

Changing an Old Concept: Mini-Lectures in a Content-Based Classroom



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Culture, connections and content-based instruction

The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1996) distinguishes five areas of competency (communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities). Of the five, culture has recently received increased attention in foreign language classes in general, and in the second year of college in particular. This focus on culture has prompted an increased interest in content-based instruction approaches. Content-based instruction, defined as the type of instruction that pursues language learning by using the target language as a medium for subject-matter learning (Leaver & Stryker, 1989), is gradually becoming more prevalent in language teaching that occurs away from the target culture (Kennedy, 1999; Snow, 1998; Ballman, 1997). In line with this trend, many professionals today endorse Mohan's statement that "Any educational approach that considers language learning alone and ignores the learning of subject matter is inadequate to the needs of these learners" (Mohan, 1986, p. 1), and one might add, is inadequate to meet the goal of the pursuit of excellence that college education strives to achieve. The content-based approach to second-year foreign language teaching is significant because it offers an intellectual challenge commensurate with college-level work required in other departments. Further, it is the perfect vehicle to achieve the third standard, establishing connections with other disci-

plines. Finally, a content-based approach prepares students to navigate the demands of courses required for their minor or major, as content exposes students to a level of sophistication in vocabulary, as well as sentential and discourse structure, unlikely to occur otherwise.

Among the techniques typically utilized to deliver information in subject-matter courses, lecturing tends to be the most common in both the humanities and sciences (Benson, 1994). Colleagues in foreign language departments report that they, like their counterparts in other departments, also lecture in literature, culture, and linguistics classes. Therefore, the ability of faculty to lecture well—and of students to follow a lecture—is essential in the academic environment.

This paper explores the use of lectures in content-based foreign language instruction. It first presents a definition of the lecture as a speech event, followed by a discussion of the mini-lecture technique and how it compares to conventional lectures and other listening formats. The paper then describes the reaction of students and instructors who have used the mini-lecture technique at the University of Michigan. Finally, a step-by-step description of the mini-lecture technique is presented so that readers can design their own.

What are lectures?

Lectures, usually delivered by an individual, are a hybrid type of discourse featur-

ing both oral characteristics and attributes found in academic writing. The orality of lectures manifests itself in the form of pauses, hesitations, and self-correction. Written discourse style is most apparent in its specialized vocabulary and syntactical complexity, with more subordination than is usually typical of informal oral discourse (Hansen and Jensen 1994). Lectures are typically delivered within the time span of twenty to sixty minutes. The dynamics of interaction between the speaker and the audience often show communication originating from the speaker only (Brown, 1978; Penner, 1984; Brown, 1986; Wolvin & Coakley, 1988; and Brown, 1995).

How do lectures compare to real-life conversation?

Real-life conversations tend to focus on the concrete, on what is tangible and immediate to participants in the conversation. The dialogic nature of conversational discourse is the result of the contribution and cooperation of the interlocutors. Our daily conversations commonly maintain already-established social connections or initiate new ones (Wolvin & Coakley, 1988). Conversations tend to feature fewer subordinated sentences—and their sentences are less dense, i.e., contain less information—than lectures (Hansen & Jensen, 1994). A summary of the features that distinguish real-life conversation from lectures is presented in Figure 1.

What are mini-lectures?

Like conventional lectures, mini-lectures are designed to deliver subject-matter information live. However, the mini-lecture is not only shorter but also conveyed in a way that maximizes comprehension at the intermediate level, when students' language skills are still far from solid. In other words, the mini-lecture encompasses the strategic use of information-delivery tools, making it possible for students to focus on content while still developing their language skills. These delivery tools, or strategies, include 1) supporting the information delivered verbally by supplying relevant visuals, 2) facilitating students' comprehension by rephrasing and recapping those ideas identified by the speaker as the core of the mini-lecture, 3) structuring the delivery of ideas in a way that enhances comprehension, especial-

Figure 1. Real-life Conversation Features vs Conventional Live lectures Features

<i>real-life conversation</i>	<i>conventional live lectures</i>
1. seven words per idea unit	1. eleven words per idea unit
2. less subordination	2. more subordination
3. concrete vocabulary	3. abstract vocabulary
4. repetitive information	4. novel information
5. social connection	5. disseminating information
6. less propositional density	6. more propositional density
7. opportunities to negotiate meaning	7. lack of opportunities to negotiate meaning
8. fewer cognitive demands on the listener	8. more cognitive demands on the listener

Figure 2. Live Mini-Lectures Features vs Conventional Live Lectures Features

<i>live mini-lectures*</i>	<i>Features</i>	<i>conventional live lectures*</i>
+	1. visual information	-
+	2. rephrasing	-
+	3. defining non-technical terms	-
+	4. care in structuring ideas	-
+	5. pausing	-
+	6. recapping	-
+	7. interaction with the audience	-

*Read the plus and minus signs as more and less respectively.

Figure 3. Live Mini-Lectures Features vs Other Commonly Used Listening Formats

<i>live mini-lectures</i>	<i>videotaped conversations, monologues, messages and advertisements</i>
1. listening to learn information	1. listening to exercise a skill
2. reinforcing redundance	2. minimal redundance
3. possibility of interaction	3. no possibility of interaction
4. reflect academic discourse	4. removed from academic discourse

ly anticipating what terms may cause a communication breakdown, and 4) interacting with the audience, especially when students' faces indicate that they have lost the thread of the topic (Brown, 1989; King, 1994). While all of these delivery strategies may be used occasionally in conventional lectures, the mini-lecture incorporates them systematically and more frequently. Figure 2 presents a summary comparison of mini-lecture features to those of conventional lectures.

How is listening to a live mini-lecture different from listening to other speech events?

Among the listening materials most commonly used by foreign language students are audio/videotaped conversations, monologues, messages, and advertisements. Live mini-lectures complement these important traditional forms of listening practice because they incorporate different listening strategies and goals. One important objective of a mini-lecture is to provide information about the target culture using a type of discourse that mimics that typically used in academic settings. Another important goal is to use the live medium to maximize opportunities for successful listening comprehension. The face-to-face interaction between speaker and listeners allows the speaker to tailor the delivery to the needs of the students by pointing to visuals, rephrasing ideas, and reinforcing the main points. Figure 3

summarizes the differences between live mini-lectures and other formats.

How do students react to live mini-lectures and other types of listening materials?

In the fall of 1999, a group of 121 students enrolled in a fourth-semester Spanish class at the University of Michigan were exposed to the following listening comprehension formats: read-aloud text, audio-taped text, songs, video, and live mini-lectures. At the end of the semester, the students completed a survey (see Appendix A). The students ranked the activities in order of preference, and they qualified the types of activity by indicating whether it was the most comprehensible, the most enjoyable, or the most helpful in improving listening skills (see Figures 4 and 5). Thirty-eight percent of the students ranked video, and 36% ranked live mini-lectures, as their preferred choice. In qualifying the activities, 48% of students indicated that live mini-lectures were the most comprehensible, and 24% and 21% gave this qualification to read-aloud text and video, respectively. In the most-enjoyable category, 49% and 30% placed video and songs, respectively, in this category, while mini-lectures were considered most enjoyable by 7%. Finally, 45% thought that mini-lectures were the most helpful activity in improving listening skills, while 22% gave this qualification to videos and 21% gave it to read-aloud text.

Figure 4. Activity Type Ranked #1 and #2

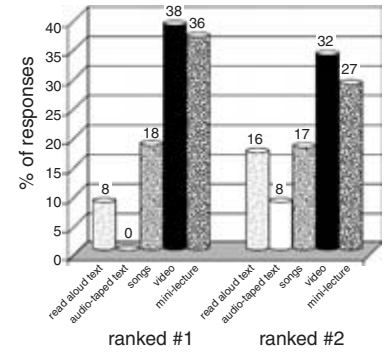
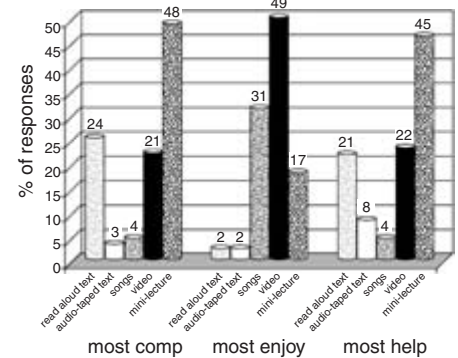


Figure 5. How Students Qualified Activity Types



Students' responses to question number three (concerning the helpfulness of the mini-lecture format) help clarify the results reported above. Three positive features of mini-lectures emerge from their comments: 1) a familiar voice aiding the listening process, 2) a somewhat slower pace, and 3) interaction with the speaker. What students perceived as a "slower pace" may reflect a somewhat slower speech rate, compared to other types of listening activities. It may also have been the end-product of the speaker's elaboration, recapping, and pausing. Pausing that occurs throughout a mini-lecture is triggered by two events: 1) the process of referring to visual aids pertinent to the content, and 2) student questions.

One notable outcome of the survey is the overwhelming student perception of audio-taped material as least comprehensible, least interesting or enjoyable, and least helpful. This result warrants further inquiry, as audio-taped materials continue to be a primary source for listening comprehension practice at all levels of foreign language instruction. This result, however, is consistent with the fact that audio-taped material in general lacks those features that students praised in mini-lectures. Student perception of audio tapes confirms the results obtained by Vogely (1998), who reports that her subjects identified lack of visual support and

lack of repetition as two sources of the anxiety they experienced when listening to recorded conversations.

It is worth noting the dichotomy that students made between material that is “entertaining” vs “beneficial to their learning.” While 48% and 45% perceived mini-lectures as most comprehensible and most helpful in improving listening skills, respectively, only 17% qualified this type of activity as most interesting or enjoyable. Conversely, other types of activities (like videos and songs) that were rated as most enjoyable by a large number of students, were not rated as highly comprehensible and helpful. These results suggest that those types of activities may need to be made more effective.

What do instructors report?

The instructors who used mini-lectures in their classes reported improvement in their students’ confidence level. During the two semesters that they used mini-lectures in their fourth semester classes, their students’ attitudes towards listening became more relaxed, and they seemed more confident. The instructors also indicated that they themselves welcomed the challenge of preparing lectures about a sociopolitical or historic topic.

How do you create and present a mini-lecture?

Creating and presenting a mini-lecture involve a few basic steps that, initially requiring some practice, quickly become second nature.

- I. Script preparation (See Appendix C for a sample script)
 - A. Establish content objectives. The instructor must determine what cultural, historical or social content to cover. Ideally this content should be tied to some part of the syllabus. Further, student learning objectives, i.e., what they should know and be able to do after the mini-lecture, should be stated.
 - B. Script design. In designing the script, content is not the only important aspect. The instructor should 1) decide what vocabulary items to include and how new vocabulary will be addressed during the presentation, 2) control the length of the script, 3) plan pauses, recappings, elaborations of the information, and 4) chart the integration of visuals.
 1. Focus on language. Identify vocabulary items with which students will most likely have difficulty. Either simplify those words or include

them as part of the vocabulary preparation in the pre-listening stage. Then identify other potential language difficulties that students may encounter and prepare paraphrases or build repetition and/or reelaboration into the text.

2. Length. The presentation of the mini-lecture, not including the activities, should last no longer than 10 to 15 minutes, which is equivalent to 500 to 600 words. It is our experience that otherwise, students tend to suffer from information overload and cease processing the information effectively.
 3. Incorporate comprehension and vocabulary checks. Having already established potential language difficulties in the script, now include comprehension and vocabulary checks. They will not only assist comprehension but also establish whether or not these objectives are met during the presentation. They can be incorporated in the form of questions such as, “Do you remember what this word means?” “Do you know a synonym for this word?” “Can you explain in your own words the idea that I just mentioned?” “Can you give me an example of this idea?” These questions should be asked and answered in the target language.
 4. Plan pauses. An important feature of the mini-lecture is interaction (Noblitt, 1995); therefore, plan natural pauses for students to think about the information or to give them the opportunity to ask questions.
- II. Design pre- and post- listening activities. The pre-listening activities should activate background knowledge, prepare active vocabulary, and help students to anticipate content. The post-listening activities can be used to evaluate students’ comprehension, stimulate open-ended discussions, and provide the opportunity to incorporate a writing activity. (See Appendices B and D.)
 - III. Find visuals and supporting materials
 - A. Importance of visual support. Visual aids reinforce information in the mini-lecture and facilitate comprehension. For example, references to a transparency with important vocabulary items is useful during the mini-lecture. Another helpful visual is an outline of the major points to be covered to which the presenter refers as the mini-lecture progresses.

B. The use of transparencies, the blackboard, maps, photos, and PowerPoint presentations. These visuals provide additional support, particularly pictures, charts, and diagrams. In our experience, using dynamic PowerPoint slides keeps students alert and attentive.

IV. Presentation of the mini-lecture

- A. Maintain interaction. During the mini-lecture, maintain eye contact with the students and pause frequently to ask if they understand or have any questions. This is especially important when their facial reactions suggest doubts or problems. At these times it may be helpful to ask the comprehension questions prepared as part of the script. Students’ answers indicate whether or not they understand the information. At the same time, your input gives them confidence in their level of comprehension and assists them in revising misunderstood information.
 1. Pausing. The interaction necessarily fosters pausing, which gives students an opportunity to reflect on the information presented up to that point and to take notes without missing additional information.
 2. Body language. The instructor’s body language—pointing to visuals and making eye contact—can also invite students to interact with the content and helps maintain alertness.
 3. Use of comprehension questions. As noted above, comprehension questions should be an integral part of the mini-lecture itself, as they are crucial for both instructor and students to monitor the comprehension process.
- B. Handling students’ questions. Initially, students may ask few, if any, questions. Because mini-lectures are a new format, they need time to familiarize themselves with the dynamics and expectations of this type of listening activity. As their familiarity and comfort with the format increases, they become increasingly-active participants. Students occasionally ask questions that are irrelevant or only minimally relevant or pertain to information yet to be presented. Avoid discouraging future participation by tactfully telling students that the issue will be explored during the post-listening activities or will be covered later in the mini-lecture.

Conclusion

Live mini-lectures represent a variation of the age-old academic practice of teaching through lectures. This variation features many of the characteristics found in lectures, particularly delivering subject-matter content. However, the mini-lecture enhances communication through interaction, visual support, and attention to vocabulary, all interwoven to build listening and language skills while imparting information.

The benefits that intermediate-level students may derive from live mini-lectures are as follows:

1. Mini-lectures help to build students' confidence in their listening skills, because students can interact with the speaker and therefore have more control over the listening process.
2. Students learn target culture information through listening, an important adjunct to obtaining such information only through reading.
3. Mini-lectures give students an insight into similarities between a regular college or high school class taught in English and a similar class taught in the target language, thereby triggering awareness of listening strategies that can be equally successful in both environments.
4. Students learn how to make sense of lectures that they will later encounter in target-language subject-matter courses, such as literature or civilization.
5. Mini-lectures can be used to guide students in the development of note-taking skills in L2.

Mini-lectures also impact instructors. In our experience, they find the experience of

designing a mini-lecture enlightening, as it fosters reflection on how vocabulary, syntax, and discourse structure can be combined to maximize comprehension and can be enhanced through interaction and visuals. Instructors find mini-lectures to be a powerful tool to teach students how to listen, and in the process, they frequently learn more about how students process information. Finally, when topics are appropriately chosen and tied to the curriculum, both students and instructors find mini-lectures to be truly intellectually engaging.

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APPENDIX A

Spanish 232 (fourth semester) Survey

Please answer the following questions about the types of listening activities you have completed this semester in your Spanish 232 course. Upon completion, include this survey with the CRLT Evaluation Forms and return them to the main office of the Department of Romance Languages & Literatures. All responses will be kept confidential.

LISTENING COMPREHENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Rank the following listening activities in order of preference using numbers (1-5) in the blanks provided.

- _____ a. The teacher read a text aloud while students took notes or answered questions.
- _____ b. The teacher played an audio-tape of a text while students took notes or answered questions.
- _____ c. The teacher played songs while the students took notes or answered questions.
- _____ d. I watched a video or movie while taking notes or answering questions.
- _____ e. The teacher gave a brief lecture on a topic using visual aids such as transparencies and pictures while students took notes, asked questions of the teacher, or answered questions (otherwise known as a *mini-conferencia*).

APPENDIX A *continued*

2. Mark with a check the type of listening activity that best fits the qualifiers listed on the far left column.

	a	b	c	d	e
	read-aloud text	audio-taped text	songs	video	mini-lecture
most comprehensible					
most interesting / enjoyable					
most helpful in improving my listening comprehension skills in Spanish					

3. This semester you have had experience with listening format “e” (the teacher gave a brief lecture on a topic using visual aids such as transparencies and pictures while students took notes or asked questions). Do you think that this specific format is more or less helpful than the other formats? Briefly explain why. (Feel free to use the other side).

APPENDIX B

Mini-Lecture: Pre-listening activitiesⁱ

I. Reviewing background information / Anticipating content.

- A. In groups of four, review the major characteristics of dictatorships in Latin America. Use the chart below to remember what you have studied in class and to guide your discussion.

Why and when have dictatorships been established in Latin America?	
What are the major characteristics of dictatorships?	
What has been (and is) the role of the military?	

- B. Based on what you already know about some dictatorships in Latin America, what problems/difficulties would countries under dictatorships encounter in their transition to democracy? For example, what would happen if Cuba became a democratic country? Remember to use the conditional to express probability.

II. Activating vocabulary.

- A. Vocabulary review: Using your own words, explain to your partner what these expressions mean in Spanish: **autocratic government, the military, power, human rights, instability, elite**

Model *elected government*: a democratic government

- B. New vocabulary: Select the item that best describes the meaning of the following words. Try to guess using the context provided in the examples.

- unable a. somebody that cannot do something;
b. only one leader

*Likewise, the dictators were **unable** to solve the problems facing their countries*

- bribery a. act of influencing someone with gifts
b. a political party

- favoritism a. to be unfairly fond of
b. synonym of “communism”

*The biggest problem facing Latin American democracies is the elimination of corruption. In almost all of these nations there is a history of **favoritism** and **bribery**, activities that some politicians have used for their own personal gain.*

APPENDIX C

Mini-Lecture Scriptⁱⁱ

Latin American Politics: Steps Towards Democracy (Part II)

As you all know, the history of Latin American politics from the 19th century up until the 80’s of the 20th century has been characterized by a series of common factors which have negatively affected the development of Hispanic countries

(Do you remember what these common factors are?ⁱⁱⁱ). As we studied at the beginning of this chapter, the first two centuries after Independence from Spain were characterized by economic and social **instability**^{iv}, political crisis, and disorder caused by the changes between **autocratic and elected governments** (Do you understand the difference between *autocratic and elected governments*?). In the present day, and for the

first time in history, almost all of the Latin American nations have an elected president (*transparency: the names and photos of several Latin American presidents*). Today we are going to discuss the transition to democracy, the factors that contributed to its realization, and the problems which still face Latin America.

As we discussed in previous classes, the 60’s, 70’s and part of the 80’s were char-

acterized by the strong presence of the **military** in the government. But, since the 80's there has been a shift to constitutional forms of government (*Can you give me an example of a constitutional form of government?*). This democratic transition was due to several factors. First, during the dictatorships **human rights abuses** were common and this provoked **indignation**^v amongst the people. An example of these violations was the unexplainable **disappearances** of thousands of people (*Do you remember in what country, or countries, this occurred?: Show the photo of a demonstration of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*). At the same time the dictators were unable to solve the economic problems facing their countries (*What were these economic problems?: Show photo of the Indian and business man to discuss the class differences and discrimination*). And finally, the dictatorships lost the economic support of the United States

after the **fall** of the Soviet Union (*Show photo of Yeltsin and President Clinton*).

Although this return to democracy has been greeted with optimism and hope, the new democratic governments still face serious social and economic problems which **threaten** the political and social stability of their countries. For example, in the 90's the differences between the rich and the poor have increased and, as a consequence, social instability has increased. The military continues to have a certain degree of power in these countries and at any moment they are prepared to **intervene** in order to **impose** order if the democratic government is unable to do so (*In what circumstances would the Latin American military intervene?: Show photos of the military*.) In reality, the biggest problem facing Latin American democracies is the elimination of political **corruption**. In almost all of these nations there is a history of

favoritism and **bribery**, activities that some politicians and members of the social **elite** have used and continue to use for their own personal gain and for the benefit of their families and friends. In recent years the corruption in some of these governments has received public scrutiny and, as a result, some political representatives have been more responsible.

The 21st century will be of vital importance for the development of Latin America. For the first time in history almost all of the Hispanic countries have a democratic government. Nevertheless, corruption and social and economic instability could provoke another military intervention. We should still be optimistic, however, and hope that the Latin American democratic governments will get stronger and stronger.

APPENDIX D

Mini-Lecture Post-Listening Activities^{vi}

I. Evaluating listening comprehension

A. Your instructor will present a mini-lecture which explains the democratic transition in Latin America since the 80's. Listen carefully to the presentation, taking notes on the information you hear, and then answer the following comprehension questions.

1. When did the change to democratic governments begin in Latin America?
2. Explain two of the factors that contributed to the democratic transition.
3. Mention two problems that threaten the stability of these democracies.
4. What do favoritism and bribery mean?
5. What do you think about the political future of Latin America? Will it be possible to maintain democracy and resolve the problems mentioned in question 3?

B. In pairs, discuss your answers to question 5 and then report your group's ideas to the class.

II. Homework: Writing assignment

A group of Latin American politicians has asked the U.S. government for recommendations on how they can maintain democracy in their countries. Your job as a member of this advisory board will be to use the information you have learned on the social, economic, and political history of Latin America to prepare a report with your recommendations. Your report should be between 40 and 50 words. Incorporate the information studied in class and use the appropriate verb forms to present your suggestions.

Suggestion: Consider the following questions before you begin writing:

- What factors threaten the stability of Latin American democracies?
- What influence has the international community had on Latin American politics?

Endnotes

- i Pre-listening activities have been translated from Spanish to English for the reader's convenience.
- ii This mini-lecture script has been translated from Spanish to English for the reader's convenience.
- iii The lines in italics contain information that falls under one of the following categories: a) a comprehension question directed to the students at a specific point in the lecture so that they will answer it before the speaker proceeds with the next idea in the talk, and b) a suggestion addressed to the speaker for a procedure to be followed at a specific point of the talk.
- iv The boldface flags items that have been introduced in a previous class. This vocabulary is reviewed by the students during the pre-listening phase. See appendix B part II.A.
- v The underline flags new vocabulary items. Some of these items are discussed during the pre-listening phase, see appendix B part II.B. Some of these new items can also be integrated into the mini-lecture by writing them on the blackboard as they come up in the talk and explaining the term in the target language. Once the explanation is over, the speaker may check comprehension by asking the students to offer an English translation of the term.
- vi Post-listening activities have been translated from Spanish to English for the reader's convenience.