

**Understanding Strategies for Improving Oral Production Skills among EFL Learners
at a Public University in Colombia**

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Abstract

This case study, carried out at a public university in Colombia, aimed to understand strategies that improve the oral production of EFL learners in a public university. Participants were four A1 EFL learners who were selected by using purposeful sampling. Two questions guided this case study: 1) what strategies does the teacher use to improve EFL learners' oral skills? 2) How do the teachers' strategies improve EFL learners' oral production skills? The data was gathered through nonparticipant observations and unstructured interviews.

Introduction

The productive skills of a foreign language include speaking and writing, two critical components of the complex process of communication. With regards to the speaking skill, Chastain (1998) stated that “speaking is a productive skill and it involves many components. Speaking is more than making the right sounds, choosing the right words or getting the constructions grammatically correct.” (As cited by Prieto 2007)

Although speaking is one of the most important skills to master, learners may not reach a high level of oral skills because some teachers may not use appropriate strategies that permit them to develop these skills correctly. It is important that teachers implement strategies that improve their students’ oral production, such as: role plays, performances, songs, play activities, and cooperative learning. Holden (1985) points out that “role plays and dramatizations are activities that students enjoy a lot not only because they like to dress in different ways, make faces and imagine that they are different people, but also because they can internalize and use English expressions.” (As cited by Cardenas and Robayo 2001)

This case study aimed to understand strategies that FL teachers use to improve EFL learners’ oral production among FL learners. At this stage, oral production will be defined as an ability to communicate with others. This process involves communication and expressing ourselves in a natural and fluent way through different activities.

Theoretical Framework

In order to have a better understanding of the purpose of this research study, it is necessary to define key terms such as: oral production and strategy.

Oral Production

There are several definitions of Oral Production. Hymes (1972) defines oral skill as “the capacity to communicate effectively within a particular speech community that wants to accomplish its purposes.” Similarly, Chastain (1998, pp. 330-358), states that “speaking is a productive skill and it involves many components”. Speaking is more than making the right sounds, choosing the right words or getting the constructions grammatically correct. According to Bygate (1987) speaking is “a skill which deserves attention as much as the literacy in both native and foreign languages.” (As cited in Leon & Vega 2010)

Strategy

It is important that a teacher uses different strategies when teaching to improve the learning process in an interesting way that catches the students’ attention. Similarly, learning strategies can greatly improve learning outcomes for students entering the classroom with different learning styles and abilities. Stephen (2006) points out that “Strategy has the power to transform passive students into active learners equipped with the tools to promote strategic planning and independent reflection”. Likewise, Nunan (1991)

states that “learning strategies are the mental processes which learners employ to learn and use the target language”.

Likewise, Serradel (2005, p209) stated that “learning strategies refer to the techniques learners apply in order to understand, remember and learn contents, which it is the object of learning”. Besides, the use of adequate strategies helps to attain the maximum goals and success.

Literature Review

Teaching and guiding students to learn a second language is a hard job, therefore, teachers have to try to find other pedagogical tools in order to help the students’ learning process effectively. This section presents three studies focused on strategies to improve EFL learners’ oral production presented in order to show what other researchers have done about this issue. Moreover, these studies aimed to improve oral production through strategies that helped to guide this research. This one uses role plays as a strategy to improve speaking skills.

Cárdenas & Robayo (2006) studied third graders because they realized that they were not conscious of the importance of learning English as a means of interaction with other classmates. The results showed that role plays and dramatizations are good activities for developing speaking skills in a striking and interesting way because they permit students to use the language in communicative situations related to their lives, such as greetings, family album, clothes and weather. While they developed these activities, they identified the progress in the students’ oral production. The researchers also realized that

before they implemented these strategies, the students just sang isolated songs, said rhymes and words, and after the implementation of role-plays and dramatizations, learners spoke frequently about situations in context.

In addition, Cuestas (2006) conducted action research aimed at understanding students' low speaking proficiency in the English language and the complexity of working with a large number of students per class. Researcher used surveys, audio and video recording, field notes and focus group interviews. Findings revealed important changes in students' oral production, since they expressed their ideas freely, spoke more when the topic was interesting for them, expressed several reasons and opinions about the proposed songs, interacted more with one another, and spoke clearly and quickly.

On the other hand, Prieto (2007) carried out action research with three students in order to help them express themselves better orally due to the fact that they did not practice speaking during the experience: they did not have an appropriate input; in some cases, they did not have enough vocabulary or the correct grammatical structures to express something; besides, the lack of attractive and appropriate activities to motivate students to express themselves by the teacher. Findings showed that cooperative learning strategies helped students to improve oral production and interaction, moreover, it was enjoyable for the students and teacher because it used many elements contributed by the students and encouraged them to improve their process.

All of these studies enlightened this research, because they showed three different ways to improve oral production through strategies such as roles plays, songs and

cooperative learning. Furthermore, they have a connection with my study because I was able to understand some strategies that improve oral skills among EFL learners.

Methodology

This study was based on a qualitative case study, defined as a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. “The process of research involves emerging questions and procedure, data typically collected in the participant’s setting.” (Creswell, 2009 p.23). Consequently, I interviewed and observed participants in their natural setting. This study attempted to understand strategies for improving oral production among EFL learners through their experiences inside their classroom.

After inviting 25 students, four students: Andrea, Dehack, Fer and Mafalda (pseudonyms) accepted the invitation and expressed their willingness to participate in the study. I carried out three interviews during three weeks. Participants were purposefully selected taking into account their English level.

Context of the Study

This research project was carried out in a FL classroom. Classes lasted 120 minutes, and in some cases, classes were extended to 180 minutes. Mostly, the teacher divided the class into three parts: beginning, development and closure. In the beginning, the teacher

started by correcting students' homework and teaching them some expressions and greetings, then she gave students instructions about the development of the class. Then, students did an activity depending on what the teacher wanted to work on. Finally, the teacher corrected their mistakes and gave them feedback at the end of the class.

Data Collection Instruments

I used several sources of information. According to Neale et al, (2006) "Case studies also allow one to present data collected from multiple methods (i.e., surveys, interviews, document review, and observation) to provide the complete story. I used observations and interviews. I chose these instruments as they increased the likelihood and validity of the phenomenon which provided credibility to the findings, because I was able to compare and contrast data from different sources.

The length of this study was about 16 weeks; I conducted five observations during five weeks in a FL classroom. In those observations, I played the role of an unobtrusive observer which helped me to identify some strategies used by the teacher and how the teacher carried out all the activities.

Non-participants observations

According to Broshenka and Castro, (1983) "in a non-participant observation, the observer remains separate from his study population's activities, and attempts to be unobtrusive. There may be a conscious structuring of observation in the sense of

developing hypotheses to be tested, or following up unclear relationships”. I conducted non-participant observations in a classroom of A1 learners and also I took notes from these observations.

Before entering the classroom, I asked permission. Once permission was granted by the teacher, participants signed a letter of consent that explained the details of this project. I carried out five observations during the semester; it was developed one day per week according to my schedule activities and the schedule of the teacher that I observed. I used an observation protocol (see annex 1) for organizing and writing what I observed - class activities, time, date and reflections of each observation.

Semi-structured interviews

I carried out three interviews during the academic semester. Harrell & Bradley, (2009) state that in “this kind of interview collects detailed information in a style that is somewhat conversational. Semi-structured interviews are often used when the researcher wants to delve deeply into a topic and to understand thoroughly the answers provided” (p.27.) During the interviews I took detailed notes - I also recorded these interviews in order to increase the validity of the study.

Data Analysis

Before starting the data analysis process I transcribed the interviews and the observations. I then followed the interpretive analysis model suggested by Hatch (2002). I

also used the MAXQDA, computer software, in order to organize and to analyse data more easily.

Ethical Considerations

I gained approval from the research committee at the Foreign Language program where this research took place. This permission determined that there were no risks involved for human participants. Then, I contacted participants directly, inviting them to participate. After students agreed to participate, they signed a letter of consent form that explained the specific conditions and requirements of the study. In this study, pseudonyms were used in order to maintain the anonymity of the participants to protect their privacy.

Findings

After data was analysed, I identified the strategies used by the teacher and how those strategies helped students to improve their oral skills. With regards to the strategies used by the teacher, I found that role plays and songs seemed to improve EFL learners' oral skills. I have also found that role plays and songs were the strategies used most by the teacher. For instance, when the participants were asked about what activities the teacher used when working on oral production, Dechak said: "los métodos que utiliza la profesora

son role plays y canciones más que todo”. Likewise, the other two participants stated similar answers about the strategies that the teacher used for improving oral production.

In addition, one of participants stated that sometimes the teacher used interesting readings to increase their oral participation. As she stated:

“otra experiencia sería lo del Kidnapped (a book for reading), en lo último, tenemos que inventarnos algo totalmente diferente al final, entonces tuvimos que usar mucho vocabulario, inventarnos algo totalmente diferente, entonces ahí hablamos bastante.”

According to the four participants’ opinions, I can infer that role plays and songs were the strategies used by the teacher to promote students’ oral production.

During one of the classroom observations, I found that the use of the book Kidnapped, by Robert Louis Stevenson, helped participants to enhance their oral participation. For example, most of the time, the teacher asked students opinions about readings. On that day, the teacher started reading about daily routines, taken from the same book. She then asked students to continue with the reading; she corrected the pronunciation mistakes and made them to repeat the word in the right way. When they finished the reading, the teacher requested students ask their classmates questions. In doing so, they worked cooperatively, sharing their experiences using the present continuous. All these activities helped students to enhance their oral production, and encouraged oral participation while sharing their own experiences interacting with their classmates.

With regards to the second research question which was about how these strategies improved participants’ oral skills, I found that role plays seemed to be the most effective

strategy. According to the participants, role plays really helped them to improve their oral skills. For instance, when participants were asked about the activities they found most appropriate for improving oral production; Dechack answered: “los role plays, porque dentro de los role plays existen muchas situaciones en la cuales tenemos que practicar, y las cuales ponemos en práctica todos los días, entonces son cosas importantes que realmente tenemos que aprender”. Taking into account participants’ answers, role plays were the strategy that helped them to improve their oral skills, since in carrying out this activity they had the opportunity to enrich their vocabulary and express themselves in English performing different situations.

In addition to the students’ perceptions, during my classroom observations I was able to realize that songs also helped students to improve their oral production. For instance, in my field notes I reflected on how the teacher used songs in class:

“The song was repeated and the teacher asked about the answers inside the blanks. The entire group gave the correct words to fill the blanks. Later, the translation began. Idioms and slangs were explained. They repeated the song line by line two times. Finally the students sang the song aloud. The teacher gave the historical facts about the song. She then asked about the students’ opinions about the song.”

It seems that these type of activities helped students to participate and express their opinions and thoughts in English and at the same time it helped to improve their pronunciation since the teacher corrected their pronunciation mistakes.

Conclusions

Conducting this study enabled me to understand that role plays helped learners to enrich their oral skills, while performing everyday situations. It seems that role plays were the most effective strategy, in which they used the language freely. Taking into account that roles plays were performed in small groups, students worked cooperatively, sharing their experiences using not only grammatical structures and vocabulary, but also putting into play group work strategies. They also used different clothes, decoration, and environments according to each situation that they had to perform.

Similarly, songs helped learners to enhance their oral production and oral participation while sharing their own experiences interacting with their classmates. Once the students interpreted the songs, and completed gap filling exercises; students were actively engaged while expressing their opinions and feelings about the songs. Such activities served a twofold purpose; they permitted participants to express their opinions and thoughts in English; and they helped to improve their pronunciation because the teacher corrected their mistakes while they were speaking.

Finally, this study allowed me, as an undergraduate researcher, to reflect on the process of conducting a qualitative study. Although, I started this study based on my experiences as an EFL learner, I learned how to maintain a “neutral stance” (Patton, 1994) throughout the entire process. I also realized the importance of conducting research in educational fields because through it, teachers and learners could understand phenomena that occur inside the classroom in order to look for ways of improvement.

Further Research

For further studies some recommendations could be taken into account:

1. Regarding the research instruments should be helpful not only to implement observations and interviews but also other sources to collect in-depth data. For example, teachers in charge of the group should be interviewed in order to understand their insights about the phenomenon. They may provide more information about the study.
2. Spending more time in the field could facilitate the collection of robust data.

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APPENDIX 1

“Classroom observation form”

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION FORM

Date: _____ Semester _____ Observation Nro: _____

Observer: _____ Duration: _____

Number of students present: _____

Objective: _____

Focus: _____

Brief description of the setting:

TIME THAT I OBSERVED MY REFLECTIONS

APPENDIX 2 Interviews' Protocol

Interview N°: _1__

Teacher: _Verónica Arciniegas_____

Interviewer: __Darymar Redondo Fuentes_____

Course: _English_____ Date: _____ Hour: _____

Site: _____ Number of interviewee: _____

Focus_____

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 “UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING ORAL PRODUCTION SKILLS”

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.

QUESTIONS	PARTICIPANT 1
1. ¿Cuénteme algo sobre su experiencia en la producción oral en sus clases de inglés?	
2. ¿Qué actividades usa su profesor	

para la producción oral?	
3. ¿Describame como son estas actividades? 4. ¿Cuál de estas actividades cree que no le ha ayudado a mejorar la producción oral?	

