

**Assessing Cañas' (2012) Paper on Factors That Affect FL Learners' Oral  
Participation**

**Maria Alejandra Ferreira\***

**Camilo Andrés Casadiegos\*\***

**Paper Summary**

This is a critique of Cañas' (2012) case study research entitled "Identifying Factors that Affect FL Learners' Oral Participation at a Public University in Colombia" and published in *Opening Writing Doors Journal* by the University of Pamplona, Colombia. This study attempts to point out the factors that stop a satisfactory foreign language (FL) beginner-level students' oral participation in English classes. The paper is broken down into 9 sections: the theoretical framework, which describes key concepts that were useful in the development of the study; the literature review, which describes 3 studies related to the phenomenon in question; the methodology; the data analysis, the findings; the conclusions; recommendations, references and the appendixes.

Starting with the introduction and according to the norms of the American Psychological Association (APA) (2001) to report research projects, the author satisfactorily presents a scientific, social and academic justification of why she undertook the inquiry. The scientific justification is based on the factors that affect oral participation. The social justification helps the involved participants to understand the reason of the



phenomenon in question. Finally, the academic justification helps teachers to realize students' necessities so that they can successfully develop their speaking abilities. However, the author did not include the research question or the hypothesis that cause the phenomenon.

The theoretical framework discusses key concepts, such as: classroom and oral participation; speaking, and anxiety based on three authors: Swain (1993), Jakarta (2009) and Horwitz et al (1986).

The literature review summarizes three previous Colombian case studies, Mendoza (2007), Castrillon (2007) and Zapata (2007), related to oral participation; the common findings in these inquiries are that anxiety is the most common factor that affects oral participation and it is caused by internal or external aspects such as “sweating hands, movement of a leg or a hand on the chair, or an inability to move” (Mendoza,2007) or “unwillingness to participate and fear of making mistakes in front of their classmates” (Castrillon, 2010) what allows us to conclude that anxiety is a multi-dimensional factor that affects students in different ways.

The research methodology covers the type of design, the participants and the instruments. The author adopted a case study. Participants are six beginner-level students from a FL program at a Public University in Colombia whose ages ranged from 16 to 19 years old,



with an A1 level of language. The instruments used were five classroom observations, which took place from May to July 2012; and three interviews aimed at obtaining information on the effect of FL students' oral participation.

The data analysis was made by following the interpretive analysis model suggested by Hatch (2002) and then a qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA. was used to organized the data. Findings revealed that students' oral performance is affected by anxiety symptoms which are described by Horwitz (1986): 1) General avoidance, when students do not participate because of the lack of previous preparation or when they do not know the right answer, 2) Physical actions, reactions in students' body language caused by nervousness such as laughing or getting upset, 3) Physical symptoms, complaining about a headache or feeling unexplained pain or tension. As a conclusion, the author identified the three factors that affected students' oral participation and the activities in which students liked the most to be involved. As regards to recommendations the author suggested to "look for more activities in which students feel motivated and engaged while learning a foreign language", which also encouraged teachers to pay more attention to students' feelings and perceptions when they are grading the knowledge of their pupils as for the author it was also important to give a solution to the anxiety students feels when they participate orally in class.



### Assessing Cañas' (2012) Paper

This critique follows Ryan, Coughlan and Croning's (2007) guidelines for critiquing a qualitative research study, which are based on the elements influencing believability of the research such as the writing style, the author's grasp on the topic, the report title and a broad assessment of the abstract; and the elements influencing robustness to the research such as the purpose of the study, the literature review, the theoretical framework, the methodology, the sample, the data collection/analysis, the findings, the conclusion and recommendation and finally the references and the appendix.

With regards to the elements influencing believability, the writing style was concise as the author got to the point directly in each section without expanding on many redundant details and she always used first person when reporting the study; it leads to a direct understanding of what is being explained or described; for instance, in the theoretical framework the author briefly explained the meaning of each concept without going out of the studied field and by quoting some other authors' perceptions. The language used was standard and technical. It avoided the use of jargon. The structure of the paper is perfectly laid out and organized following the main features of APA style.



Throughout the paper the author shows a robust knowledge on the topic of oral participation among FL students; moreover, she shows a high degree of experience in this discipline as she is studying a bachelor degree in foreign languages, English –French.

The report title perfectly identifies the research because it reflects the issue under study; population, context and type of design used, on the other hand if the abstract offers an overview of the study, it fails to include the methodology used. However, the research problem, the sample and the findings are satisfactorily described, “This article reports a case study that attempted to identify factors that affect foreign language (FL) students’ oral participation at a public university in Colombia. Participants were six foreign language students at beginner-level. Findings revealed that some anxiety signs such as general avoidance, physical actions and physical symptoms are the factors that affect FL students when speaking in front of the class. It was also found that role-plays are the activities in which students are actively engaged and workbook activities are ones in which they are less involved” (P. 1)

Regarding the elements influencing robustness of the research, the purpose is clearly identified in the abstract, and stated as follows: “This article reports a case study that attempted to identify factors that affect foreign language (FL) students’ oral participation at a public university in Colombia” (P. 189); however, the research questions are not stated in the study but they are rephrased in the findings section: “...With regards to the first question that addresses the factors affecting students’ oral participation I found that when students participated orally in the classroom, their performance was affected by some symptoms of anxiety” (P. 196) “With regards to the second research question related to the



activities in which the students participate the most, I realized that the teacher provided students with different types of activities such as: Role-plays, dialogues, listening activities and workbook activities” (P. 198). Thus, it is inferred that the first research question may be: Which are the factors that affect students’ oral participation? And the second may be: Which are the activities that the students participate in the most?

The theoretical framework provides boundaries and parameters for the study and its procedures as it encompasses key concepts which the study is centered on, such as classroom and oral participation; speaking, and anxiety. These concepts and definitions help the reader to have a better understanding of the report as a result of the narrow approach and relevance they have with the inquiry. However two out of three concepts are outdated since they are from 1993 and 1986. The author should have given updated concepts in order give a clearer and recent idea about the theoretical framework of the study in question.

The literature review provides a clear overview of three previous studies in the same field and context. The literature review also situates the research, and helps the author to easily recognize the factors that affect oral participation. Even though these three previous studies are accurate, they are not enough to really illuminate the issue under study. It is important to highlight that as a case study, the literature review should play a critical role in order to have a solid base which supports the phenomenon.



In the methodology section, the author describes the reasons why a qualitative research is the most suitable for her study. However, she does not specify what design was implemented in the research. It is impossible to know if this study has the right direction in order to solve the research problem. The sample used by the author is well described; she states quantity of the involved participants, their proficiency in the English language and their ages. Nevertheless, the author does not explain the criteria used to select the participants.

The data collection was done through five classroom observations and three interviews. The author clearly explains the strategies to collect data as she is a non-participant observer which allowed her to take detailed notes; in addition she interviews the participants three times with an interview protocol that it is found at the end of the report, in the Appendix section.

On the other hand, she does not give enough details about the data analysis because it is said that the author followed the interpretive analysis model suggested by Hatch (2002) and used MAXQDA software in order to organize and code the whole data but she does not explain Hatch's (2002) model nor how the software works.

As regards to the findings, they are addressed to the original purpose of the study, furthermore the author involves Horwitz's (1986) model that defines four sources of anxiety in order to give a better explanation about the causes of the phenomenon.



As a conclusion, the author gives a brief summary of the factors that affected FL learners' oral participation and the activities in which students preferred to participate the most and the least. In addition, the author offers some useful recommendations as to how the findings may be developed and the author in her article suggests: 1) looking for more activities in which the students feel motivated and engaged while learning a foreign language and 2) pay more attention to students' feelings and perceptions.

With regards the references, there are two inconsistencies. First, when the author cited Mendoza's research, the dates are different, in the text, she uses 2007 but in the reference, it appears 2009. Second, in the references list, the author cited "Cutrone (2002). *Overcoming Japanese EFL learners' fear of speaking. Language studies working papers*". However this study is not included in the paper.

As a general assessment about the research, this critique was written to evaluate Cañas' (2012) study which attempted to describe the factors that affect oral participation in English. Therefore, this is a pleasant case study due to the author was very accurate in splitting the study into many sections to present the information in an excellent way to the reader, however there are some weaknesses that prevent the study from being flawless such as the previously mentioned along the whole critique. Additionally, this study has an important value in the field of learning a foreign language owing to its narrow connection with the process of becoming familiar with a second language, as the studied phenomenon





is a factor that can improve or frustrate the learning process. So, the findings and recommendations in this inquiry are beneficial to FL students and teachers. Finally, and referring to further researches, this study could take different directions in the same field but with different topics such as reading features, listening abilities to understand speeches or improving writing styles.

References:

Cañas, S. (2012). Qualitative case study: Identifying Factors that Affect FL Learners' Oral Participation at a Public University in Colombia. *Opening Writing Doors Journal*. 9 (1), 12-40. Retrieved from: <http://owdj.unipamplona.edu.co/>



Maria Alejandra Ferreira and Camilo Andrés Casadiegos are in their third year of B.A. in languages. They are part of the Undergraduate Research Group-Silex- at the Universidad de Pamplona. This article is their first publication as critics. Currently they are preparing to begin their own research project.

