

Identifying Classroom Activities to Encourage Oral Participation among beginner-level learners in an English Class.

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Abstract

Speaking is one of the most desirable skills that foreign language learners want to develop to communicate their needs and desires. This case study is aimed at identifying the activities an EFL teacher uses to encourage oral participation among beginner-level learners. Data was collected through non-participant observation and interviews. Inductive analysis (Hatch 2002) guided the analysis of data. Findings show that role plays and song translations, and the teacher's attitude positively influenced students' interaction and participation. However, these strategies should not be repetitive because they lose their effectiveness in the classroom since they may become monotonous.

Key Words: oral participation, interaction, activities, teacher's attitude.

Resumen

Hablar es una de las habilidades más deseables que los estudiantes de lenguas extranjeras quieren desarrollar para comunicar sus necesidades y deseos. Este estudio de caso tiene como objetivo identificar las actividades que un profesor de inglés como lengua

extranjera usa para fomentar la participación oral entre los alumnos de nivel inicial. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de observaciones no participante y entrevistas. El análisis inductivo (Hatch 2002) orientó el análisis de los datos. Los resultados muestran que los juegos de roles, la traducción de canciones, y la actitud del profesor influenciaron positivamente la interacción y la participación de los estudiantes. Sin embargo, estas estrategias no deben ser tan repetitivas puesto que su eficacia se pone en riesgo a causa de la monotonía”.

Palabras claves: participación oral, interés, actividades, actitud del profesor.

Introduction

Throughout my experience as an English as a foreign language (EFL) learner, I have found that speaking is one of the most desirable skills that English learners want to develop. Most learners are eager to talk and use the language they are learning to communicate their needs and desires. However, it is not so easy to participate in class since often it is necessary to have significant influence of the teacher’s strategy.

Learning a foreign language is focused on four skills: Writing, reading, speaking and listening; however, this research will be focused on speaking since this is the basis of everyday interaction; from there I feel the need to know how teachers aim to help learners encourage oral participation in class.

Furthermore, drawn from my experience as a teaching assistant in an EL (English language) beginner-level course at a Colombian public university, I realized that beginners

do not have sufficient teacher stimulus or self-motivated interest to orally participate in a FL class environment. They should be involved in meaningful situations that emphasize the interaction between student to student and student to teacher, through the use of English as a communication tool. Thus, teachers need to implement pedagogical activities to help students improve their oral production in English. Although, it is true that the lack of variation in classroom activities contributes to this problem; it is also true that students need to take more risks when participating orally. Therefore, I focused this project on answering the following question: What strategies do teachers use to encourage oral participation among beginning-level learners in an English classroom?

Literature review

A series of concepts and previous studies on classroom interaction, oral participation, motivation, and teaching strategies will be presented concurrently in order to describe the relationship between them and the phenomenon being studied.

Classroom interaction

Classroom interaction is the phenomenon in which students practice oral and written speech in the language they are acquiring (Bishop, 2000). Castro et al. (2010) carried out a study in a public university in Colombia in order to describe how a French Foreign language teacher involves 6th semester, non-participant students in classroom interactions. Findings showed that the back position in the classroom became a problem due to the distracting nature that it constituted; also the time of arrival to the class did not influence the students' position inside of it. Moreover, the front position demanded more interaction from the students than the back positions. However the students' position in the classroom did not determine their proficiency in French, only the level of participation.

Similarly, Herazo (2009) published an article about Authentic Oral Interaction in a secondary school in Monteria, Colombia. The conclusions showed that the script-based dialogue has very little to offer in terms of EFL proficiency growth. He thinks it retains some value in terms of pronunciation practice, confidence in handling the sounds of the language, and perhaps motivation, as well as controlled language practice.

These two studies highlighted the importance of enhancing the classroom interaction by creating a friendly environment and collaborative learning towards the students. Furthermore, it could be said that the environment alone is not sufficient; the teacher also needs to motivate students in order to create a productive attitude.

Motivation

According to Winke (2005), motivation is the factor which has more influence than others in an FL classroom. She defines it as “the positive implication and contribution in the attitudes on learning environment”. Motivation involves four aspects: a goal, an effort, a desire to attend a goal and a favourable attitude towards the activity in question. Several studies have been conducted to examine the influences of motivation in classroom interaction and oral participation. Prieto (2007) carried out research to establish strategies that help students to improve their oral production in English with eleventh graders at a public school in Bogotá, Colombia. Finally, the author concluded that “The implementation of cooperative learning strategies showed a different attitude towards group work and the skill of speaking. It was enjoyable for the students and teacher because it used many elements to motivate the students to improve their process. Students said that they learnt more and had more opportunities to participate orally in the class; they felt comfortable using English in class”.

Similarly, Winke (2005) published an article on how to promote motivation in the foreign language classroom. The author concluded that “teaching motivational strategies in the language classroom is a complex task, but one that can easily be done by following some common foreign language teaching principles and by remembering that motivation is one of the key factors in student success. Motivation is something all our students bring with them in one form or another. It is not the case that all we need to do as teachers is to identify it, encourage it, feed it now and then, and watch it grow”.

Based on conclusions of Prieto (2007) and Winke (2005), I inferred that motivation has a positive influence on classroom interaction; and that oral participation is the most beneficial aspect since it gives the students a sense of identity and opportunities to participate in class.

Oral participation

“Oral participation is the cognitive and socio-linguistic communication developed in the classroom interaction considering the nature and conditions of speech”, (Carter and Nunan, 2001). Several studies have focused on how to help students improve their oral production, or, basically, their participation in English classes. Ariza (2001) conducted an action research in order to encourage oral participation in English through the use of games at a public school in Bogota, Colombia. Ariza (2001) concluded that “games are good activities for developing participation in a funny and interesting way because they permit students to use the second language in communicative situations. Furthermore, they help lower tension and anxiety that prevent students’ acquiring the language.

A recent case study carried out by Tepfenhart (2011) attempted to determine which factors students find most influential in their oral participation in a foreign language class, and their thoughts on what actions the teacher should take to encourage more oral participation in class. Tepfenhart (2011) concluded that “to encourage all students to participate orally in foreign language class, teachers need to create a safe and fun environment”.

Likewise, Lanfont (2007) studied the factors that affect oral participation in students of 6th grade in a public school from Sahagún, Colombia. She stated that “all type of oral activities such as conversation, reading in public provoke anxiety in students; the author concluded that “some personal factors such as self-esteem, risk taking, competitiveness and social anxiety affect students’ performance”. Furthermore, some external factors are evidenced, such as beliefs, academic differences, empathy and relationship among students as well as the lack of strategies to assume a different attitude to participate in class”.

Based on the definition and the studies previously presented on motivation, I believe that students actively participate when they feel positive attitudes, responsibility and are engaged in a meaningful learning process. Besides, based on Lanfont's negative emotions (2007) I consider that motivation is a factor which has to be present in whatever constructive strategy to promote positive attitudes towards learning in a foreign languages classroom, but the most important is to look for the most appropriate teaching strategy to encourage oral participation. As teaching strategies are part of this research, I am going to explain how it is defined.

Teaching strategies

Bishop (2000) refers to teaching strategies as “the way where teacher has the opportunity to bring the students a faster and more efficient learning process, a greater retention, and feel more positive about the learning experience”. Buitrago and Ayala (2007) conducted action research in Bogotá, Colombia at a public school. They implemented activities in order to encourage oral interaction of tenth graders. Findings also showed that

the cultural activities permitted not only an increase in the level of participation but also a reduction in learners' fears which contributed to the loss of confidence in expressing themselves orally in English in public.

Similarly, Castrillón (2003) conducted a study to provide teachers with instructional tools that promote changes in the classroom at a public primary school in Bogotá. Findings showed that the implementation of fun activities as a supporting strategy is important to encourage oral communication in the foreign language classroom. The teachers should include games as part of their teaching strategies because these provide students with situations that help them learn easily. At the same time, games encourage the development of oral and written communicative competences.

On the other hand, Forero (2004) developed research on how to promote oral Interaction in large groups through task-based learning. In conclusion, the researchers said that the use of task-based learning in large groups helped students to improve oral interaction. In addition, to teach English in large groups, it was necessary to use different strategies to maintain motivation such as changing the activities often, using creative and colourful flashcards and guides, and making a dynamic lesson plan.

Finally, the aforementioned definitions and studies show how motivation becomes an indispensable factor to promote positive attitudes towards learning foreign languages and the teacher is responsible for looking for the most appropriate teaching strategy to encourage oral participation.

Methodology

I adopted a qualitative case study; “an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources” (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p. 544). I spent 16 weeks in the field collecting data through seven non-participant observations and two interviews. Although I was working on the proposal for this research since March 2011; the data collection process started in May 2012.

The participants of this case study were beginner-level students of an English course at a public university in Colombia. Although the course was comprised of 27 students, five students gave their consent to be interviewed; the rest of students in the class gave me their permission to be observed. These interviews followed two interview protocols (see Appendix A, B); the questionnaires consisted of five questions related to students’ perceptions of their foreign language class, their teacher and their thoughts on their personal participation in the class.

In addition to the interviews, I observed seven classes; two classes in a foreign language laboratory and five classes in a regular classroom. In the foreign languages laboratory, I saw 31 computers, one computer per student, which were divided up by separate cubicles. Furthermore, in front of the computers there was a whiteboard, one television set, and a sound system.

I observed each class following an observation protocol (see Appendix C). None of the class observations were recorded. During the observations, I sat at one of the classroom's corners observing and taking notes about teachers’ performance, activities and how students responded to them. One of the main advantages of collecting data by observing is the opportunity to record information as it occurs.

During my first visit to the class I introduced myself and explained the purpose of my visit, I explained all the aspects about my research, including the ethical considerations I would observe while collecting, analysing and reporting data. I gained approval from participants of this research. Finally the teacher and the students signed a consent form (see Appendix D) that explained the specific conditions and requirements of the study.

Data analysis

Data was analysed following inductive analysis (Hatch 2002). After, I organized the data using MAXqda, a computer software programme; I analysed data from interviews and observation, and I reduced it into a set of domains. I also made some preliminary judgments about the most important data of my study; I analysed data in the light of my research questions. Finally, I selected the domains one-by-one and re-read them and began to write reflections which later became the basis for my findings.

Findings

I identified two major themes: Teachers' activities to encourage students' participation; and activities influence on the students' oral participation in class.

Teacher's activities to encourage the students' participation:

The teacher in my case study used activities such as reading comprehension, role plays, translations and songs. She implemented them throughout different classes. The week was divided up among literature, grammar and listening classes.

In literature classes, the teacher used activities based on two books: the student book named “New English File” for elementary students and a book named “kidnapped”. When the teacher worked with “New English File” she asked students to read texts such as “Fascinating Festivals”, which is about three different festivals in the world, but focuses on how to say dates. The methodology employed by the teacher was to demonstrate the pronunciation of new vocabulary followed by students’ choral repetition. After reading, the teacher asked students to develop conjugation and pronunciation exercises according to the topic introduced in class. Finally, the teacher encouraged the students to present their answers in an oral way and for each act of participation, she gave participation points. While working with the book named “kidnapped”, the teacher told students what chapter of the book they had to read before class, and furthermore she gave students a questionnaire to develop at home. For instance, “Deckac” said in the first interview “La profesora siempre nos decia cual era la actividad para la próxima clase de literatura”. The questionnaires were found at the end of the book and for each class the students only had to answer the questions and present them in class. In order to answer the questionnaires, the teacher called each student alphabetically by list and awarded a participation point for every correct answer submitted. However, if the student did not provide the correct answer, another classmate had the possibility to answer.

As a final remark, I can infer that the literature classes must not be part of the teaching motivational strategies in an English class at a beginner level because I realized students did not like to participate actively, keeping in mind they did not feel motivated to do it, so it would not accomplish the objective of the activity.

Meanwhile, in grammar classes, the teacher usually worked on role plays. These classes were on Wednesdays and were taught in the classroom IB 106. The teacher began these classes with a greeting or an expression which are used by American and British people in a real context. "Reina" stated "La profesora inicia la clase saludando a los estudiantes, luego ella dice: "good morning, how are you?" y pregunta ¿cuál es el saludo de la clase?; ella dice "what is the student book's greeting?". An example of a greeting used in the English textbook was "what's going on?" Later, the teacher continued with the explanation of the grammar topic, among the grammar topics the teacher explained "the past tense" and the demonstrative pronouns "this, that, these, those".

The teacher frequently asked students to present role plays and dialogues in order to improve the students' participation. The students in this class prepared a presentation based on a real life situation using the grammar topic introduced in class and at the end the teacher gave feedback about pronunciation and grammar mistakes.

I can infer that role plays are a good activity but it is not recommended to overuse that same technique frequently because the students feel this activity is monotonous and each time they will participate less in class.

Finally, the listening classes were based on song and translation activities. The teacher used songs during Thursday classes, these classes were in the foreign language laboratory where the students had a computer to listen to songs and look up both song lyrics and unknown vocabulary online. The students heard the song once without lyrics. Then they used the lyrics in order to recognize the words that they did not comprehend and finally they translated the song's lyrics.

In addition, according to Reina: “Todo lo que usa la profesora, los materiales y estrategias motivan mucho para que nosotros participemos. Las actividades influyen en nosotros para que participemos o no participemos”. I can infer that the teacher’s attitude and the activities used by her in the class are essential to increase the students’ interest towards the class.

Influence of activities on students’ oral participation in class

During the observation procedure, it was observed that the teacher used different activities in class and how they influenced the students to participate in class. Teachers ask students for active oral participation which in some cases they do not try to encourage by implementing new or different activities in the classroom. To use activities to improve the students’ motivation while teaching is the remedy for the lack of oral participation in class. Teachers know many activities and decide which strategy to use but it would seem that they do not assess their strategies.

Motivation plays an essential role in students’ participation. If students do not feel inspired by the activities, they will not participate actively. EFL learners in this study expressed positive as well as negative comments regarding motivation as a factor created by their teacher’s input and strategies. For instance, during the first section interview, two students agreed to not feeling motivated to participate in reading classes. The part of reading classes, where the students had to read and answer questionnaires about readings of the student book, were identified by two of the five students interviewed as a class in which they did not participate because of the lack of motivation, for instance; “Gebagu” said “nos

ponen a responder las lecturas del student book, ella nos pone a leer y eso a mi no me cuadra”. As for the Reading class with the book named “kidnapped”; “Decak” and “Musical” agreed that “las clases con el libro de “Kidnapped” son aburridas porque tenemos que pasar uno por uno como estamos en la lista y no es tan dinámico para hablar”.

On the other hand, students stated they participated more in role plays and singing activities. When participants were asked about what activity motivated them to participate actively in classes, four of them concluded “La actividad que más motiva son los role plays y las que se hacen con las canciones porque ahí uno aprende bastante y conoce nuevas cosas. Si hay errores, la profe corrige y podemos interartuar con los compañeros ya que estamos en fase de comunicación oral. Además, en los role plays hacemos situaciones del día a día”. However, two students pointed out that “Los role plays on buenos pero ya están monótonos, uno pasa y participa pero después se pierde toda la motivación. Y pues al principio si participaba pero ahora cansa.” It means that when an activity is repetitive, it loses its effectiveness in the classroom.

Conclusions

Findings from this study revealed that students’ oral participation depended not only on the grammar and vocabulary knowledge of English, but also on which and how the class activities were implemented by the teacher in the classroom. Based on the teacher’s activities and the methodology used, I conclude that some activities such as role plays and songs translations were successful, and encouraged students’ oral participation, because they involved the study of subjects and the creation of real life stories.

Discussion and implications

According to Williams and Williams (2011) “Motivation is probably the most important factor that educators can target in order to improve learning.” They identified five key aspects that have a big impact on the enrichment of the students' motivation in their learning process; the student, teacher, content, method/process, and environment. Although Williams and Williams (2011) identified five aspects, I found that there were only two essential aspects that played an important role when motivating the students' oral participation: the teacher and the lesson procedure. For instance, the teacher must not only be a guide in the class; the teacher must observe and analyse the students' learning. The lessons procedure is not only used to accomplish the students' needs; it is necessary to focus the activities on the students' desires and expectations.

Finally, I leave an open invitation for teachers and students to continue researching the teachers' activities and methodologies to encourage the students' oral participation. FL teachers and students may embark upon a reflective practice in order to expand the present findings.

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Appendix A

Interviews' Protocol (First section)

Interview N°: _____

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: _____ Date: _____ Hour: _____

Site: _____

Focus _____

Objective: _____

QUESTIONS	PARTICIPANT #
Cuénteme un poco acerca de sus clases de Inglés.	
¿Cual es la parte de la clase que más le gusta y porque?	

¿Cual es la parte de la clase que menos le gusta y porque?	
¿Cuál es la parte de la clase en la que usted más participa? ¿Como y porque?	
Cuénteme acerca de cómo hace su profesora de Inglés para que usted y sus compañeros participen en clase.	

Las siguientes preguntas tienen como fin recolectar información acerca de la experiencia de los estudiantes, cuando aprenden inglés, además de ello, saber cómo se sienten los estudiantes de 1 semestre cuando ponen en práctica la producción oral que se requiere al momento de aprender una lengua extranjera. La misma se realiza con el fin de dar respuesta al siguiente fenómeno "Teaghin Strategies to Foster Oral Participation". La información que usted proporcione en esta entrevista será utilizada únicamente para la colección de datos del estudio previamente citado. Mi interés es aprender de sus experiencias. Todos los comentarios y sugerencias de todos los participantes serán manejados con profesionalidad y confidencialidad. Ahora siéntase libre y cómodo de responder al siguiente cuestionario. Le agradecería su completa sinceridad.

Appendix B

Interviews' Protocol (Second section)

Interview N°: _____

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: _____ Date: _____ Hour: _____

Site: _____

QUESTIONS	PARTICIPANT #
¿Qué tan participativa hace su profesora la clase de Inglés?	
¿Cuál es la actividad que menos los motivan a participar en clase? ¿Por qué?	
¿Cuál es la actividad que menos los motivan a participar en clase? ¿Por qué?	
¿Cuales factores identifica usted que posiblemente afecta la participación en su clase?	

<p>¿Cómo cree usted que su profesora haría que participen un poco mas usted y sus compañeros?</p>	
<p>Dígame algunos comentarios o información que quizás me podrían ayudar a entender como influyen las estrategias del profesor para que participen oralmente los estudiantes.</p>	

Focus _____

Objective: _____

Las siguientes preguntas tienen como fin recolectar información acerca de la experiencia de los estudiantes, cuando aprenden inglés, además de ello, saber cómo se sienten los estudiantes de 1 semestre cuando ponen en práctica la producción oral que se requiere al momento de aprender una lengua extranjera. La misma se realiza con el fin de dar respuesta al siguiente fenómeno "Teaching Strategies to Foster Oral Participation". La información que usted proporcione en esta entrevista será utilizada únicamente para la colección de datos del estudio previamente citado. Mi interés es aprender de sus experiencias. Todos los comentarios y sugerencias de todos los participantes serán manejados con profesionalidad y confidencialidad. Ahora siéntase libre y cómodo de responder al siguiente cuestionario. Le agradecería su completa sinceridad.

Appendix C

Observation Protocol

Observation Nº: _____

Teacher: _____

Observer: _____

Course: _____ Date: _____ Hour: _____

Site: _____

Focus _____

Objective: _____

CLASSROOM DESCRIPTION:

1- Description of the classroom:

2- Teaching aids /materials:

3- Assessment strategies used by the teacher:

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STUDENT DESCRIPTION:

Number of students: Date:

1- Number and gender of students; number of minorities or majorities:

2- Describe the students' behavior

3- Students' attitudes toward the subject matter and the teacher:

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CLASS DESCRIPTION:

TIME	WHAT I OBSERVED	MY REFLECTIONS
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Appendix D

Estudiantes

Primer semestre

Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras y Comunicación

Universidad de Pamplona.

Cordial saludo.

Con el fin de dar cumplimiento a uno de los objetivos fundamentales del curso “proyecto de investigación en Lenguas Extranjeras”, les solicito muy comedidamente su participación en el estudio durante el periodo académico con el cual será entrevistado y observado durante el semestre en la investigación que se llevara a cabo, titulada “Identifying Teaching Strategies That Foster Oral Participation Among Beginning-Level Students In An English Class: A Case Study”.

Igualmente quiero manifestarle que toda la información que se obtenga, será llevada con la más estricta confidencialidad, anonimato y privacidad que caracteriza este tipo de estudio. Es importante resaltar que su participación es de manera voluntaria y no tendrá ningún tipo de remuneración económica, en cualquier momento podrá retirarse de este proyecto sin ninguna consecuencia y sin que afecte su proceso de evaluación semestral ni su relación con el docente encargado del grupo. Sin embargo, cabe decir que el proyecto le proporcionara beneficios en su proceso académico ya que conocerá de antemano que estrategias de enseñanza emplea el profesor de primer semestre en lenguas extranjeras con el fin de fomentar la participación oral en la clase de Inglés. De otra parte los resultados de este proyecto podrían ser publicados en un artículo. Esto no quiere decir que la identidad de los participantes será revelada, ya que toda la información recopilada se mantendrá bajo estricta confidencialidad.

Desde ahora, le agradezco su colaboración. Al final de semestre ustedes serán invitados para socializar los resultados obtenidos en el estudio realizado.

Al firmar este proyecto Ustedes autorizan su participación, con el objetivo de recoger los datos necesarios para el proyecto

Sin otro particular,

Atentamente,

Co investigador

Investigador principal

Docente

