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LING 2142 Fall 2019  
Second Language Teaching  
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### **Reflection 3: Simulated OPI Roleplays**

This activity was prepared as a way to help the only tutee able to attend the final meeting before the Thanksgiving Recess, Bogota, prepare for her upcoming Speaking final exam. Neither A-chan nor Lala were able to be there because of extra commitments; however, this actually worked out in my favor, because Bogota was the only one of my tutees taking an intermediate high/advanced low speaking class. Bogota's Speaking final at the English Language Institute would include a roleplay portion with another ESL student, so I figured it would make sense to just spend some time practicing. To this end, I chose a number of transactional speaking tasks used for Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) training. Two prompts were selected from the Intermediate band to serve as a warm-up, three were chosen from the Advanced level, and one Superior-level prompt was used as a "challenge" task. From prior interactions, I had unofficially assessed Bogota as an Advanced speaker, so this would also serve as a way of confirming or refuting this rough assessment.

In a nutshell, Bogota performed well on each task at the Intermediate and Advanced levels, despite some errors in phonological production. Although I had not intended on pausing mid-roleplay for any reason, a substantial amount of time (5-7 minutes) was spent working on producing the difference between /i/ and /ɪ/ when I mistook Bogota saying the word "bills" /bɪlz/ as "beers" /bi:z/ because of a vowel production error and a difficulty in articulating the velarized /ɹ/. This was definitely not an intended part of the activity, but thankfully I've done enough work on phonology to know what was going on and help identify a root cause: Bogota shared that she has a type of ankyloglossia (tongue-tie) that restricts the full range of motion for her tongue, making articulating /r/ and /l/ difficult even in her L1, Spanish. This made it difficult to help resolve the issue, since I'm not accustomed to working with pathological issues in speech production, but at any rate, we did spend time practicing minimal pairs

containing /i/ and /ɪ/. “Sheet” and a common minimal pair were particularly helpful in getting her to recognize the difference between the two vowels, even if producing them reliably remained an issue.

Still, in terms of actually navigating a communicative task, Bogota outperformed my expectations and was able to confidently manage even the advanced-level roleplays without much prior planning. I think this activity went well due at least in part to the positive rapport that Bogota and I have developed over the course of this semester; this seems to have enabled her to feel more at ease with being creative with her language use. One of the difficulties in a *real* Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is not knowing the tester or being comfortable with them, which makes low-stakes, simulated roleplays in a learning situation a useful way of preparing learners for actually engaging in a real one if they need to have their proficiency evaluated. The only area in which Bogota struggled, predictably, was the Superior prompt that was selected. Still, this may be more of a reflection on the artificiality of the OPI process and the types of prompts used than on Bogota’s language abilities.

After the “real” practice activity was over, we had some time left over and decided to just chat, and the conversation somehow turned to local politics (if I recall correctly, Bogota mentioned her plans to travel home to Colombia and expressed some concern over the political situation back home). In this discussion, Bogota spoke more openly about national issues concerning people in Colombia, and it’s not surprising to me that in a “danger of death” situation, one that actually *matters* to her in an authentic way, she would produce more fluent, naturalistic speech. It’s difficult as a language instructor to strike a balance between eliciting this kind of speech from one’s learners and forcing them into conversations that they might be traumatized by, but since Bogota seemed to be offering to have that conversation, I was able to engage. I don’t think this type of conversation would have been possible without the trusting rapport that we’d built up over the last nine or so weeks, and it’s certainly not the type of conversation I would have at the start of a term with my learners—that being said, it’s also the reason I enjoy teaching language: to enable people to share these kinds of stories.

**Intermediate Prompts**

1. Your neighbor is going on vacation and has asked you to take care of things while they're away. Ask four questions to find out what you need to know.
2. You're looking for an apartment-mate. Ask several questions that will help you decide if this person will be a good apartment-mate for you.

**Advanced Prompts**

1. You missed an important exam and have made an appointment with the instructor. Explain what happened and try to arrange for a make-up exam.
2. When you arrive at the airport in Colombia, your luggage is not in the baggage claim area. You speak with a service representative. Describe your luggage in detail, explain why you didn't arrive with it on the same flight, and make arrangements to have the bags delivered to your hotel.
3. A window in your apartment is broken. Call the building manager, describe the problem, explain how it happened, and try to get the window repaired as quickly as possible.

**Superior Prompt**

1. I'd like to know about the differences in family structure between the United States and Colombia, since we talked a little bit about your family back home. In some societies, families are large, extended networks, while in others, small, nuclear families are the norm. Describe the burdens and pleasures of families and take a stand supporting your preference for a large, extended family or a smaller, nuclear family.