Enhancing Oral Interaction in English as a Foreign Language through Task-Based Learning Activities

Mejorar la interacción oral en inglés como lengua extranjera a través de actividades basadas en tareas de aprendizaje

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Abstract

New processes of task-based learning (TBL) activities were implemented in a class of 35 eighth-grade students of English as a foreign language at a public school in Planeta Rica, Córdoba, Colombia. The activities were based on information about students' interest and own experiences, and research results from this project suggest this helped encourage an improved quality of oral interaction. The provision of goal-oriented input additionally facilitated the oral interaction process, as students could recall previously rehearsed activities as needed when practicing oral production of their ideas and experiences in English. The researchers conclude that task-based activities helped the students comprehend and manipulate information, as well as interact meaningfully and spontaneously.

Key Words: task-based learning, activities, oral interaction, authenticity, action research.

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es describir el proceso y mostrar los resultados de un estudio realizado a 35 estudiantes de Inglés de una clase de octavo grado en una escuela pública en Planeta Rica Córdoba, los cuales participaron en la ejecución de actividades basadas en tareas de aprendizaje para mejorar su capacidad de interacción oral en Inglés. Los resultados mostraron que los estudiantes desarrollaron una mayor calidad de la interacción oral debido a que las actividades llevadas a cabo eran reales, y contenían información sobre sus propias experiencias y temas de sus intereses. Además, se constató que el hecho de ofrecer a los estudiantes un "input" o lenguaje de entrada con un objetivo final facilito el proceso, teniendo en cuenta que los estudiantes tenían la oportunidad de recordar las actividades ensayadas cuando las necesitaban al momento de producir sus ideas y experiencias en Inglés en forma oral. Por último se puede decir que a través de actividades basadas en tareas de aprendizaje los estudiantes pueden comprender y manipular la información, y posteriormente interactuar de manera significativa y espontánea.

Palabras Claves: tareas de aprendizaje; actividades; interacción oral; autenticidad, investigación-acción.

Introduction

In learning a foreign language, oral interaction is one of the most difficult competences to develop. Indeed, oral interaction skills are often neglected in classroom environments because their success depends on a large number of teaching and learning factors. When teaching language, many teachers focus mainly on verbal or communicative interaction without distinguishing related nonverbal interaction. This leads to a situation in which teachers give insufficient attention to not only students' elicited performance in early stages of the language learning process but also to the quality of the comprehensible input with which they are provided (Fernandez, 2004). However, the results of our research show how strategies using task-based learning (TBL) activities can encourage learners to express their ideas spontaneously and improve their quality of oral interaction.

This project was based on action research methods, with different steps that allowed the researchers to gather information, explore initial findings, identify and apply solutions, report the results, and draw specific conclusions. Critically, the task-based activities used in this study were designed taking into account not only the students' linguistic needs, but their likes and preferences. Accordingly, these activities all used authentic information from the students' own experiences with the intention of fostering student motivation towards increased oral interaction. The results confirm not only the value of task-based strategies for enhancing oral interaction, but also allow us to identify significant improvements in terms of the type of oral interaction produced, as well as authenticity and positive learner attitudes.

Literature review

Interaction

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2004) describes interaction as follows:

> In *interaction* at least two individuals participate in an oral and/or written exchange in which production and reception alternate and may in fact overlap in oral communication. Not only may two interlocutors be speaking and yet listening to each other simultaneously. Even where turn-taking is strictly respected, the listener is generally already forecasting the remainder of the speaker's message and preparing a response. Learning to interact thus involves more than learning to receive and to produce utterances. (p. 14)

The IRF exchange

Arguably, the most prevalent model of classroom discourse is the teaching cycle or IRF (Initiation, Response, Feedback) exchange model. As described by Van Lier (1996), this model consists of the teacher initiating talk (almost always via a question), the pupil responding, and the teacher evaluating the response (i.e. providing feedback judgment). This practical structural sequence has made the IRF model one of the types of classroom interaction; it is typically used for teacher-student interaction, and has been characterized as a "closed, rather than an open, discourse format" (Van Lier, 1996, p. 152) due to the fact that it limits the learners' participation to one turn, hemming it in between the eliciting turn (the first turn) and the evaluative turn (the third turn).

Contingent interaction

The contingent example of utterance appears in classroom interactions when the language used manifests itself by its "new-ness or known-ness", after which it is possible to make connections to context, thoughts, and intentions. In other words, the learner might be able to act communicatively in any interactive situation while simultaneously being resourceful with the language needed to give a response or provide a solution (Van Lier, 1996).

Task-based learning (TBL) activities

The present study focuses on task-based learning (TBL) activities as the medium to promote oral interaction. Willis (1996) describes tasks as "activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" (p. 28). Additionally asserting that, for language learners to attain the objectives of a TBL task successfully, the task itself should have certain characteristics. Firstly, the task should provide an appropriate level of complexity and difficulty. Secondly, the task's primary goal should reflect what learners need to do in real-life situations in the workplace (e.g. exchanging information, giving instructions, or presenting an oral report). Moreover, tasks must be based on authentic materials obtained from written or oral texts that have not been adapted to simplify their level of difficulty. Willis also recommends that tasks include a particular feature of language form for students to use in conveying meaning during the task (e.g., use of the passive voice, the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives, or the conditional sentences).

Communicative TBL activities should also have clear outcomes in observable behavior that can be evaluated throughout the different phases of the TBL framework. Ellis (2007, p. 2) shows three principal stages when using designing task-based activities (pre-task, during-task, and post-task) which indicate how such activities develop. Willis (1998) also highlights the importance of following these phases, stating in particular that the pre-task stage gives learners exposure and a chance to recall things they know, as this stage provides communicative opportunities for speaking and writing in which students can learn from one another. Success in the pre-task stage can increase motivation for subsequent stages, as in attempting the task learners can notice gaps in their own language and, in response, can choose to listen carefully in order to hear how more fluent speakers express themselves.

Reflecting on the post-task phase, Willis (1996, p. 2) recommends asking students to present a report, oral or written, on how they carried out the task and on what they decided or discovered during the task. The teacher's role here is to act as a chairperson and to encourage the students, and Willis considers this is the natural conclusion of the task cycle. However, it is possible to go further, asking students to reflect on and evaluate their own performance of the task. After the task is completed, students can be asked to concentrate on linguistic forms, with no danger that in so doing they will subvert the "taskness" of the activity. In this way, a focus on form constitutes a valuable during-task option that may provide opportunities to review learner errors, as well as to perform addition consciousness-raising, production practice, and noticing activities.

Authenticity

Rivers (1993) defines authentic messages as those that contain information of interest to the speaker and listener. Therefore, authentic interaction involves not just expressions of one's own

ideas but the comprehension of others' ideas. One listens to others, the others respond directly and indirectly; others listen and respond. The participants work out an interpretation of meaning through this interaction.

Methodology

This study uses an action research methodology. As Burns (1999) states, the flexible and eclectic nature of action research implies that teachers can change the questions or issues guiding their research to adopt different research methods or to take their interpretation in new directions as the need arises which would not be appropriate in quantitative research.

Context

This study was carried out at Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria school in Planeta Rica, Córdoba, Colombia from April to June of 2007. The participants were 35 students from eighth grade, ranging in age from 12 to 14 years old. Their socioeconomic status is relatively low by Colombian standards, and the school does not provide what the researchers consider an appropriate environment for learning foreign languages.

Techniques and instruments

Five data collection procedures were implemented to gather the data from the whole study population: questionnaires, interviews, direct observation, student diaries, and audio/video recordings. These procedures were chosen as the most suitable means of collecting, analyzing, and evaluating the amounts and types of oral interaction demonstrated during English classes, as well as the students' attitudes towards the activities being performed in class. The chosen procedures also provided information on the role of the activities implemented and the students' achievements in oral interaction. In particular, the questionnaires gathered information about students' preferences and current situation before the application of the new TBL strategy and, afterwards, were used to collect data on the students' feelings and the quality and amount of their interaction. Interviews provided data about teacher perceptions about the types of interaction revealed in the classroom before the intervention stage. Direct observations allowed us to see classroom realities both before and after the application of the new TBL strategy. Audio and video recording helped capture general observations, as well as information about the type and amount of classroom interaction generated by TBL activities. Finally, student diaries helped corroborate findings from the other data collection instruments.

The data gathered in the fact-finding stage was analyzed and triangulated with respect to five categories of information about oral interaction:

1. student attitudes towards oral interaction.
2. types of student interaction.
3. teacher assumptions about oral interaction—international authenticity.
4. the amount of students' oral interaction.
5. students preferences regarding oral interaction.

Data collection during the intervention stage was planned as follows:

- Direct observation was used in the pre-task and during-task stages to collect information regarding to the first and second categories noted above (student attitudes towards oral interaction, and types of student interaction).

- Transcripts of interaction were made in the pre-task, during-task and post-task stages, capturing related to the first, second and third, categories (student attitudes towards oral interaction, types of student interaction, and international authenticity).
- Questionnaires were used in the post-task stage to obtain information related to all the categories.
- Interviews were used in the post-task stage to collect information related to the first category.
- Finally, student diaries helped corroborate information obtained in the pre- and post-task stages related to the first, second and third categories.

Results

Types of student oral interaction

Two different types of interaction occurred in the classroom:
- IRF exchange
- contingent interaction.

These were analyzed in terms of the distributions of roles and responsibilities between learners and teacher when these were engaged in communicative speech, as well as the kind of discourse that took place.

The data gathered before the application of TBL activities from the questionnaires and interviews revealed that most classroom interaction occurred in response to teacher questions. Most of the observed classes focused on practicing points of grammar; thus, classroom interaction was accordingly oriented towards checking students' understanding of the grammar. The transcripts (see the Supplemental Material) also demonstrated that the type of interaction the students were engaged in was IRF exchange (Initiation-Response-Feedback); the teacher would initiate conversation with a question, resulting in a student then answering the question, and finally the teacher giving feedback to the student based on the student's answer. The transcripts also demonstrate that the teacher spent much of the class asking students mere display questions related to the grammar point (to which the teacher already knew the answers). Another finding about types of interaction concerns the students' use of Spanish when giving answer about personal information. This suggests that interaction was merely mechanical, with little or no opportunity for students to interact or express themselves spontaneously. As an example, the transcript provided in Extract 1, Appendix A in the Supplemental Material for this study reveals a typical pattern:

1. Both the teacher and the students exchange information, but conversation is initiated by the teacher (63) (by eliciting a comparison from the student).
2. The student (64) answers (by comparing two places).
3. The teacher uses a checking question (65) that identifies an incorrect answer (meaning that the teacher's evaluation is focused on grammatical correctness rather than the meaning of the student's production).
4. Thereafter, intervention from the other students (66) shows that they understand the teacher's grammatical correction and are then able to construct a grammatically correct sentence.
5. The teacher gives positive feedback and encourages fresh participation (67).

This cycle typically repeats, with the students again answering teacher questions (68), the teacher requesting correction (69), the students then answering correctly (70), and the teacher giving positive feedback.

After exploring this type of teacher-student focused oral interaction, as well as student needs and preferences, task-based learning activities based on these factors were designed and introduced. These activities attempted to change students' type of oral interaction by serving as input to stimulate not just the production of mere prefabricated utterances but also to involve learners more deeply in variety of communicative functions. The activities were based on authentic and naturalistic sources with two main objectives:

- to enable students to manipulate and practice some specific aspects of the language
- to enable students to rehearse oral communicative skills with which they were not previously familiar.

In this phase, five pre-task activities were used to prepare the students for a final (sixth) task:

1. The first pre-task activity concerned a conversation with comprehension question to introduce the topic and practice pronunciation. Students were given a dialogue in which they had to understand the situation, listen to pronunciation and practice speaking about it.
2. The second pre-task activity focused on writing, with the purpose of reinforcing correct grammar.
3. The third pre-task activity, concerning speaking, used pair-work to promote oral interaction. The students had to ask and answer questions orally about their experience during Easter vacations.
4. The fourth pre-task activity used a reading to provide authentic input and practice vocabulary. Students were asked to read two authentic texts: one taken from the Internet (about events at Easter time), and the other (named "Easter in Cordoba") narrated by the students and their parents in a homework assignment. Throughout this pre-task activity, the teacher encouraged students to ask questions of a partner, instead of the teacher, to promote student-student interaction.
5. The fifth pre-task activity used group-work to preparing learners for the final task; this activity effectively simulated the final (sixth) task.
6. In the sixth task, the final product, the students exchanged discussions about their past experiences with each other. The goal was to promote spontaneous oral conversation by exchanging authentic information, applying contingency strategies, solving problems, and making decisions. This final activity was called "Who had the best Easter time?". This was a problem solving, communicative activity that consisted of three repetitions:
   i. Firstly, the class was organized in groups of three, with each group given a particular information exchange role responsibility regarding the experience they had during the Easter vacations. One student in each group was in charge of asking questions about food, another about places visited, and the other about the actions they experienced over Easter week.
   ii. Secondly, each group had to discuss and then decide on a winner.
   iii. Thirdly, each group shared their results with the whole class, explaining the reasons for their decision

A similar activity had been performed in the class previously, but it had been presented as a semi-guided modeling activity in which the students wrote their questions and answers in their

notebooks so as to become familiar with the activity. This time, however, the teacher asked them to be as spontaneous as possible, even though they were permitted to take notes in a chart as an aid to memory when making their final decisions. Thus, teacher talking-time was reduced, and a wider variety of student utterances was presented.

Accordingly, this type of interaction was categorized as contingency interaction, which is characterized by "making any help given conditional to students' understandings of previous levels of instruction" (Wood 1988). This helps students link their prior knowledge to new input in order to help solve any communication problems that may arise. Another characteristic of contingent interaction is that speakers do not take a certain direction in their speech, nor is there a limit on participation limit; rather, this type of interaction depends on the contributions from listeners in each talk turn. This category shows how students negotiated meaning when interacting and how this permitted them to take advantage of communicative TBL activities to express what they wanted to say spontaneously.

As an example, the transcript provided in Extract 2, Appendix A in the Supplemental Material for this study reveals a typical pattern:

- There are clear examples of negotiation of meaning where students and teacher focused their attention on message, and not in terms of correctness but in terms of understanding. For example, in line 25 of Extract 2, because the student's answer is unclear, the teacher restates it correctly, not with the intention of correction but rather to provide a clearer model for the rest of the class.
- Extract 2 also reveals moments in which the teacher, together with the students, used contingent elements to convey meaning. For example, in line 20, the student experiencing a problem asks for assistance from another student, thereby seeking and finding an appropriate strategy to solve the problem.
- Also in the exchange from line 21, the student supplements his speech with gestures to enhance understanding and communication. When it seems that the participation did not answer the question, the teacher provides assistance (line 22).

There were also other examples where students resorted to Spanish as an aid to expressing their ideas; for example, in this exchange:

Sx: (laughs) *Hay monto hicotea. No entendiste.*
Sx: *Otra* question, teacher – question!!! He eat *mongomongo*?

Here, it can be observed that the student uses a familiar Spanish word as a contingent element to connect a new idea. Students' interventions were totally different from the extract N°1. This time, the teacher and students assumed different roles; the teacher was not the only one who initiated conversation, and instead there was an equal distribution of duties in which both students and teachers had the same power or right in the conversation. As an example, the transcript provided in Extract 3, Appendix A in the Supplemental Material for this study reveals a typical pattern:

- Participations from the teacher is intended to encourage the students or to start or continue the conversation.
- The teacher's role is to serve as a contingent element, helping students solve a problem presented when producing their ideas. However, in (16), it seems that the teacher does not make good use of the question the student asks; the teacher could continue with the conversation and make it more challenging, but perhaps was distracted. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable and positive change in contrast with the types of interaction observed before the application of the new TBL strategies.

- Students' roles have changed; they now have the freedom to say what they want, and they can use any strategy or known element to help them communicate something new: body language, single words, non-structured sentences or requests for help from the teacher or classmates. For example, in turn 11, it can be seen that the student asks the teacher for help using a familiar Spanish word ("How can I say *gaseosa*?"), while in turn 14 the student's sentence is not grammatically correct but the teacher understands what the student is trying to communicate.

Interactional authenticity

Due to personal contact with the students and the observations, it was possible to determine that students genuinely produced authentic messages, as they were not only involved in expressing their own ideas but also in comprehending those of others. Students were also engaged in listening to others, responding directly or indirectly, and working out the interpretation of meaning through both verbal and non-verbal contexts. As an example, the transcript provided in Extract 4, Appendix A in the Supplemental Material for this study reveals a typical pattern:

- Students use mechanized expressions they had practiced in previous activities, but in some cases increased authenticity can be noticed. For example, in turn 4, the student is able to change from the role of the interrogated to that of the interrogator; the student does so in Spanish, but the change in interaction and negotiation style is noticeable and, in our estimation, significant.
- In (12), the student is able to ask for help to overcome the difficulty being face and finally is able to express the desired idea. And then in line 16, after answering the question, the student is able to turn around and ask a question, also then adding a comment about the question.

Accordingly, our research finds that the application of task-based learning activities successfully increases participation by the study's student population in authentic oral interaction. Moreover, the content-based nature of the material seems to aid students in achieving facility with language use, as their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages. We consider this finding to be of special significance, as it offers important insights that augment the data gathered and analyzed in order to answer the original research questions.

Discussion

According to Fernandez (2004), language teachers typically center their attention on providing explanations while the students remain in silence. She also notes that, during a language class, many teachers feel they spend a considerable amount of time doing the talking and encouraging the students to participate, rather than listening to students and helping them to cope with their weaknesses. This implies a continuing need to be more conscious of the necessity of using a variety of different teaching methodologies, techniques, and activities to promote students' active participation in the classroom.

The results of this study concerning the use of activities that are not just task-based, but that specifically incorporate authentic and personally relevant content-based materials, offer strong support for implementation of strategies including such activities in order to enhance oral interaction in language classrooms. Moreover, such activities which involve the comprehension of, manipulation of, rehearsal of, and exposure to combinations of the "known" and the "new" are particularly helpful in terms of encouraging meaningful and authentic oral communication.

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Biodata

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