Evaluative Setting and Oral Production

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the influence of an evaluative setting on the Foreign Languages (FL) oral production. It was hypothesized that the FL oral production of FL learners would increase being challenged in an evaluating setting. This last term is created based on authors that refer to the importance of the teaching, learning, and evaluative methods during the FL learning process (Krashen and Terrell, 1983; McDonough and Shaw, 1993; Courtillon, 2003; Lozanov, 2005; Loewen, 2007; Clerc, 2010). The study describes the possible factors and elements that surround the evaluative process of the ability to communicate verbally in the target languages. A total of ten (10) learners were observed and interviewed in a mixed method research. The findings were analyzed taking into account interpretative techniques, recursive abstraction and coding procedures. It was found that students seem to respond to diverse personal needs increasing the FL oral communication when they are evaluated.

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Additionally, the characteristics of the evaluative setting components may affect the results of the oral evaluations.

Key words: Evaluative setting, oral production, learner needs.

Resumen

El propósito de este estudio es identificar la influencia de un entorno de evaluación sobre la producción oral en una lengua extranjera (Foreign Language, FL). Se hipotetizó que la producción oral de los aprendices de una lengua extranjera aumentaría colocándolos en un entorno de evaluación. Este último término es creado basado en autores que se refieren a la importancia de los métodos de enseñanza, aprendizaje, y evaluación empleados durante el proceso de aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera (Krashen and Terrell, 1983; McDonough and Shaw, 1993; Courtillon, 2003; Lozanov, 2005; Loewen, 2007; Clerc, 2010). El estudio describe los posibles elementos que rodean el proceso de evaluación de la habilidad de comunicarse verbalmente en los idiomas meta. Se observaron y entrevistaron diez (10) aprendices en una investigación de métodos mixtos. Los resultados se analizaron teniendo en cuenta las técnicas de interpretación, abstracción recursiva y procedimientos de codificación. Se encontró que los estudiantes parecen responder a diversas necesidades personales que aumentan la comunicación oral en la lengua meta cuando son evaluados. Además, se halló que las características de los componentes del entorno de evaluación pueden afectar los resultados de las evaluaciones orales.

Palabras clave: Entorno evaluativo, producción oral, necesidades de los aprendices.

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Open. Writ. Doors. J.
ISSN 2322-9187 • July-December 2014. Vol. 11 • Number 1 • Pamplona, Colombia.

Introduction

It is certainly possible that speaking generates the most discussion and controversy in language teaching. McDonough and Shaw (1993, p. 151) affirm that speaking is undervalued and taken for granted while; Ur (1996, p. 120) considers speaking is the most important skill to develop. Bearing this in mind, this paper analyses how an evaluative setting affects the oral production in a group of ten FL students at a public university in Colombia. The study applies a mixed method approach involving observations, field notes, a written demographical questionnaire and an interview. Although, there is an extensive amount of studies comprising the oral production definition, phases of development, components, and correct evaluation (Omaggio, 1986; The Council of Europe, 2001; Courtillon, 2003; Canagarajah 2006; Moreno, 2007), there are a few studies broaching the components forming the setting of an evaluative process and its influence on the evaluations. Due to the absence of studies focused on this topic, the researchers create the term evaluative setting and list its components. In this study, setting is understood as the whole teaching and learning environment (McDonough and Shaw, 1993). In this manner, the evaluative setting is formed by the evaluation, context and time, methods and resources and, pressure sensations. These terms are defined providing the theoretical framework of the study. The paper finishes presenting the conclusions and discussion analyzing the findings and providing some future research implications.
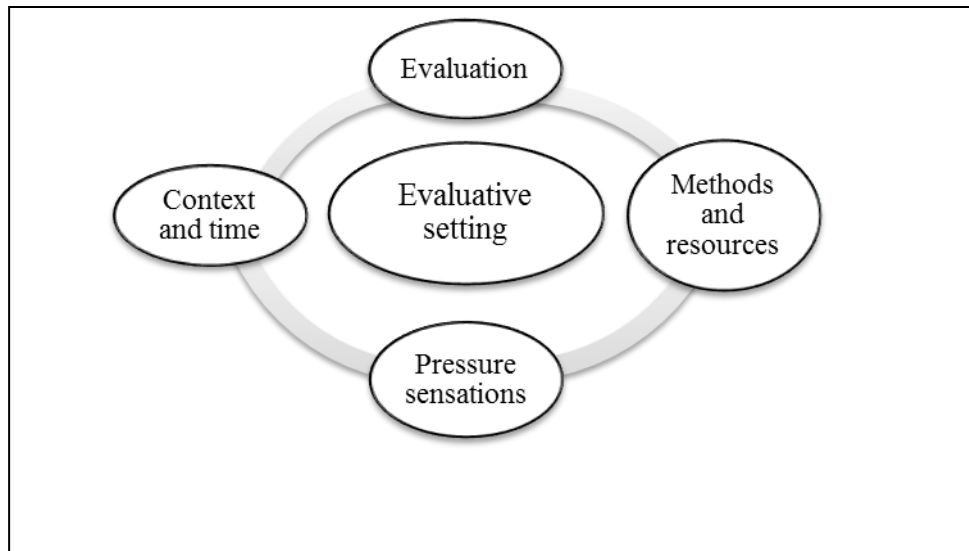

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ISSN 2322-9187 • July-December 2014. Vol. 11 • Number 1 • Pamplona, Colombia.

Literature review

Evaluative Setting

McDonough and Shaw (1993) states that setting includes the factors that determine whether the aims of a language program are feasible and realistic. They include the role of English in the country, the role of English in the school, the teachers, management and administration, resources available, support personnel, the number of pupils, time available for the program, physical environment, the socio-cultural environment and so on. The term evaluative setting is created to identify the components encircling an evaluative process and their influence on the FL oral production (see figure 1). It emerges when the students consciously know they are being evaluated, measured, tested, examined or assessed formally in their oral production. The evaluative setting is structured by four components. They are the evaluation, the context and time in which the evaluative process is developed, the methods and resources used by teachers during the evaluative process and, some

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pressure sensations felt by students at the moment of the evaluation.

Clerc (2010) affirms that **evaluation** is a process of collecting and reviewing specific information that finishes with the assignation of a value. It has different purposes: (i) regulation of the learning process fixing goals and controlling progressions, (ii) categorization of students, (iii) changes in teaching and learning methodologies, (iiii) orientation of academic processes and, so on. Additionally, there are different categories of evaluations (diagnostic, formative and summative). They are appropriate to measure the ability to use the language effectively for specific purposes and functions inside specific communities (Canagarajah, 2006).

In this study, context refers to the physical space where the evaluation is applied. It

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ISSN 2322-9187 • July-December 2014. Vol. 11 • Number 1 • Pamplona, Colombia.

can be an authentic or a quasi-authentic place. The creation of a visually attractive

environment for learners helps to motivate the apprenticeship (Lozanov, 2005). The Natural

Teaching Approach attempts to immerse the student with the language s/he is learning by

creating artificial spaces allowing an in-depth use of the language (Krashen and Terrell,

1983). These artificial spaces encourage the communication in real life contexts (Hymes,

1973). Time is considered as the moment in which the oral evaluation occurs or is

perceived. It can be in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening, or at night during a

class, a tutoring, a spontaneous dialogue or a real oral evaluation.

The methods and resources refer to the procedures and elements selected by

teachers to evaluate students. Interactive, collaborative and performative evaluations reveal

the pragmatic language competence permitting to evaluate fluency, grammar and, phonetics

because "it includes not only an acceptable pronunciation to communicate one's words but

also the discourse strategies to convey one's ideas" (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 239). Moreover,

the oral production is evaluated individually when students are demanded to maintain

monologues (Courtillon, 2003). Teachers can use Error Correction strategies when students

or their pairs are not able to correct their mistakes (Walz, 1982; Lowen, 2007;) and

techniques of suggestopedic instruction (rhythmic music, cultural resources, decoration

elements, and breathing exercises) to reduce pressure and anxiety during the evaluations

(Beitinger, Heinz & Renkl, 1993; Lozanov, 2005).

The pressure sensations comprise different perception students have when they are evaluated orally. These sensations are not only taken as threats because they can be notions to make the students to improve their oral practices and enlarge their vocabulary. They are divided into internal and external sensations. The internal ones refer to the pressure exerted by the learner him/herself to accomplish personal needs (achievement, power and affiliation). These needs are examined by McClelland (1958). In this study, the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation features are considered as internal agents of pressure since they respond to the personal language needs of the students (Weiss, 1979 as cited in Bertocchini & Constanzo, 2007). The external sensations come from exterior agents as people who want students to achieve a determined goal, sicknesses, feelings of anxiety or fear, personal problems and, so on.

Oral Production

Oral production refers to the ability of communicating verbally, functionally and accurately in the target language (Omaggio, 1986). The speaking activities may include events as reading a text aloud, speeches at public meetings, monologues to describe something or to defend an idea, speaking spontaneously, singing, or commentaries about life details (Council of Europe, 2001). The Council of Europe (2001) presents the definition of spoken interaction as an activity in which "the language user acts alternately as speaker

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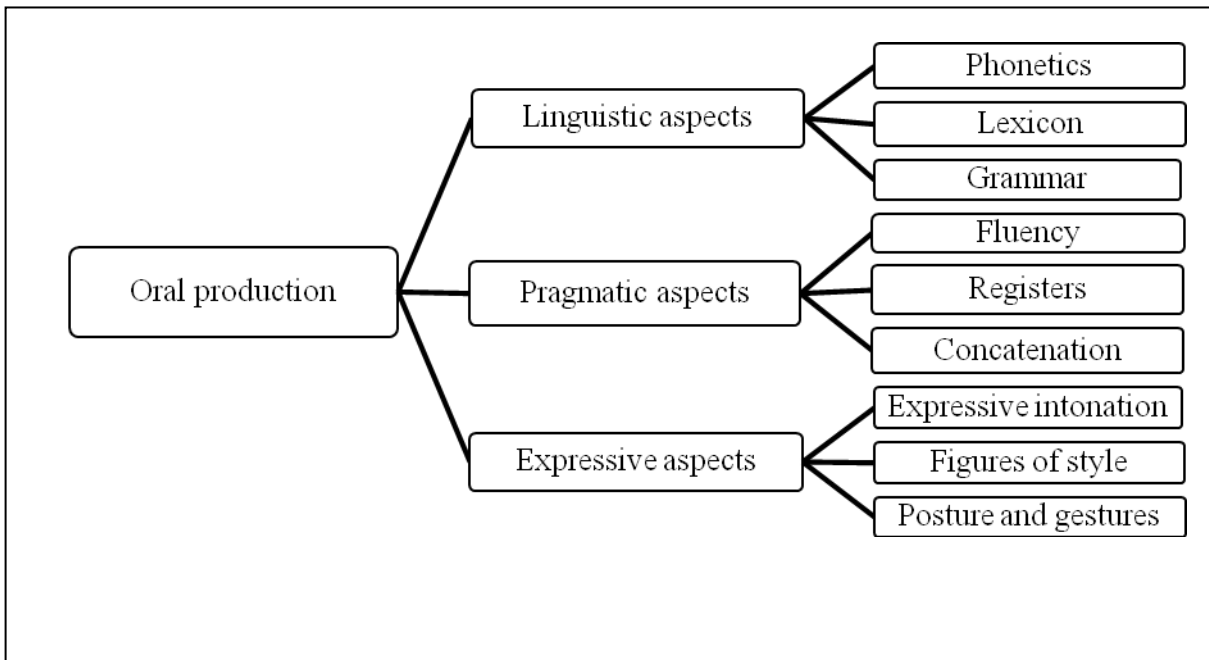
and listener with one or more interlocutors so as to construct conjointly, through the negotiation of meaning following the co-operative principle, conversational discourse" (p.73). Some examples of spoken interaction are casual conversations, formal and informal discussions, interviews and, debates. The oral expression is an observable skill related to the oral comprehension and it is unified to the affective part of the personality (Moreno, 2007). It means that the student can be influenced by the fear and/or nervousness to make a mistake and his/her oral production can decrease.

The language development phases have been described in different studies (Lambert, 1964; Moreno, 2007; Clerc, 2010). The oral production development advances in the same way the general knowledge about the FL increases (Moreno, 2007). Lambert (1964) establishes that the development of a new language starts with the acquisition of principles of phonetics and lexicon. After that, syntax is arisen. As a third stage emerges morphology. Finally, the socio-cultural rules are developed. Courtillon (2003) affirms that the acquisition of morphology is proportional to the language practices and the time employed studying the FL. Also, it is based on the language correction strategies provided by teachers and on the detection of mistakes in the speech of other students. The pragmatics aspects can be developed through the participation in role-plays and cultural encounters with native speakers of the target language.

Courtillon (2003) unifies the oral production components into linguistic, pragmatic and expressive aspects (See Figure 2). The linguistic ones

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involve phonetics (pronunciation of phonemes and linguistic intonation), lexicon (vocabulary knowledge) and grammar (word order, verbal forms, used of prepositions, articles, etc.). The pragmatic properties measure the capacity of transmitting information in an adequate manner according to the context. These aspects take into account fluency (pronunciation of words without long and repetitive pauses in speech), registers (adoption of situations as neutral, familiar or distant) and concatenation (reformulation of questions and statements). The expressive qualities gathers together the expressive intonation (natural pauses and accents), use of figures of style (discourse emphasis) and posture and kinesics language (natural gestures to facilitate the transmission or perception of the message). The expressive aspects are relevant taking into account that he great part of communication comes through non-verbal communication (Mehrabian, 1972).

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Canagarajah (2006) determines that an evaluation of the oral language proficiency is usually formed by two categories: language (grammar, discourse, and pragmatic skills) and strategic competence (negotiation and nonverbal skills). However, according to Courtillon (2003) these evaluations involve the linguistic, pragmatic and expressive aspects revision (see figure 2). In this way, these aspects need to be evaluated separately to detect individual strengths and weaknesses in each FL learner. This author states that the evaluation of the oral production needs to be placed in authentic or quasi-authentic situations. It refers to the creation of simulated conditions of real oral language interchange to achieve different needs of communication. In fact, Courtillon (2003) claims that the first need of an interlocutor is the accomplishment of communication. S/he needs to communicate her/his own ideas and understand the consequential messages.

The oral language is required to take part in different life domains (personal, public, occupational, educational, familiar, etc.). In this way, FL students have different needs or motives to practice the oral language procuring to take some advantages in the learning process. These advantages are cognitive, social, and affective (Clerc, 2010) and may be associated to the achievement, power and affiliation needs proposed by McClelland (1958). The cognitive advantages can be related to the need of achievement because they develop a sense of accomplishment with the acquired knowledge. The social ones can be linked with the need of power since it encloses the social prestige and involvement and, the affective advantages can be connected to the need of affiliation because they procure the

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establishment of good relations with other human beings.

The theory of the needs demonstrates how the motivation is related to the accomplishment of three principal needs: need for achievement (N-Ach), need for power (N-Pow) and need for affiliation (N-Affil) (McClelland, 1958). The level of importance of each need may vary from one person to another and they influence the actions of people in different contexts (educational, managerial, labor, educational, social, etc.). The N-Ach refers to the need to achieve, be successful and do extremely well. This need requires communication, achievement, progress and a sense of accomplishment. The N-Pow is the necessity to lead, influence, teach, or encourage others and make an impact in doing so to attain a position of greater authority. The N-Affil concerns to the establishment of excellent relations in the human interaction (McClelland, 1958). The fulfillment of these needs operates as motives to learn and practice a particular subject. This is the reason why they may work as pressure sensations to encourage the FL oral communication attaining cognitive, social, and affective advantages.

Research Method

General Approach

The influence of the evaluative setting on the FL oral production is analyzed through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods centered in a case study focus. The qualitative side provides specific information about human opinions, behaviors, beliefs and, relationships between the individuals and the social context (Mack, Woodsong, McQueen, Guest & Names, 2005). The quantitative approach is focused on deductions, confirmations, testing of theories, explanations and, predictions (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The case study aims to describe and understand the individual sample of the inquiry (Woodside, 2010).

In this study, the data collection methods are: twelve non- participant observations, twelve field notes, a written demographical questionnaire and an in-depth interview to close the study (See appendices). In this manner, the non-participant observations are accomplished during two semesters. They are reported in field notes. The field notes report descriptions of some moments when observations are done. These registers have in its principal parts the date when the observation is done as well as the hour when it begins and finishes and the place where it is performed. They describe the characteristics of the participants as attitude, moods and, observable traits of personality during the English and French language classes. The attitude observations are focused on the favorable or

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unfavorable reactions of the learners towards the class, specifically, in the activities related to oral production. Moods observations are centered on the emotional state, temper, feelings like fear or surprise and disposition of students before, during and after the oral evaluations. Personality observations attempts to verify whether the students who are good speakers in their mother tongue maintain this tendency when speaking in a foreign language. The researches make a detail description of the observed setting as well as the attitude and actions adopted by the participants. The researchers take a field note during each observation.

Finally, the participants are required to respond a written demographical questionnaire to establish a trustful social background about them. It included ten questions about items such as age, sex, family context and others social components (See appendix 1). After that, they are interviewed. The interview aims at obtaining personal thoughts of students. The set of open-ended questions are designed in English but the interviewees are able to answer them in Spanish. This strategy is applied to allow the participants to express their opinions without limitations in their responses. The responses are recorded, transcribed, summarized and, coded by the researchers. The interview is applied during the final phase of the data collection period to verify the anterior collected data. The questions of the interview are divided into three groups (See appendix 2). Some learning strategies questions aim to detect the students learning habits and their interests in improving the oral communication. Some perception questions attempt to establish how learners perceive the

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evaluative process. Lastly, some motivation questions help to understand how students consider motivation, motivation during evaluation and, motivation influenced by teachers.

This study takes a sample of ten FL students. They study English and French, and their mother tongue is Spanish. They are placed in the B1 linguistic level proposed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in both languages. The sample is convenient and the amount and characteristics of participants is considered to supply diverse, deep and meticulous data for the purposes of the study. The criterion of participant selection is based on the purposive sampling principle taking into account the goals of the study (Given, 2008). The reasons to select the participants are their permanence during the study (two semesters) and factors of motivation.

The context of the study provides a platform to analyze the human conduct in everyday situations close to natural settings where the participants cannot change or modify their behavior (Hammersley, 1990). Taking into account the first participant selection reason, the study is developed with the same sample in two different locations. The first observations are taken in Cúcuta (North of Santander, Colombia). The participants (5th semester FL students) are observed in the whole university campus without telling them they are monitored. Similarly, the second observations are done in Villa del Rosario (North of Santander, Colombia) when the participants are in sixth semester.

The goal of data analysis is to describe the way the findings and results are obtained

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(Brennan, 2005). In this study, the interpretative, recursive abstraction and coding techniques recommended by Kaski (1997) are combined with the model of data analysis proposed by Miles and Huberman in 1994. Miles and Huberman (1994) consider three principal stages in analyzing qualitative data and cases in an inquiry (data reduction, data display and, conclusion drawing and verification). Data reduction is addressed to analyze, sharpen, classify, focus, abandon and systematize the findings in a way that conducts to conclusions and allow them to be drawn and verified. The data is reduced and transformed using recursive abstraction and interpretative techniques (summaries, paraphrases and, larger patterns). In the second stage, it is necessary to take the information that has been reduced and display it in an organized and compressed manner establishing codes to compare the relationship between them. These displays allow the easy-drawn of conclusions. The conclusions are derived from regularities of events, justifications, possible arrangements or propositions that have been noted.

Findings

The influence of the evaluating setting on the FL oral production is analyzed in this paper. In this manner, it is found that most of the participants of the study do not participate actively in foreign language conversations if they do not perceive the fact of speaking as a need. This need seems to be related to the evaluation process developed by teachers and shows the main relation between the evaluative

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setting and the FL oral production. In other words, the evaluative setting forces the students to speak in the FL they are learning. Various comments in the interview shed light on this topic.

Extract (1)

"It is better to communicate using a language that everybody can understand".

Extract (2)

"Most of the time, in our daily life, we communicate in Spanish but during the oral evaluations, we speak in the language the teacher is evaluating".

Extract (3)

"The evaluation pressure makes us forget other goals apart from the grade and we start to speak in English or French".

This means that participants tended to show a reduced use of the target language they learnt even in academic spaces when it could be supposed they should communicate in the target language. Also, this tendency could be demonstrated when providing the participants the possibility to select the language during the interview and, most of them preferred to use their mother tongue. Only one participant responded the interview in a foreign language (English). One of the participants considered:

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Extract (4)

"The mother tongue is the best instrument to communicate now because we feel

frustrated when we want to explain or express our ideas using the foreign

languages we are learning and we do not know the vocabulary that is required or

we do not know how to organize the word order to communicate".

To overcome this lack of speaking practices, learners considered the importance of

speaking with other learners, teachers, foreigners, or relatives. Some learners declare it is

not common to speak with other students because some of them reject the FL

conversations. Their speaking practices seem to combine two main objectives. On the one

hand, some students practice this linguistic skill to get good results in the oral evaluations.

They declare that it is necessary to think about the results of the evaluations (See extracts 2

ad 3). On the other hand, other students practice speech to improve the skill. They say the

grade is just the complement of a good process and they need to be prepared to face real life

situations and not only simulations in the university artificial contexts.

Another relevant point mentioned by the participants is the evaluation itself. There

are two perspectives that emerge from the collected data. The first fact is related to the

importance of evaluation as an instrument to measure and quantify their FL performances.

These characteristics permit them to be conscious of the advancement in their learning

process and analyze how it could be enhanced. The second perspective tends to question

the reliability of the evaluation assuming that the result they obtain when being tested could not correspond to their real language level proficiency. In this manner, the participants mention the influence of factors as anxiety, nervousness, moods, reactions and, attitude of partners at the moment of being evaluated. Those mentioned elements could affect and block the speech of the students. Additionally, they believe that some feelings related to their background (e.g. fear, personal and familiar problems, lack of pieces of advice, shyness) also may determinate the results of an evaluation.

Another important agent that may have a relevant influence on the results of an evaluation is the evaluator. In this manner, the role of the evaluator was also identified as determinant in the failure or success of the learner during the oral evaluations. Participants reveal they feel comfortable when they detect confidence and a positive attitude of the evaluator. Most of the participants mention that motivation is relevant because it makes students feel comfortable in the development of their linguistic skills. They announce that teachers who use different methods (simulations, monologues, role-plays, interviews, debates), resources (images, photos, posters, drawings), or authentic and quasi-authentic spaces during the oral evaluations tend to develop more motivation and security. As a result, students participate actively. However, the final result of the evaluation would possibly change if the attitude of the evaluator tended to be disruptive by what s/he said or even only by watching his/her moods.

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Conclusions

The existence of the evaluative setting forces the students to use the target languages they are learning. Nevertheless, the results of an oral exam are conditioned by the setting and related to the characteristics of the learners taking into account that their oral production responds to needs. The needs expressed by participants concerning to the language use can be classified as needs of power, affiliation and achievement but they also respond to needs of communication when the teacher pressure them to communicate in the target languages in casual conversations.

The setting itself is important because it provides the basis for the arrangement of the evaluative objectives. Furthermore, the different components of the evaluative setting (type of evaluation, context and time, methods and resources and, pressure sensations) influence the oral performances of learners during the evaluations. It can be perceived when the modifications in the context or in the methods of evaluation and resources applied by teachers produce alterations in the linguistic, pragmatic and expressive aspects of the oral production proposed by Courtillon (2003). Additionally, the alterations in the way in which the students are evaluated or in their pressure sensations also influence the results of an oral production exam.

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Discussion

There are still few studies analyzing the influence of an evaluative setting on the oral production of FL students. In fact, there is not previous research holding, characterizing and, relating the components of an evaluating setting as a whole. Nevertheless, there are different theoretical frameworks broaching these components separately, e.g., the considerations of Canagarajah (2006) and Courtillon (2003) about FL proficiency evaluations and McDonough and Shaw (1993) about the setting definition. These studies allow an increase in understanding the way the characteristics of the evaluating setting may affect the FL oral production.

The evaluative setting seems to create the need of using the oral language. The students mention diverse learning schemes to practice and improve their speech but these schemes seem not to be applied in real life. However, the involvement in an oral production evaluation placing the student in the center of the evaluative setting seems to activate the cognitive, social and affective advantages of the learning process proposed by Clerc (2010). Therefore, they start to speak in the FL they are being evaluated. This fact shows the answer to the question: how does the evaluative setting influence the oral production?

Hymes (1973) proposes real life communication in FL and Loewen (2007) argues that error correction can be performed not only by the teachers but also by students. The creation of artificial spaces for improving oral production is claimed by Krashen and

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Terrell (1983). Additionally, Lozanov (2005) explains how to reduce the sensations of pressure and nervousness creating a comfortable environment leading the students into state of relaxation. In this manner, the attitude of indifference toward speaking can be explained because students feel they can be criticized during the conversations (Moreno, 2007) but it is rejected during an evaluation.

Students mention that during evaluations the reactions of teachers and partners, the methods (individual or collective evaluations), the resources, the contexts (authentic or quasi-authentic), or the pressure sensations they feel may reduce or increase their oral production. In this way, it may be inferred they consider that according to the characteristics of the evaluative setting components and its interrelation, the results of the oral evaluations may vary. However, there may be a few probable theoretical explanations about this fact. McDonough and Shaw (1993) outline how elements of the context might affect materials design, course planning and syllabus design. They did not included how those factors might influence the evaluations results.

In order to gain a complete understanding of the influence of an evaluative setting on the FL oral production evaluations, it is necessary to conduct a study that examines each aspect of the oral production proposed by Courtillon (2003) in relation to the components of the evaluating setting. This includes the revision of the linguistic, pragmatic and expressive speech features taken diverse kinds of evaluations, contexts and times, methods and sources, and pressure sensations. The effects of each

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evaluative setting component on the oral production may be different demonstrating its influence on the evaluation results.

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Colombia.

Appendix

Appendix 1

UNIVERSITY OF PAMPLONA

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAM

Demographic data

Name:

Surname:

Age:

Sex: ( ) Male   ( ) Female

Marital Status: ( ) Single   ( ) Married   ( ) Divorced

Cohabitation: ( ) With parents   ( ) With other relatives ( ) Alone

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ISSN 2322-9187 • July-December 2014. Vol. 11 • Number 1 • Pamplona, Colombia.

Children: ( ) Yes   ( ) Not

Working: ( ) Yes   ( ) Not

University spending: ( ) by your own   ( ) Your parents   ( ) Other relatives

Other studies: ( ) Yes   ( ) Not

Previous studies*: ( ) University studies ( ) Other establishments

* Answer this if you have filled *Yes* in the previous question

Appendix 2

The proposed questions are divided into three groups according to their focus:

Learning Strategies Questions: these questions aim to collect the learning habitudes of students. They also establish the interest of the students in improving oral production.

- ✓ How do you learn Foreign Language?
- ✓ Do you practice speaking?
- ✓ How do you practice speaking?
- ✓ How do you improve your speaking?

Perception Questions: this group of questions attempts to establish how learners perceive evaluation and associated terms such as evaluative setting and motivation. These questions aim also to provide a support to understand the possible answers of the students in other questions of the interview.

- ✓ What is evaluation for you?
- ✓ What is motivation for you?
- ✓ How do you feel when being evaluated?
- ✓ When you listen the term 'evaluative setting', what do you think?

Motivation Questions:

These groups of questions are useful to understand the students' point of view related to motivation, motivation in the evaluation and motivation influenced by the teacher. Also,

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ISSN 2322-9187 • July-December 2014. Vol. 11 • Number 1 • Pamplona, Colombia.

their objective is to clarify if the students perceive motivation as a need.

1. **These questions clarify why some students reject one of the languages they are studying.**

✓ Do you think that some languages are better to learn than others? Why?

✓ Do you think that the level of prestige of a language is an important reason to study or practice it? Why?

2. **This set of questions is related to the teacher motivation in the evaluation process. Also, it explains if students consider the teacher motivation as something beneficial.**

✓ Do you think that motivation is a significant factor in learning and practicing a foreign language? Why?

✓ Do you consider that teacher interaction with you at the moment of an oral evaluation is helpful for you? Why?

✓ If you are nervous when being evaluated orally, stop speaking and the teacher helps you with the conversation, do you think that his/her words are important? Or should you try to face the emotional state for yourself?

✓ Does the diversity of sources employed in the evaluation motivate you to participate actively and obtain a beneficial result? Why?

✓ Do you think that the teacher's personality, moods and attitude influence in the evaluation results? Why?

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3. **These questions are important to reveal the meaning of the evaluation for students. Also, they relate good results with motivation and the implication of this combination for students.**

✓ Does the system of evaluation influence motivation to learn and practice? Why?

✓ Do you practice speaking to improve your skill or just to get o good mark in the evaluation? Why?

✓ Do you consider that a good mark is a synonym of a good and relevant knowledge? Or there are some external and internal factors that determine the results in an evaluation?

✓ If you have gotten a good mark in an oral evaluation but you have studied for a long time, do you feel well because you have studied and learnt or do you feel depressed because you have gotten a bad result?

4. **These questions make clear the importance that the oral production have for students. They also verify if students perceive motivation like a necessity.**

✓ Do you participate actively in foreign language conversations in and outside of the classroom?

✓ Do you participate in a conversation in FL if you know that the teacher is not evaluating you and you will not get a mark? Why?

✓ Do you think that motivation is a need? Why?

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ISSN 2322-9187 • July-December 2014. Vol. 11 • Number 1 • Pamplona, Colombia.