IDENTIFYING FACTORS CAUSING DIFFICULTIES TO PRODUCTIVE SKILLS AMONG FOREIGN LANGUAGES LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study focused on analyzing the factors that affected English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' performance when working on writing or speaking activities. This study may help EFL teachers understand why most of their students face difficulties throughout their learning process.

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Introduction

The process of learning English is slow and progressive and it could be interpreted as a series of challenges to face. This process consists of the development of certain skills. According to the Common European Framework, these are divided into productive and receptive. Receptive skills comprise reading and listening. They are important because they allow learners to understand contents, textbooks, works or documents. Productive skills consist of speaking and writing and they are significant because they permit learners to perform in communicative aspects such as oral presentations, written studies and reports among others. Therefore, these skills need to be developed and learnt properly.

According to the experiences of some foreign languages learners, most difficulties are found in the productive skills, thus the main purpose of this study was to identify the factors causing those problems. This study sought to answer three questions related to the causes of the difficulties presented when learning a foreign language 1) What are the main factors affecting writing and speaking skills in FL students?; 2) What is the influence of these factors on the performance of EFL learners?; and 3) how do learners notice the factors that affect their productive skills?

Previous studies have addressed several aspects of factors affecting writing or speaking. In Jaramillo and Medina's (2011) study, the written skill is perceived as an art in which willingness and motivation are important. According to Urrutia and Vega (2010)

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speaking is a skill which is mostly affected by causes such as lack of vocabulary, shyness, and fear of being humiliated. In Ellis (2008), it was shown that learning difficulties varied according to the type of knowledge students have. In addition, in Ferrari and Palladio's, (2007), certain skills were examined which showed that the most frequent difficulties come from students' previous knowledge as well as the different disorders they presented.

Furthermore, it is necessary to explain that there are many learners who need to express their ideas in a second language but they find themselves without the linguistic resources to carry it out, (Gass and Selinker, 1994). This means that they are not acquiring knowledge correctly.

Hopefully, identifying these problems may help find a solution to overcome these problems. Subsequently, the purpose of this study is to identify what factors cause difficulties to productive skills among foreign languages learners.

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Theoretical framework and Literature review

This section will provide the main definitions of key words of the factors affecting productive skills, and a review of previous research projects focused on identifying the factors affecting the FL learners' speaking and writing skills.

Receptive and productive skills:

Receptive skills comprise silent reading and following the media. Productive skills consist of oral presentations, written studies and reports. In addition, they also consist of social values (i.e. making judgments of what has been submitted in writing or of fluency in speaking and delivering oral presentations).

Productive skills, speaking and writing, are defined by Jaramillo and Medina (2011) as an important form of expression used to persuade or convince other people as well as to share ideas and feelings. According to Chastain (1998), speaking is a productive skill that involves many components, such as grammar, strategy, sociolinguistics and discourse For him speaking is more than simply making the right sounds, choosing the right words or getting the constructions correct. (pp. 330-358)

Factors

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The Common European Framework (CEF) defines a factor as an aspect of full complexity by any individual or learners. These are generally presented in the communicative activity, connected especially with students' attitudes, motivation, values, believes and cognitive styles. All of them influence their use of language and their ability to learn.

Internal factors

"These are those that a language learner brings with him or her to the particular learning situation". These factors are composed by age, personality, motivation, experiences, cognition and native language.

External factors

According to the Frankfurt International School, these are related to a particular language learning situation. These factors are composed by curriculum, culture, status and motivation.

Difficulties

Harrison (2009) states that difficulties are related to learning disabilities students have, thus in this aspect they feel greater uncertainty than some of their classmates. Besides, hardships are reasons of syntax, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and other types of mistakes students present when learning a foreign language.

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Previous studies

The following six studies identified some factors affecting foreign language learners' speaking and writing skills.

Urrutia and Vega (2010) found that oral participation of foreign language learners was affected by their lack of vocabulary, shyness, and fear of being humiliated. Also, this study showed that students' cooperation, involvement, self-confidence, knowledge of vocabulary and the class environment motivated them to improve their speaking abilities.

Similarly, Boonkit (2010) conducted an action research study in which factors enhancing the development of EFL students' speaking skills, and the strengths and weaknesses of speaking performance were analyzed. The author realized that a good preparation of tasks for speaking became an effective strategy to minimize anxiety. It was also found that freedom of topic selection encouraged the participants to feel comfortable and motivated to speak, maximizing speaking confidence.

Likewise, Prieto (2007) focused her study on cooperative learning activities. She realized that students did not use English during their preparations, they did it in Spanish. Furthermore, the researcher noticed that when students were preparing a group activity, it was actually developed by one of them. Findings revealed that one way to improve

speaking is through interaction with others, learning from others,

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and the selection of the topics according to students' interests in order to motivate them.

With regards to writing skills, Jaramillo and Medina (2011) focused their action research on the development of writing short descriptive texts in English. The results confirmed that most of the difficulties students had were related to the construction of sentences, grammatical errors and difficulties in reading comprehension. The researchers understood that learners performed better in writing tasks when they had a clear idea about the topic they were focusing on. In addition, investigators suggested that the best way to improve writing skills was through practice.

Furthermore, Quintero's (2008) study pointed out that problems with grammar, punctuation, lexical choice and the like have a negative impact on the content and the general understanding of a text. In addition, this study indicated that writing was a complicated skill to develop since it implied the use of mental processes rather than only using the structures of the language. For instance, the author established that those difficulties could be solved by motivating the students, by giving them the opportunity to write about the topics of their particular interest, and also by giving them the appropriate feedback of their work.

In addition, Larios et al. (2008) conducted a study in which the foreign language writer's strategic allocation of time to writing processes was analyzed. They found that the process of writing formulation took up the largest percentage of composition time for

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participants, and also that writing processes were differentially distributed depending on the writer's proficiency level.

Design

This research study adopted a qualitative case study. According to Creswell (2002) a case study is "an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., an activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection" (p. 485). For instance, I selected a case study because this type of research allowed me to better understand and to identify the factors that caused difficulties on productive skills of FL learners.

Instruments and data collection

The data was collected through three instruments: six observations, two interviews and field notes. During classroom observations I played the role of a non-participant observer. According to Creswell (2005), a non participant observer "… visits a site and records notes without becoming involved in the activities of the participants." (p. 212.) With regards to interviews, I took into account the view of Hatch, (2002) on interviews as instruments to complete observations and as tools to involve participants in order to know their viewpoints about a subject. According to Cohen and Manion (1994), interviews are considered as the best way to understand the factors that govern human beings' conduct. In this inquiry these were effective in distinguishing what

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participants felt when expressing their ideas in speaking or writing. These were also necessary to identify the criteria participants had in relation to the problems they presented. The two interviews were conducted differently. The first one was a focus group interview with the participation of three key participants. The second interview was conducted two weeks after the first one. I decided to do a one-on-one interview because I realized that when participants had been interviewed as a group, they expressed their opinions based on their classmates' ideas. One-on-one interviews gave me a clearer understanding of the opinions and points of view of each of the participants.

On the other hand, the use of note-taking is a very relevant factor which can help the researcher to better develop the process of data collection, Gwyn and Mort (1994), state that the process of note-taking is very important to revise the events which have already occurred. In this case study, the notes I took were useful since they gave me a general description of my observations, my impressions in the field and important aspects during the process. More importantly, my notes were useful in complementing the information the participants provided me with in the interviews. Through them I was able to remember the participants' attitude, thus it was easy for me to reflect on different aspects that were not presented in the audiotapes.

Participants

The participants were: Hana, Deisy and Pet (pseudonyms), three students from an

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advanced English course at the Foreign Languages program of the Universidad de Pamplona. They were selected following one classroom observation and considering that in this semester (6th) students have a B1 level and considerable previous knowledge about the target language, as well as the ability to construct their communicative competence with coherence and cohesion.

Setting

According to Larsen and H. Long (1991), investigators should recognize the importance of the role of the institution where they are going to carry out their investigation, thus in order to make reference to pedagogical values, keeping in mind this perspective, it is important to mention that the present case study was carried out at the Universidad de Pamplona; a public university in Norte de Santander Colombia, in its school of education; specifically in the foreign languages program where learners study for a Bachelor of Arts in English and French.

Ethical considerations

Before developing a research project, it is very important to consider the characteristics and the type of the methods that will be used to obtain data, the context, the procedures, the nature of participants, and the importance of participants' moral subjects, which influence the stem of contributors. For this reason, it is significant to respect and to value their perspectives, (Cohen and Manion, 1994). Before embarking upon this research

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study, I requested permission from the Foreign Language Department of the Universidad de Pamplona, and more specifically from the teacher in charge of the group from which I selected the participants. In addition, through a letter of consent, participants agreed to providing and allowing me to use the information gathered to develop this study.

Findings

Taking into account the purpose of this study, "to analyze the factors causing difficulties on productive skills of FL students", the information obtained through the three instruments; two interviews, six observations and field notes, was analyzed. After the completion of this analysis a contrast between the different factors causing difficulties to productive skills was made. Findings were grouped into two categories: four internal and two external factors.

I found that insecurity, unwillingness to use the target language, lack of knowledge and languages transfer (internal factors) caused difficulties to the participants' development on productive skills. In addition, I found that time allocation and the teachers' methodology (external factors) also affected the participants' productive skills.

With regards to internal factors, it was found that insecurity caused participants difficulties when writing or speaking in a foreign language. Participants explained that insecurity might be linked to their behavior. While observing participants in class, I realized that they preferred to be seated next to their best classmates or friends. Likewise,

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when they were asked to work in groups they developed the activities with the same classmates or friends. They showed that they were not interested in working with others. Maybe because they knew how their classmates worked. For instance they selected their teams according to their expectations, friendships, behavior and learning strategies. Students felt more comfortable and secure working with their close classmates.

In addition, during some observations, a high level of insecurity was perceived in Deisy and Pet when they participated or tried to answer a question in oral presentations. For example, they paused, looked at the ceiling or they attempted to communicate through hand gestures.

While being interviewed, Hana stated that insecurity was a factor that affected her oral and written productions because sometimes she felt she did not have the appropriate knowledge to accomplish certain class activities. As she stated:

"Pero ¿sabe, sabe cual es el problema que radica ahí? Es la inseguridad y es porque uno no aprendió bien. Lo que uno… Lo que bien se aprende, nunca se olvida. Si uno no aprendió bien las cosas, por eso la inseguridad. Entonces es como falta de… de afianzar bien los conocimientos…"

Taking into account Hana's words, it seems that insecurity comes from the lack of knowledge students have about certain topics.

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Likewise, unwillingness to use the target language caused difficulties. Through observations, I realized that all of the participants favored the use of Spanish to communicate among themselves, and to develop the tasks proposed by the teacher. Nevertheless, they used the target language to ask questions to the teacher and to communicate between themselves. These actions demonstrated that participants were not willing to practice in the target language unless they were forced to do it.

The unwillingness to use the language was also caused by the lack of practice on the participants' part. During the interviews, participants agreed that the process of learning a foreign language implied a series of autonomous work and practice. However, they acknowledged that they did not practice as they should. As Hana stated:

"Si uno no practica, así uno tenga los conocimientos, si uno no trata de practicar y practicar y practicar. Pailas, no hay nada que uno pueda hacer."

Unwillingness and lack of practice were negative factors that affected participants' language production, not only because they experienced problems when presetting ideas, thoughts and opinions, but also because they were unable to communicate with the expected level of proficiency.

Lack of knowledge was another aspect that affected the students' participation. Production based upon unknown topics, the lack of vocabulary and the lack of knowledge about grammar structures were issues that belonged to this factor.

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With regards to the production based on unknown topics, in some observations, I realized that students did not like to participate in class, especially when they felt that they did not understand the context or when they did not have the knowledge of the topic they were studying. When learners were not familiar with the topic, they remained silent, and refused to answer the teacher's questions. They demonstrated that when they were not prepared to carry out a presentation in front of their classmates, it was not successful. They made many mistakes in pronunciation and sometimes they forgot what they had to say or explain.

The written or oral production based on unknown topics was also noticed by taking into account the participants answers. Deisy and Hana explained that writing production was an activity that they could develop correctly when they had the possibility to select the topic they were going to write about. Similarly, they stated that if they were asked to write about something they were not familiar with, it was more difficult because they had to start looking for relevant information and for the appropriate vocabulary.

-"Es mejor cuando a uno le dicen haga un escrito libre de cualquier tema, a que cuando a uno le imponen un tema. Si a usted le imponen un tema y usted no sabe sobre eso, no tiene la idea, entonces tiene que ponerse a leer y eso".

Another aspect that I took into account when considering the participants' lack of knowledge was the familiarity they had with the vocabulary and grammar. In the fourth

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observation, I noticed that participants' written reports lacked coherence and cohesion.

Students had to do a presentation in which they explained a short article they had written.

Analyzing their productions I realized that they did not know how to put the words in order,

how to connect their ideas they had and also their choice of words was not appropriate.

When they were taking notes or writing in their notebooks, they thought in Spanish and

then they had to look for the words in a dictionary. This caused loss of confidence; and

interruptions during participants' productions.

In the interviews participants confirmed what I had thought about their lack of

vocabulary as they stated that it caused their mental blocks, not only when writing but also

when speaking.

"A veces también la falta de vocabulario AV: de acuerdo al tema, por que a veces

no conocemos de pronto mucho vocabulario de lo que vamos a ver, y nos quedamos ahí

trancados."

Language transfer was another internal factor affecting participants' oral and written

productions. During one classroom observation, I realized that some participants were

sometimes disturbed when presenting oral reports. They sometimes spoke in English and

suddenly they began explaining in Spanish or even in French. Language transfer made them

lose control of their productions, and their concentration.

In addition, while being interviewed, two participants explained that it was difficult

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for them to continue orally producing an idea when they transferred the languages they were learning. First, because it interrupted their production process and second because it made them lose concentration.

"Pero y la confusión también de los idiomas, por que a veces uno cuando esta escribiendo en inglés de pronto mete una palabrita en francés y también se puede atrancar el proceso. Es por esa parte, afectando esa parte; los dos idiomas."

The language transfer might be interpreted as a factor that affects the student's oral and written productions, and also it can be related to the participants' lack of vocabulary and knowledge. When observing them I understood that participants doubted themselves when they knew little about the topic.

With regards to external factors, I found that teacher's methodology and time allocation were the most prevailing factors.

During the interviews participants stated that teachers' methodology was another factor that impacted upon their language production. When considering the teachers' role, one of the participants declared that they were part of their foreign languages learning, and they stated that the problem might start when teachers teach inappropriately:

"Los profesores no explican el tema…así bien, bien explicado sino de así Como de paso. Entonces a uno le quedan dudas de eso, que no entiende.".

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Another participant clarified that the quantity and the quality of knowledge depended on the way teachers taught, she specified that it was a fruitful task if they practiced.

"El problema radica en que no hemos tenido buenas bases ¿Si?, o sea yo… Pues yo no me puedo quejar en cuanto en algunos semestres, pero si siento que en alguno que otro semestre no… Vi lo que tenía que ver, no obtuve los conocimientos que tenia que obtener. Aunque no culpo del todo al profesor, pero si o sea, por que si también es cuestión de uno auto regularse."

In the interviews, participants clarified the importance of the teachers' methodology in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. For them, teachers and their methodologies were very important because they were going to connect them with the real use of the language. Participants could not advance appropriately with gaps in their learning process, which is one reason why they had doubts.

Finally, time allocation was another factor that negatively influenced participants' productions. In one of the observations I carried out, one of the students stated that he did not develop his homework because he did not have time; in this instance he was not able to participate in the class.

I also saw this during the interviews when two of the participants declared that it influenced their productions in a negative manner, especially when the allotted time was

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not enough. They stated that the process of writing demanded time, not only to write, but also to think, read and investigate. They confirmed that problems emerged when they could not do it because time was over.

"Si, si, si, el tiempo. Más que todo el tiempo. Uno se siente presionado por que ya es. Siempre esa es la ultima parte del parcial, y uno ósea tiene que escribir mas o menos un escrito…bien estructurado y por el tiempo uno escribe a la carrera y a veces eso es un factor que también afecta, al escribir mal."

The same situation occurred when participants did not have the possibility to practice because they had to dedicate time to other subjects. Because of this, it is convenient to state that the internal and external factors found through the observations and the interviews were all related to each other. In this case the lack of time was a factor causing participants' unwillingness to use the target language, and this unwillingness led to lack of knowledge.

"Entonces pues ese es el problema y es que últimamente… estamos trabajando mucho, si, entonces es como mucho trabajo por todos lados entonces uno queda como ya el tiempo no tiene nada mas que hacer, entonces, ese, ese seria la, la, la parte que yo diría que no le queda a uno tiempo, como para practicar."

According to the information provided by participants, and the observations carried out, it was confirmed that the more time dedicated to practice, the better the overall quality

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of the productions presented. Thus, time became an effect especially when it was not enough and this factor caused frustration.

To conclude, it is relevant to state that six factors (internal and external) were considered as factors causing difficulties to productive skills among foreign languages students. Two of them were identified as the most relevant factors affecting (Unwillingness to use the target language and the teachers' methodology), and four of them were generally seen as causing a certain degree of difficulty (Lack of knowledge, insecurity, language transfer and time allocation.) As a consequence, inappropriate productions, obstructions, and frustration emerged.

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