Supporting oral communication in language learning through the fictitious identity technique

Katrin Saar[a1], Terje Loogus[a], Krista Uibu[b]

[a] College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, University of Tartu
[b] Institute of Education, University of Tartu

Summary

People use language to express their thoughts and emotions, as well as reflect and construct their attitudes and knowledge (Haid, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to develop oral communication not only in the mother tongue, but also when learning foreign languages. Oral communication or interaction may be defined as using language for communicative purposes by interlocutors who focus mainly on the content of their conversation, not so much on the correctness of their language use (Philp & Tognini, 2009). Usually, this means conversations between two persons, and sometimes also listening to the interlocutor or delivering a monologue (Eriksson, 2020). When learning a foreign language, we primarily resort to the notions of *speaking and listening* in connection with oral communication (Krelle, 2011).

The main problem in a foreign language class is the learners' reluctance to communicate (Ikonomu, 2010; Kroemer & Hantschel, 2019). The DESI (Deutsch Englisch Schülerleistungen International, 2001–2008) study on the proficiency of German schoolchildren in English and German shows that, on average, teachers speak 70% of the classroom time and learners only 30%. For example, if the number of pupils is 15 and the lesson lasts for 45 minutes, each learner can only speak for about one minute during the whole lesson (Helmke et al., 2007). The significance of the development and practice of speaking in a foreign language and the role of teaching communicative skills is also emphasised in the Estonian context because, in certain cases, teaching foreign languages is largely focused on preparing for the exam (EVK, 2009–2017). A similar view is expressed in the report on the state of the language in Estonia, in which the methodology used in foreign language learning is criticised for focusing excessively on grammar and language (Lukk et al., 2017). Dialogues and speaking tasks used in language classes often differ from real-life

---

[1] College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, University of Tartu, Lossi 3, Tartu, 51003 Estonia; katrin.saar.1@ut.ee.

communicative interactions as they are limited to the themes and vocabulary contained in textbooks (Lütge, 2017). Textbooks are often aimed at the correct use of grammatical forms rather than concentrating on grammar for communication purposes (Delius, 2020). However, the natural process of language acquisition is forgotten in foreign language lessons. Didacticised dialogues in textbooks use complete sentences without any sentence breaks or repetitions and with their syntax and vocabulary corresponding to the use of the "language of distance" (*Distanzsprache*). Comparisons with oral language corpora show that the language of textbook dialogues differs from natural language usage to a great degree (Delius, ibid.).

Oral communication in a language class requires an independent, creative and flexible approach and is not restricted to knowing grammar rules. While speaking, the language user has to consider the language, the content, the present situation and the listener, which in methodological terms means the principle "message before accuracy", i.e., the content is more relevant than the accuracy of the language used (Kurtz, 2013). Research shows that in interactions, it is more important to express yourself comprehensively rather than point out mistakes (Rösler, 2012). Speaking exercises in the form of different games, role-plays, simulations, improvisation and projects are recommended to stimulate interaction (Kurtz, 2013).

This paper examines the influence of using fictitious identity as a technique for learning and teaching foreign languages (French '*simulation globale*') and on the communication readiness of the students in teaching German. Fictitious identity is defined as an activity-oriented language teaching technique in which learners assume new imaginary identities for an extended period, creating an imaginary universe for themselves (Maak, 2011).

The objectives and research questions of the study

The objective of the study was to find out how much using fictitious identity as a language learning technique supports the students' readiness to interact in German and what the students think about using this technique. The following research questions were posed:

1) How does the use of fictitious identity as a language learning technique influence the readiness of students to interact in German?
2) What is the students' opinion on using of a fictitious identity in a German lesson?

Method

An intervention was used to find answers to the research questions. The study involved students of different programmes and study levels at the University of Tartu who had registered for an intensive German language course (N = 18), including 13 female and 5 male students. The data gathered from written questionnaires were analysed by a combined method, using both quantitative and qualitative data analysis (Kelle, 2008; Kuckartz, 2014). Quantitative frequency analysis was used to analyse the results of the students' pre-tests and follow-up tests to determine the efficiency of the intervention. Qualitative content analysis (Gibbs, 2018) was used to analyse the students' opinions on using the fictitious identity technique in learning German.

Results and discussion

As to the students' communication readiness, the results of the analysis related to the first research questions were as expected, i.e., compared to the start of the intervention, the students' activeness in speaking German did not increase significantly. It can be argued that the use of fictitious identity supports the learners' readiness to communicate only to a certain degree and encourages mainly those who are somewhat reluctant to discuss personal topics with fellow students to interact in a foreign language. In language classes, these learners were afraid of making mistakes and avoided speaking when the others were listening (see also Kroemer & Hantschel, 2019). It is possible that due to their previous foreign language studies, they had developed a habit of focusing too heavily on understanding grammar (see also Ikonomu, 2010). This is also referred to in the final report on the Estonian Foreign Language Strategy 2009–2017 (EVK, 2009–2017) and the report on the state of the language in Estonia (Lukk et al., 2017). The results were further confirmed by the answers to the question on role-plays, according to which almost 25% of the respondents had no previous experience with role-plays in foreign language lessons. The answers pointing out a more relaxed and creative classroom environment created by the role-plays during the intensive course confirm the positive effect of playful language learning on promoting oral interaction (Jentges, 2009).

The results related to the second research question or the students' opinions on the use of fictitious identities in foreign language learning confirmed the results of intervention in regard to supporting communication readiness. Some students believe that they would have spoken just as much without using a fictitious identity. However, some of the students found that their fictitious identity helped them react faster in dialogues to their interlocutor's words and without thinking too much about the answer. They would have liked even more

activities in the classroom that were associated with fictitious identities. As it is recommended in the fictitious identity method to involve learners also in creating different communicative situations (Sippel, 2003), they could later be given, for the purposes of experimenting and providing more variety, even more, decision-making power and initiative to expand the range of topics related to fictitious identities (Lütge, 2017; Sippel, 2003). This way, the learners would more clearly perceive their own responsibility in developing their language skills (Schmenk, 2017). Closer cooperation with other learners and getting to know one another better may also allay their fear of speaking and enhance the learners' communication readiness (Aguado, 2021).

In conclusion, the study reveals that using fictitious identities in intensive German courses may advance the students' readiness to interact, but the results of the study cannot be generalised as applying to all language courses where the subject is intensively taught. At the same time, the abundance of variables (e.g., the age of learners, different learning resources, features characterising the teacher and the classroom, personality type) does not provide any grounds to state that the observed effect was only achieved on account of the technique used in classes (see also Darsow & Felbrich, 2017). In order to investigate fictitious identity as a foreign language teaching and learning technique more extensively, additional questions could be put to the respondents, and an interview with a target group could be conducted. Based on communication theories, the relationship between oral communication and personality types could also be examined. The next stage of the survey will include an intervention study of the fictitious identity technique with a reference group and an interview with the co-lecturer.

Keywords: intensive language learning, acquisition of language, communication readiness, intervention, German