Talking to strangers: Learning Spanish by using it

Dr Phiona Stanley, School of Education, UNSW
phiona.stanley@unsw.edu.au

Please cite as: Stanley, P. (2014). Talking to strangers: Learning Spanish by using it. In D Nunan and J. C. Richards (Eds) (2014) *Language Learning Beyond the Classroom* (pp.244-252). Abingdon & New York: Routledge.

Introduction

This chapter considers how I learned Spanish by getting out of my 'comfort zone' and pushing myself into situations in which I had to use it, well before I felt ready to do so. I discuss different stages and the various strategies I used, and I analyse the ways in which this approach can be replicated by other language learners in different contexts. I begin with my own background and two language-learning vignettes and, throughout the rest of the chapter, I refer back and unpack these experiences to make sense of how transferable this technique may be.

For several years in high school and as an undergraduate I took classes in various languages, and I got nowhere fast. Languages, places, peoples, and cultures fascinated me then, as they do now, and every year or two I would make a start in a new language. In those years, I dabbled in French, Italian, Russian, Spanish, and German. In classes, we mostly focused on accuracy and grammar, and although I learned some trivia about each of these languages and a handful of useful phrases (and many useless ones, too), my oral proficiency was sorely lacking. I worried that I was no good at languages. I took some linguistics courses at university to learn more about the structure of languages generally, in the hope that this would be the magic bullet. It wasn't. So it was with some trepidation that I set off, straight out of university, to Peru to teach English. Peru had just come out of civil war and I was living in an area of Lima in which most houses had an armed security guard outside the gate. When I walked past I would say hello to these guards, who were bored guys from the provinces, paid little for endless hours of watching and waiting; it was a quiet area. And little by little, I struck up a friendship with Arón, the guard at the house next door.

A vignette of two cities

Lima, Peru, 1994

We're sitting on the kerb in the dusty street under a tree; it is evening. I've brought us sugary *Inca Kola* and the two glass bottles sit next to us, collecting condensation in the humidity. We communicate through my fragments of

Spanish but mostly through goodwill, sketches, and shared cognates, which we sometimes write down. It isn't early March but we're talking about international women's day; *el día internacional de la mujer*. I know the word *'mujer'* and the rest is cognate-easy. In Peru, Arón says, women's day means that men buy flowers for women, just like mother's day. I say that, where I'm from, it is a bit different, a bit more feminist. He considers the word feminist, rolls it around his mouth and then dismisses it. *Feminista*. It sounds like an insult the way he says it. Arón is one of thirteen children, *trece hijos*. (*¿Tres? No, ¡Trece! Uno. Dos. Tres. Cuatro. Cinco. Seis. Siete. Ocho. Nueve. Diez. Once. Doce. ¡Trece!* He counts on all his fingers and three of mine.) He sends his mother flowers on women's day. Women, he says, where he is from –which is Pucallpa, in the Amazon basin– the women there work just as hard as men. Harder. Women's day celebrates this, he says. With *trece hijos,* I imagine his mother's life *is* really hard. I say this (grammatically all over the place but still making meaning): *vida es duro*, I tap on the surface of the stone kerb to show this idea, *duro*, hard. *Sí, la vida es dura. La vida de mi mamá es bastante dura,* Arón confirms, correcting my accuracy without even realising he's reformulating it for me. I listen attentively to how he puts it. Then, laughing, I ask if every other day of the year is *el día de los hombres*, and Arón laughs too, and then stops laughing, and says, simply, *sí*.

Warsaw, Poland, 1996
I am trudging through Łazienki Park in the snow. It's Friday afternoon, getting dark, and our breath condenses on the outsides of our scarves. Lots of other people are around, but the breath frozen on our scarves is different from theirs, because ours is forming las palabras españolas and not polskich słów: Spanish words, not Polish ones. I'm walking with my Polish friends Kinga and Piotr and we're going to our Spanish class at the Instituto Cervantes, which is attached to the white-marble Spanish embassy. Its teachers are Spanish graduates of *filología* and *lingüística aplicada*; well versed in the mysteries of the *subjunctivo*, the *pluscamperfecto*, and the *imperfecto*. They are amused at my Peruvian 'street Spanish'; one tells me I sound like I just stepped out of the Amazon. They laugh, gently, that I don't know such simple words as *abrigo*, *bufanda*, and *guantes*, but I've never needed coats, scarves and gloves in Spanish before. My teachers despair, a little, at the grammatical carnage I make of their royal language, and they bewilder me with their metalanguage and insistence on accuracy. But they cannot deny me this: when we listen in class to the original recording of Juan Rulfo's *Diles Que No Me Maten*, I, alone in our group, understand.

Principles
In Lima, I learned Spanish as I had learned English, by using all kinds of meaning-making strategies to build my language, as needed, from the ground up. The first day I sat with Arón I used, perhaps, 2% Spanish and 98% everything else: cognates, gestures, drawings, and the avoidance of anything complicated. During and in between our chats under the tree I kept my eyes and ears open, magpie-like, collecting Spanish: I strained to string sentences together and I gathered new words as I needed them. I would make a coffee last all afternoon in the marketplace, poring over a book called, ambitiously, *Spanish in Three Months*. The book was a prop: it, and the lone *gringa*, attracted passersby, many of whom stopped and transformed themselves, momentarily, into Spanish teachers.

Everyone was keen to help out. And then the next time I sat down with Arón I used, maybe, 3% Spanish and 97% everything else. And so it went on.

What is going on here? There are two main ideas here, used in tandem: acquiring bits of language (input; Krashen, 1985) and using those bits of language, as well as whatever other resources are needed, to make meaning: output (Swain, 1985, 2005). Neither one, on its own, is enough. And sometimes the division between them is blurry: when I sat in the market with my book, I was learning a few words from the page (input) but I was also speaking to people (output), and sometimes those people were explaining new words (input) or I was trying to make meaning without the right words (output) and they would help me fill the gaps (input). The two processes are blended, which is the principle behind the test-teach-test language lesson format (e.g. Cullen, 2001), and what I was doing was perhaps an organic version of that.

Principle 1: Find sources of comprehensible input

Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis posits that in order to acquire new pieces of language –grammatical structures, but also active vocabulary items– learners need to be exposed to language input that is simplified to a level just slightly above their own current language level. So although I may have a Russian TV channel, for instance, unless I'm exposed to slower, simplified Russian speech I cannot pick up much Russian just from watching it as the input is not sufficiently comprehensible. Krashen called the requisite level 'i+1', by which he means the current state of the learner's interlanguage, plus one. This is the level at which comprehensible input can be used by learners as a source of development for their own learner language.

So there I was. I would sit for hours in cafes with a dictionary and *El Comercio*, the local paper. It was good comprehensible input because it had a lot of pictures that gave context. I went out with my colleagues, other English teachers, both *profesores nativos* and local Peruvians, and I listened, noticed the way they constructed things, and got them to write down their words for me. The same words and phrases kept coming up again and again and I looked them up: *pues, entonces, todavía, por lo menos, por si acaso, no es justo, me dijo. Poco a poco* –bit by bit– I built vocabulary; *paso a paso* –step by step– I understood more. I proudly brought all these new acquisitions back to Arón, under the tree. My Spanish was full of mistakes and the effort to speak was exhausting, but I felt the progress I was making. It was exhilarating, motivating, exciting, and fun.

Principle 2: Maximize opportunities for comprehensible output

This principle, proposed by Merrill Swain (1985, 2005), says that in order to develop his or her interlanguage, learners need to do more than simply *receive* comprehensible input. S/he also needs to *produce* language, and to receive feedback from listeners about what 'works' or does not. So, for example, as people spoke to me in Lima I would replay their words in my head, making sense of things and sometimes trying them out for myself. A street seller went off to find small change and told me to stay until he returned: '*no se vaya'*. I pondered this new construction, not learning its grammatical label until years later. I had never noticed it before, and had certainly never used it. To learn language by

speaking it, one must become a language detective: a sleuth, an interrogator of words. I saw the same construction used in the title of a Jaime Bayly book, '*No se lo digas a nadie,'* on sale on every street corner that year. Both phrases are commands: *don't go! Don't tell anyone*. I tried using this structure in all commands, and sometimes it worked and sometimes it caused looks of slight puzzlement. This was the negative feedback I needed to tell me that something wasn't quite right. So I restricted its use to phrases in which I knew it worked: *¡no me lo digas! ¡no te vayas!* Ah, these all start with 'no', maybe it is not *all* commands, only the negative ones? I tried that and it worked better.

I was a detective, solving this puzzle using the clues around me. I started hearing these odd verb forms cropping up in other places: *que tengas buen fin de semana*,; *en cuanto lo sepa* (*have a good weekend; as soon as I know*). It wasn't until I finally came to study Spanish in class that I was able to iron out the wrinkles and use this structure properly. But by then I had a feeling for when it 'sounded right', and this made it easy to grasp the underlying principles, enjoy some 'aha' moments, and then move on, using it organically. And, finally, I learned its name (it is the subjunctive). Like a native speaker of any language, I learned first to *use* the language then I learned *about* it.

After six months in Lima, I took off for a while around South America. By then I could defend myself, as Spanish puts it, I could get by. Travelling, I struck up conversations with all kinds of people. I tried my first oyster –*ostra*– tasting of the sea, with some laughing fishermen; later I found out that *aburrido como una ostra* is to be bored as an oyster, bored stiff. I squirrelled away new words and idioms as if they were precious stones (squirrel, an animal but not a verb in Spanish: *ardilla*. Not to be confused with *orilla, águila* or *anguila:* similar sounds, different ideas.) Like the oysters, I tasted these new sounds, chewed them, pushed them around with my tongue (*lengua*, which is also language). I rolled the r's and imitated the Latino lilt. I had fun with the language, and I smiled a lot, and smiling is infectious: I met people and they tolerated my lousy Spanish.

These stages seem to be the way pieces of grammar are acquired if you learn a language by using it: at first it is used rarely, then randomly or in set phrases, then 'properly' (according to rules learned in a grammar book), and then, finally, organically, incorporated into natural use. Other research backs this up (Ellis, 1997; Lightbown & Spada, 1999, pp. 141-149; Scovel, 2001, pp. 50-56). It may not be the most *efficient* way to learn a piece of grammar but it does seem to be *effective*: I have a good 'sense' about what 'sounds right' in Spanish, much as I do in English, and I acquired this through learning Spanish by using it.

And I read. Books are expensive in Latin America but a vibrant bootleg trade exists on the streets. I read whatever they were selling and sometimes I struck up conversations with strangers because we were reading the same book. Many of the words I learned through extensive reading I've never had much use for since. To this day, I know a lot of obscure vocabulary that I've never needed: *eje* (both axis and axle), *destornillador* (a five-syllable screwdriver), enlutado (from the Guillén poem ¡Ay señora mi vecina!) and *dábale arroz a la zorra el abad* ('*the*

abbot gave rice to the vixen', which is a somewhat contorted Spanish palindrome; I learned this, unsurprisingly, in Panama: *A man, a plan a canal, Panama*).

I did not *need* these words, but 'need' is a slippery concept (*un concepto resbaloso;* I remember deducing *resbaloso* from the warnings of a stranger, while we were both climbing down river rocks near Baños, in the Ecuadorian Amazon). I 'needed' all these curious words because I needed a background to my new self. Words were a question of identity. I loved (and still love) being someone who speaks good Spanish. If you speak English and Spanish you can talk to half the world. Latin America draws me in like nowhere else: it has *chispa*, a sparkle, and it is a place where *no termino en mi mismo*, as Pablo Neruda puts it. I am more than just myself. My Latina self is more confident: that year I spent Christmas with a family of Bolivian silver miners and crossed Lake Titicaca with a Peruvian priest. Learning Spanish was as much a course in culture and confidence as it was in language.

Applications

For this approach to be successful, it helped that I am outgoing and that I didn't feel embarrassed to make language mistakes (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, pp. 54-57). Under our tree in Lima, Arón understood that I spoke English just as well as he spoke Spanish, and that my inability to say what I wanted to say in Spanish was indicative of nothing more than that; I never felt my identity or intellect were threatened by my limited language. Later, when travelling around and talking to strangers I was aware that I sometimes had to push myself to engage with people and that sometimes all I felt like doing was holing up somewhere with a book in English and avoiding the struggle to make meaning. (Sometimes, too, I retreated into the backpacker 'scene, in English, spending time with other *gringos*.) I'm an extrovert, and I feel so very driven to learn Spanish, and if even I felt like escaping sometimes I can only imagine how confronting learning like this might be for someone more introverted and less motivated than me. This is supported by a famous case study of a Japanese artist who learned English in Hawaii, in a similar way how I learned Spanish. Of his subject, 'Wes', Schmidt (1983, p. 142) writes:

> All observers agree that Wes is an extremely extroverted and socially outgoing person, with high self-esteem and self-confidence, low anxiety and inhibition. He is … not at all afraid of making mistakes or appearing foolish in his use of English.

This whole process, then, relies on three main factors: being in or seeking out a target-language-using environment, finding (or feigning) the confidence to have a go at using language without necessarily getting it 'right', and being sufficiently motivated to collect new bits of language from whatever source and to engage with users of the target language and become part of their social 'world'. Not everyone meets these conditions, but a bit of feistiness and the willingness to step out of a comfortable bubble are good things to develop more generally, and are beneficial in areas well beyond language learning.

What about context? Is 'learning by using' something that requires the luxury of an extended period spent in a target-language context and plenty of free time to

spend *pateando latas (*literally *kicking cans,* but in English this might be *shooting the breeze)* among native users of your chosen language? Certainly, being in a target language place helps. (Although without motivation it is absolutely possible to be in a language rich environment and nevertheless eschew that language altogether: plenty of long-term expats are only minimally proficient in the language of the place they live.) And it is better to be around the language, physically, viscerally, emotionally, if only to maintain the momentum of motivation. But it is also possible, as my Warsaw experience showed, to keep a language warm in a cold place. While it is *simpático* to speak Spanish in *Sudamérica*, it is perfectly possible to practice among Poles in a park. And now, thanks to the Internet, it is easy to find someone to practice language with, whether online or among others near you who speak the language (whether they are fellow learners or natives interested in a language exchange). My Spanish practice now, in Sydney, is both online with Latin Americans and locally among Australians who also learn and love Spanish. In the mid 1990s, when I started my Spanish journey, the only way to be fully immersed was to go to the target-language place; now, it is just as easy to do this online (and, for most people it is probably less intimidating to start chatting online than it is to make real-life friends in the street or market, as I did).

Payoffs and pitfalls

The number one issue here, I think, is motivation, both amount and type. I have loved Latin America, wholeheartedly, from first reading and obsessing about going there during my undergraduate studies of Colombia, to the moment I set foot in traffic-snarled Lima, through some very rough travels and my reading of its often brutal history, right through to feeling a little shiver of excitement when I hear Spanish spoken in the street in Sydney. I have Latino friends and I share the values of those cultures that prioritise moment-to-moment enjoyment and the quotidian embrace of the literary and the magical. I keep an eye on Latin American politics and I have an iPhone app that links me to the Guatemalan national news: right now I'm following, with fascination and horror, the trial of Rios Montt. The literature of Latin America –both classic and contemporary– interests me, and the moment I landed in Texas for a conference this year, I tuned the rental-car radio to a salsa station. Caring about Latin America motivates me to learn the language. This is an integrative motivation and it is very strong – strong enough to make me trudge through Warsaw snow to Spanish classes; strong enough to have me listing obscure nouns like *ardilla, águila* and *anguila*.

Is it also necessary to experience, and play to, an otherness of some sort? Being a *gringa* certainly helped me in Lima, and being a language-nerd gave me entry in Warsaw into a like-minded circle. But I don't think the mystique of otherness is a necessary condition of this approach. I know a Chinese student in Australia (where Chinese international students are ubiquitous and where it is perfectly possible to remain firmly ensconced in in a comfort zone throughout a university degree) who is managing to do something similar. Having initially taken a part-time job in a restaurant kitchen –speaking only Chinese– she now travels further and does less convenient shifts in an ice cream shop, where her colleagues are Afghani, Indian and Brazilian and where English is used all day.

Laughing one day, she also told me about a strange 'secret hobby' she enjoys: she calls the free phone 1800-numbers on consumer goods packaging –toothpaste and shampoo packaging, electronic gadget instructions and guarantees, the Ikea helpline– with invented problems and questions, for free English practice and, sometimes, a chat with bored call-centre operators. This is not dissimilar to my sitting in the market in Lima with *Spanish in Three Months* all those years ago.

Resources

Social networking, retro-style (i.e. get offline and go and talk to people!)
http://www.meetup.com/
This site provides a forum where like-minded people in your town or city can organise to meet. On it, there are lots of language-focused meetups.
https://www.couchsurfing.org/
This site is for travellers and hosts looking for/offering free homestays. However, if you don't want to host visitors, you can also use this site to arrange to have coffee with tourists who come to your town. You can set the language/s you are learning and the countries you would like to meet people from.

Language exchange websites
These sites allow you to chat online with people whose language you are learning and who are learning your language.
http://www.italki.com/
https://www.verbling.com/

Language learning blogs
And it is also worth reading the blogs of people who write (mainly) about *how* they learn languages. Here are some interesting ones but there are many others.
http://www.thepolyglotdream.com/
http://www.fluentin3months.com/
http://www.everydaylanguagelearner.com/
http://speakingfluently.com/
http://www.omniglot.com/blog/
http://www.janafadness.com/blog/
http://www.mezzoguild.com/

Discussion questions

- The writer of this piece describes her motivation as 'integrative' in that she wants to become part of Latin American society and culture. This helps her learn Spanish as she enjoys the identity that comes of using it. How would you describe your own or your students' motivation (type and amount) in a language you/they are learning?
- How would you feel about starting a conversation in a language in which you are beginner level? To what extent is personality important in this 'method'? How might this learning approach be used by a shy person?
- What was the role of Spanish-English cognates in this account? How could this process be applied to language learning where the learner's first and target languages do not share such linguistic similarities?
- Learning a language by using it relies on finding something to talk about. Some of the websites listed, such as verbling.com, provide a list of

suggested conversation topics on the side of the video-chat screen. If you are hoping to learn or improve a language by using it, what might you choose talk about? What does this depend on?

References

Cullen, R. (2001). PPP and beyond: Towards a learning-centred approach to teaching grammar. In H. Ferrer Mora (Ed.), *Teaching English in a Spanish setting* (pp. 13-26). Valencia: Universitat de Valencia.

Ellis, R. (1997). *Second language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis and implications*. New York: Longman.

Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (1999). *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schmidt, R. (1983). Interaction, acculturation and the acquisition of communicative competence: A case study of an adult. In N. Wolfson & E. Judd (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and second language acquisition* (pp. 137-174). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Scovel, T. (2001). *Learning new languages: A guide to second language acquisition*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence:some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 235-256). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Swain, M. (2005). The output hypothesis: Theory and research. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 471-483). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.