customs	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
C- Knowledge of gestures	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0