

# **Identifying Factors that Affect FL Learners' Oral Participation at a Public University in Colombia**

Sandy Liseth Cañas Carrillo\*

Sandy91\_4@hotmail.com

## **Abstract**

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.

Key words: FL students, oral participation, speaking, anxiety

## **Resumen**

Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso que identificó los factores que afectan la participación oral de los estudiantes de lenguas extranjeras (FL) de una universidad pública en Colombia. Los participantes fueron seis estudiantes de lenguas extranjeras con un nivel A1. Las conclusiones revelaron que hay algunos signos de ansiedad tales como evitación general, acciones físicas y síntomas físicos. Estos son los factores que afectan a los estudiantes al momento de hablar frente a la clase. También se encontró que los juegos

de rol son las actividades en las que los estudiantes participan activamente y de las actividades de libro son aquellos en los que están menos involucrados.

Palabras clave: Estudiantes de lenguas extranjeras, participación oral, ansiedad

## **Introduction**

Speaking plays an important role in a FL classroom. Those who attempt to become proficient in an FL classroom should be actively engaged in class oral activities. However, participation is a problem for many students. Based on personal experiences during my time as a FL student, I have realized that there are many factors involved in oral production. Experts have identified nervousness, anxiety, lack of vocabulary or lack of self-confidence as affecting factors. Eventually, this study will help FL students and teachers understand the factors that affect their communicative oral production and will help teachers understand what students need in order to achieve their speaking goals in the FL learning process.

## **Theoretical framework**

This theoretical framework describes key concepts, such as: classroom and oral participation; speaking, and anxiety.

According to Swain (1993), classroom participation provides opportunities for the students to use and practice their linguistic and communicative skills, and that is what students do during English classes. On the other hand, according to Jakarta (2009)

speaking is an activity used by someone to communicate with another. It takes place everywhere and has become part of our daily activities. When someone speaks, he/she interacts and uses the language to express his/her ideas, feelings and thoughts. He/she also shares information with others through communication (Cited by Mendoza, 2007). The fear of speaking in public is related with anxiety and can be defined by Horwitz et al, (1986, p.125) as the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system, it includes signs such as general avoidance that is related to “forgetting” the answer, showing carelessness, cutting class, arriving late, arriving unprepared, low levels of verbal production, lack of volunteering in class, apparent inability to answer even the simplest of questions. Physical actions such as squirming, fidgeting, playing with hair or clothing, nervously touching objects, stuttering, displaying jittery behaviours, being unable to reproduce the sounds or intonation of the target language. Physical symptoms refers to complaining about a headache, experiencing muscle tension, feeling unexplained pain or tension in any part of the body. Other signs which might reflect language anxiety, depending on the culture, include over studying, perfectionism, social avoidance, conversational withdrawal, lack of eye contact, hostility, monosyllabic or noncommittal responses, image protection or masking behaviours (exaggerated smiling, laughing, nodding, joking) failing to interrupt when it would be natural to do so, excessive competitiveness and self-criticism.

Consequently, this research attempted to identify affecting factors to FL students' oral participation, the factors stated by Horwitz will be taken into account in order to answer the main research question of this study.

## Literature review

This literature review summarizes and describes the findings of 3 (three) previous studies related to negative and positive factors that affect oral participation; I chose three studies conducted in Colombia because I am more interested in what has happened here. For this reason I am not referring to other studies in which anxiety is the most relevant factor affecting oral production in FL students.

In Colombia, Mendoza (2007) conducted a case study in a public high school with 6th grade students who showed symptoms of anxiety in specific situations as conversations, role plays and oral participation or any other oral activity. Findings showed that students felt anxiety and nervousness symptoms during oral activity participation. It was also found that when they participated they felt external factors such as sweating hands, movement of a leg or a hand on the chair, or an inability to move. Castrillón (2010) conducted research in a high school institution with 4th semester students from a public university in Colombia in order to identify what affects their participation and interaction in class. He found that there are different learners' factors that may influence participation in a classroom such as unwillingness to participate and fear of making mistakes in front of their classmates. Moreover, Zapata (2007) conducted a case study with first semester students in an English language teaching program in Colombia. Findings revealed that anxiety is one of the factors affecting students' oral participation and is caused by internal and external factors. Internal factors such as self-esteem, motivation, introversion and extroversion, lack of vocabulary, beliefs, ability to take risk; and internal factors such as methodology and interaction. The findings concluded that anxiety affects oral competences of language students. This study

also revealed that oral presentations and participation in front of large audiences and the teacher were the communicative activity which aroused the most anxiety.

It can be concluded by revisiting the three studies that English language anxiety is a multi-dimensional factor which affects students differently depending on the context or situation. In regards to the findings previously mentioned, it was helpful during the research process because I identified those factors more easily whilst my classroom observations were being conducted.

### **Research methodology**

This section explains the steps I followed during this study, deciding on a research design, selecting participants, instruments, data collection and analysis procedures.

#### **Type of research design**

I implemented a qualitative research because I was interested in understanding students' feelings and perceptions about their learning experiences. According to Creswell (2002) the investigator explored a bounded system over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving sources of information; I used purposeful sampling which, according to Patton (1990), is used to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study.

## Participants

The selection of participants was guided by the purpose of this study that attempted to identify factors affecting FL students' oral participation. Participants were - Estrellita (1), Dekac (2), Phineas (3) Princess (4) Chuck (5), Toto (6) - (pseudonyms were used to protect their real identities). They are six beginner-level students from a FL program at a Public University in Colombia. The age of the participants ranged from 16 to 19 years old. Their language proficiency was A1<sup>1</sup>. I informed the participants about the research issue, its aims, its purpose, and the future use of the information collected. I also informed them about their freedom (willingness) to freely collaborate or withdraw from the project at any time. In order to preserve participants' anonymity I used pseudonyms. After I observed the first class, I chose six students taking into account their level of participation in the English classes and I asked them to answer to a set of questions at interviews in order to get relevant information about the factors that influence their participation. In the section called "instruments" the classroom observation process and the interviews I conducted will be further explained.

## Setting

The setting in which this research took place was a foreign language classroom at a public University in Colombia. Classes always took place in a big classroom, well illuminated with two big windows on the left side. The seating arrangement was a stretched

---

<sup>1</sup> According to the Common European Framework

semi-circle. During the 5 (five) classes observed the teacher always used the same methodology; she divided the class into three parts: beginning, development and closure. At the beginning, the teacher started by correcting students' homework and giving students' instructions for the development of the class. Then, students did oral practice depending on what the teacher asked the class to do, for example a role-play, and reading books. Finally, they worked on the students' textbook "New English file 1" in which they developed question by question each exercise presented. The class finished when the teacher assigned the task for the next class.

### **The instruments**

I conducted 5 classroom observations (See appendix 1) and 3 interviews (See appendix 2, 3, 4) as the main instruments to gather the necessary information to answer the research questions for this study.

In order to have a clear idea of how they behaved in oral presentations, I did classroom observations. As a researcher, I was a non-participant observer, I did not take part in the class activities, which allowed me to take detailed notes. Classroom observations were carried out from May to July 2012. For the classroom observations I stated five objectives aimed to identify: students' attitudes when they took part in the class orally; also, factors that constrain students' oral participation, identifying which kind of activities students participate in the most and identifying which kind of activities students participate in the least. On the other hand, I interviewed the participants three times: Although I had designed an interview protocol with five questions each, during the interviews I had the

opportunity to ask other follow-up questions that allowed me to expand the data from the participants. The questions aimed to obtain information on the effect of FL students' oral participation; the interviews were carried out in June and July.

During the classroom observations, I observed 27 students that signed the letter of consent in order to participate in the study, during the first classroom observation I selected 6 students, 3 men and 3 women for the interviews, taking into account their behaviours and their participation in class. They were interviewed based on the schedule I established at the beginning. In each interview I used open- ended questions. I took into account their perceptions and thoughts about their oral participation in the classroom and how they behaved when having to take part in oral situations.

### **Data analysis**

In this section I will explain the procedures followed to organize and analyse data. I followed the interpretive analysis model suggested by Hatch (2002). After transcribing classroom observations and interviews, I used MAXQDA software in order to organize and code the whole data.

### **Findings**

Findings will be presented in light of the research questions. 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. I have adopted the Horwitz (1986) model in order to better explain what I found. Although the Horwitz (1986) model has four sources of anxiety, I have identified three of them in my project: 1) General avoidance, 2) physical actions and 3) physical symptoms. 1) General avoidance is when students forgot the answer, arrived late or arrived unprepared to class, and did not answer the questions (Horwitz, 1986). I realized that students felt these symptoms when participating in oral activities. For instance, during a class I observed that one participant said while performing a role play “No teacher, ehh wait a moment, I don’t know what to say.” During another class, while performing a role play, two students seemed to be nervous because one of them had forgotten his script. He then said “Tengo mucho miedo, que hago, se me olvido.” One of his classmate said to him: “A mí también, ojala que todo nos salga bien.” On the other hand, general avoidance constrained them from answering specific requests from the teacher, one participant said “Una vez no era capaz de pronunciar unas palabras, la de kip...ki ¿Cómo se dice secuestrado? Este kidnap, esa palabra se me olvido, entonces los compañeros se reían ese día, me dio mucha pena.” I observed that the teacher suggested that they not learn dialogues by heart; she said “If you forget just one word, you are lost.” I can infer that when students performed an oral activity they forgot some words and the right pronunciation which constrained their participation. Students became afraid of making mistakes because they were not well prepared or had forgotten parts of their scripts.

With regards to the second source of symptoms 2) physical actions, some students reacted by showing nervous behaviours. For instance, I realized in my second classroom observation that “They were laughing, they seemed to be nervous, they started to develop an oral activity but something was wrong so they started again”. My perceptions were

confirmed when the participants were asked during one of the interviews: “Me achanto siempre porque a veces me equivoco en la pronunciación, pero lo que más siento es nervios.” another participant said: “Nerviosa porque se me olvidan algunas cosas.” I realized that students reacted with nervous behaviours because it was difficult for them to keep talking when doing oral activities.

On the other hand 3) Physical symptoms refer to complaining about a headache, feeling unexplained pain or tension. During a classroom observation one participant expressed some concerns about her health that would not let her participate in class: “Profesora no puedo cantar, me siento enferma.” She did not participate in the whole class. I realized that when the teacher asked them to complete any exercise some students did not participate, as one student said in the classroom “Teacher, I didn’t do the homework.” When the teacher asked him why, he said “Porque no tuve tiempo.” I can infer that when students did not have the correct answer they complained about a headache and made excuses up in order to avoid participation.

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. While observing a class, I perceived that students tended to participate more in those activities in which they have enough time to prepare what they were to say or perform with their classmates or individually. I also realized that, when students worked in small groups there was more participation among them because they felt they were in a more relaxed environment. It seems that participants agreed on what I observed. For example, one of them stated: “Me gustan las actividades por ejemplo juegos de rol porque podemos

trabajar con los compañeros, crear personajes, también porque nos da la oportunidad de mejorar el inglés, ya que cada uno debe utilizar expresiones o cosas vistas en la clase, eso es muy interesante.” Similarly, another participant stated: “En los juegos de rol participo más porque puedo hablar, puedo preparar, es divertido porque cada uno de nosotros tiene diferentes ideas entonces tratamos de que las cosas que hacemos nos salgan bien.” It seems that students participated actively because they felt immersed in a more relaxed environment and they had the opportunity to prepare their oral performances with their classmates. As a non-participant observer, I realized that students were well prepared when they performed role plays. The teacher congratulated them because of their performance.

With regards to the third question, this study found that there were other activities in which students participated less frequently. As a non-participant observer, I realized that students were not actively engaged while doing workbook grammar activities. Most of the students participated because the teacher requested their participation and not because they wanted to do so. Others preferred to remain silent. During a classroom observation “I realized that students did not participate because they had not found the correct answer to a textbook exercise, one participant said “Participo menos en las actividades del libro no porque no quiera sino porque a veces no tengo la respuesta.” I also realized that getting bad/good grades were a factor that constrained students’ participation. During an interview, one participant said: “En las actividades del libro yo creo que es por temor a equivocarme y la presión por sacar buena nota.” Taking into account that the teacher graded each student’s participation, some participants reported that they were not actively engaged in those activities, because they were afraid of making mistakes when expressing their ideas, and therefore getting a bad grade.

## **Conclusions and pedagogical implications**

I found that there are three factors that affected students' oral participation such as general avoidance, physical symptoms, and physical actions. Conversely, I found that role plays are the activities in which students preferred to participate the most. On the contrary, students seemed to be less engaged when doing workbook activities.

The results of this study will be helpful for FL teachers who may implement these strategies to foster students' participation, and to improve their oral skills. However, it would be necessary to look for more activities in which the students feel motivated and engaged while learning a foreign language. Also, in order to have better results, teachers should pay more attention to students' feelings and perceptions.

## **Further research**

For further studies some recommendations could be taken into account:

Regarding the sources of information, it would be helpful to interview the teachers in charge of the group in order to learn about their insights about the phenomenon experienced by the students. Finally, researchers should spend more time in the field.

\*Sandy Liseth Cañas Carrillo is studying a bachelor degree in foreign languages, English – French at the Universidad de Pamplona. She is currently in her fifth year; she has taken

four courses on research. She has been part of the undergraduate research group SILEX for two years; her research interests involve oral participation and factors affecting FL students. She can be contacted at sandy91\_4@hotmail.com.

## References

Castrillón (2010). Students' perceptions about the development of their oral skills in English as a foreign language teacher training program. Unpublished master's theses. Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira. Common European Framework (cef).(n.d.). Retrieved June 12, 2012 from:  
[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf).

Creswell, J. W. (2002). Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating.

Cutrone (2002). Overcoming Japanese EFL learners' fear of speaking. Language studies working papers.

Hatch, J. A. (2002). Doing qualitative research in education settings. New York: State University of New York.

Hortwitz, e- k Horwitz, M.B and Cope J. (1986) Foreign language classroom anxiety.

Jakarta (2009) Speaking as Oral Communication skill.

Mendoza (2009) factors that affect students' oral participation. Master thesis for master degree. Universidad Del Norte. Barranquilla.

Patton, m. q. (1990). Qualitative evaluation and research methods. Newbury park: sage.

Swain, M. (1993). The Output Hypothesis: Just Speaking and Writing aren't Enough. The Canadian Modern Language Review. 50/1. The modern language. Journal 70: 125-132

Zapata (2007). Students' Personality Type and Attitudes toward Classroom Participation. Proceedings of the CATESOL State Conference, 2005.

APPENDIX 1

“Classroom observation form”

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION FORM

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Semester \_\_\_\_\_ Observation No: \_\_\_\_\_

Observer: \_\_\_\_\_ Duration: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of students present: \_\_\_\_\_

Objective: \_\_\_\_\_

Focus: \_\_\_\_\_

Brief description of the setting:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

TIME WHAT I OBSERVED MY REFLECTIONS

APPENDIX 2

“Interview number 1”

INTERVIEW No 1

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Hour: \_\_\_\_\_ site: \_\_\_\_\_

Focus: \_\_\_\_\_

Objective: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Las siguientes preguntas tienen como objetivo recolectar información acerca de la

participación oral de los estudiantes en el curso de inglés elemental I en la Universidad de Pamplona para desarrollar un proyecto de investigación llamado “factores que impiden la participación oral de los estudiantes en primer semestre”.

La información que usted proporcione en esta entrevista será utilizada únicamente para la recolección de datos del estudio previamente citado. El propósito de esta entrevista es aprender de sus experiencias, averiguar cuales con los factores que influyen en la participación oral. Los comentarios y sugerencias de todos los participantes serán manejados con ética profesional es decir, los profesores no tendrán acceso a ellos ni va a perjudicar su nota. Pido sinceridad al momento de responder QUESTIONARIO Nro. \_\_\_\_\_

1. ¿Cuénteme como se ha sentido hasta ahora en el área de inglés?

---

---

---

2. ¿Dígame como es su participación en clase?

---

---

---

3. ¿Cómo se siente al momento de participar en clase?

---

---

---

---

4. ¿Podría contarme una de sus experiencias durante su participación oral en clase? \_\_\_\_\_

---



---

---

5. ¿Cuándo usted participa en clase lo hace voluntariamente o porque le toca?

Cuénteme una de sus experiencias.

---

---

---

---

### APPENDIX 3

“Interview number 2”

INTERVIEW Nro. 2

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Hour: \_\_\_\_\_ site: \_\_\_\_\_

Focus: \_\_\_\_\_

objective: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Las siguientes preguntas tienen como objetivo recolectar información acerca de la participación oral de los estudiantes en el curso de inglés elemental I en la Universidad de Pamplona para desarrollar un proyecto de investigación llamado “factores que impiden la participación oral de los estudiantes en primer semestre”.

La información que usted proporcione en esta entrevista será utilizada únicamente para la recolección de datos del estudio previamente citado. El propósito de esta entrevista es aprender de sus experiencias, averiguar cuáles son los factores que influyen en la participación oral. Los comentarios y sugerencias de todos los participantes serán

manejados con ética profesional es decir, los profesores no tendrán acceso a ellos ni va a perjudicar su nota. Pido sinceridad al momento de responder.

QUESTIONARIO Nro. \_\_\_\_\_

1. ¿En cuál materia se siente más cómodo al momento de hablar en inglés o francés?

¿Por qué?

---

---

---

2. ¿Le gusta la clase de inglés?

¿Por qué?

---

---

---

---

3. ¿Le gusta la metodología de su profesor?

---

---

---

4. ¿Qué le agrada y que no le agrada de la clase de inglés?

---

---

---

---

5. ¿En qué actividades usted participa más en clase y por qué?

---

---

---

---

6. ¿Que hace que usted participe en clase? ¿podría usted darme un ejemplo?

---

---

---

---

#### APPENDIX 4

“Interview number 3”

INTERVIEW Nro. 3

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Hour: \_\_\_\_\_ site: \_\_\_\_\_

Focus: \_\_\_\_\_

Objective: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Las siguientes preguntas tienen como objetivo recolectar información acerca de la participación oral de los estudiantes en el curso de inglés elemental I en la Universidad de Pamplona para desarrollar un proyecto de investigación llamado “factores que impiden la participación oral de los estudiantes en primer semestre”.

La información que usted proporcione en esta entrevista será utilizada únicamente para la recolección de datos del estudio previamente citado. El propósito de esta entrevista es aprender de sus experiencias, averiguar cuales con los factores que influyen en la participación oral. Los comentarios y sugerencias de todos los participantes serán manejados con ética profesional es decir, los profesores no tendrán acceso a ellos ni va a

perjudicar su nota. Pido sinceridad al momento de responder.

1. ¿Cómo se siente usted cuando se expresa en inglés?

---

---

---

2. ¿En qué actividades usted participa menos y por qué?

---

---

---

3. ¿Que hace que usted no participe en clase? ¿Podría usted darme un ejemplo?

---

---

---

4. ¿Cómo se siente usted en cuanto a su nivel de inglés en comparación con el grupo?

---

---

---

5. Como se siente cuando no entiende los temas que se presentan en clase? ¿Por qué?

---

---

---

