Task-Supported-Teaching to Promote EFL Oral Fluency[1]

Enseñanza Asistida por Tareas para Promover la Conversación en Inglés

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Abstract

This paper presents a study that looked into the structuring of tasks that may foster oral fluency in an intensive eight-week course with 25 young adult and adult learners of English as a foreign language in a format of tutoring sessions for conversation. The action research involved two teachers and a research advisor, coauthors of this paper. Researchers identified two drawbacks: learners claimed that instruction was not helpful for them to use English outside the classroom, and that they had difficulty in retaining information in long-term memory. With surveys, interviews, observations and videos, the research team gathered data on students' progress, goals, performance and beliefs. The pedagogical intervention with *Task-Supported Teaching* (TST) produced these results: a) TST promoted cooperation b) the degree of participation correlated with the students' purpose for learning English, and c) TST raised awareness on the acquisition of speaking.

Keywords: *conversation club, foreign language, oral production, Task-Supported Teaching, tutoring*.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una investigación que analizó la organización de las actividades y su impacto en la producción oral en inglés en un curso intensivo de 25 jóvenes y adultos en un club de conversación tipo tutoría que se desarrolló en ocho semanas. Esta investigación-acción fue desarrollada por los coautores de este artículo: dos docentes y un tutor de investigación. Las dos problemáticas identificadas fueron: primero, los estudiantes aseguraron que lo aprendido no era

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útil fuera del aula de inglés, y además tenían dificultad para retener lo aprendido en la memoria a largo plazo. Mediante encuestas, entrevistas, observaciones y videos se recogieron datos del desempeño de los estudiantes, sus metas y sus creencias. La intervención pedagógica consistió en la metodología de la Enseñanza Asistida por Tareas y se evidenció un incremento de la participación de los estudiantes cuando las tareas les permitieron el uso de diversas habilidades, la utilización del conocimiento previo, y cuando la gramática y el léxico se relacionaron con su entorno. Los resultados de la intervención pedagógica con la Enseñanza Asistida por Tareas indicaron que: a) se promovió la cooperación b) el grado de participación se incrementó cuando lo aprendido se relacionaba con su contexto inmediato, sus metas de aprendizaje, y c) se creó conciencia en relación al proceso de producción oral en inglés.

Palabras claves: aprendizaje de idiomas, club de conversación, Enseñanza Asistida por Tareas, producción oral, tutorías.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta uma pesquisa que analisou a organização das atividades e o seu impacto na produção oral em inglês, em um curso intensivo de 25 jovens e adultos, em um clube de conversação tipo tutoria que foi desenvolvido em oito semanas. Esta pesquisa-ação foi desenvolvida pelos coautores deste artigo: dois docentes e um tutor de pesquisa. As duas problemáticas identificadas foram: primeiro, os estudantes asseguraram que o aprendido não era útil fora da aula de inglês e, além disso, eles tinham dificuldade para reter o aprendido na memória ao longo prazo. Mediante enquetes, entrevistas, observações e vídeos se coletaram dados do desempenho dos estudantes, as suas metas e suas crenças. A intervenção pedagógica consistiu na metodologia do Ensino Assistido por Tarefas e evidenciou-se um incremento da participação dos estudantes quando as tarefas lhes permitiu o uso de diversas habilidades, a utilização do conhecimento prévio, e quando a gramática e o léxico se relacionaram com o seu entorno. Os resultados da intervenção pedagógica com o Ensino Assistido por Tarefas indicaram que: a) promoveu-se a cooperação b) o grau de participação incrementou-se quando o aprendido tinha relação com o seu contexto imediato, as suas metas de aprendizagem, e c) criou-se consciência em relação com o processo de produção oral em inglês.

Palavras chaves: aprendizagem de idiomas, clube de conversação, Ensino Assistido por Tarefas, produção oral, tutorias.

Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) can have particular goals and approaches, which teachers and students should discuss in advance. This study encountered two drawbacks in the conversational club of 25 young adult and adult EFL learners. Club participants claimed that instruction did not help them to use English outside the classroom, and that they had difficulty in retaining information in long-term memory. The circumstances and the students' difficulties became the motivation to test if Task-Supported Teaching promoted speaking.

The academy opened in 2002, and it specializes on the teaching of English and French serving over 1.000 students in three cities of Colombia. The situation of the conversation club was similar to the one Fergusson (2018) describes:

> "*There is no right way to teach such classes, there is no textbook to guide lessons and no structure to follow. The students are an incredibly mixed bunch, different ages, and attending the conversation course for a variety of reasons*". (p.1).

On the other hand, gaining awareness of language acquisition, and consulting the learners' needs and interests is in line with meaningful learning (Ausubel's, 1978). Students can retain the new knowledge in the long-term memory, retrieve it and apply it to solve a new problem when it is memorable. The diagnosis, the teachers' experience, and the literature review on *Task - Supported Teaching* and *oral production* were the variables to explore and analyze the problem. The research team assumed that the cognitive tasks proposed would help store the new knowledge in long-term memory and use the new knowledge to speak in other contexts. The inquiry revolved around the question: How may Task-Supported Teaching promote oral fluency?

Task - Supported Teaching (TST)

Swan (2005) considers that TST constitutes an approach, which links Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and Task-Based Instruction (TBI) in a way that learners can be conscious of their process, and practice the knowledge gained adding an aspect of metacognition. TST contributes to systematic EFL instruction, especially when time is limited and out-of-class exposure unavailable. For Swan (2005), in TST the teacher is a proactive resource that negotiates the syllabus with learners for bringing motivation. TST offers learners a more meaningful

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engagement and a more negotiated syllabus than CLT and TBI when conducted in three phases: *planning, acting and reflection*. Shafipoor and Latif (2015) conducted a study on the efficiency of TST; the results signaled that TST was superior to TBI for EFL reading.

Furthermore, Prabhu, (1987) defines a task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (p.10). Thus, the tasks in the pedagogical intervention focused on meaning rather than on linguistic structure.

Oral Production

Oral production is the process in which learners express, with fluency and accuracy, their thoughts and ideas. Folse (2006) expounds that oral production presents issues and myths, which teachers and students have to resolve. Bueno, Madrid and McLaren (2006) also assure that oral production is the most difficult due to the fear of mispronouncing, or of being unable to express their ideas. The research team realized that the 25 participants held issues and myths on speaking such as that it had to be free of pause or hesitations, and that speaking resulted from repeating.

At the language academy, the syllabus for grammar, listening, reading and writing had a clear scope and sequence while the one for speaking did not. This may be attributed to teachers' beliefs and practices that convince them that oral tests and exercises in a class are the most challenging to create, administer and score, as Chuang (2009) claims.

Participants claimed that they wanted to use the FL not only for studying, but also for their everyday life. Then we specified the features of spoken language as put forward by Long and Robinson (1998): Focus on Meanings requires the speakers of all the ages use the language not as an object of studying, but as a tool that allow them to communicate. (Cited by Saeidy, Zaferanieh & Shatery, 2012, p. 2).

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The research team revised the literature on tutoring since this was not a teacher-centered class, but rather a guide of the students' learning. Hayes (2012) points out tutoring as an appropriate way to follow up on classes because it allows students to feel comfortable asking and resolving doubts, reducing students' insecurities and making mistakes. Accordingly, the tutoring sessions were designed for supporting meaningful learning, collaboration and self-confidence to stimulate speaking.

Method

Research Design

The research designed had three stages of inquiry. In the diagnostic stage, tutees responded a survey on their perceptions regarding their EFL process. This instrument was essential to identify students' lacks and necessities to be addressed with a TST curriculum. As Hutchinson & Waters (1987) state, the purpose of needs analysis is to find out the language competence these learners need developing, and help determine if the existing curricula meet their needs.

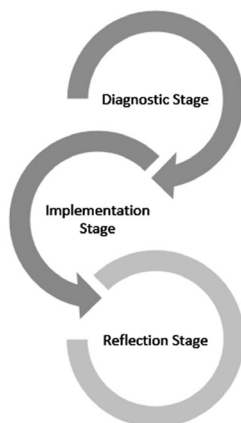Figure 1 represents the stages followed.

Figure 1. Research Stages

The diagnosis indicated that classes were not realistic enough, and were not helpful for solving real-life problems. The interviews of the diagnostic stage (Appendix 1) revealed that learners estimated that regular classes did not help them much outside classroom. They felt they needed to go over the structures and vocabulary acquired before they could actually use it. This study followed Kvale's (1996) suggestion for interviewing in which both open and close questions appear.

In the implementation stage, the curriculum was meant to meet needs and preferences informed by the data collected. EFL became an instrument of communication and a vehicle to expand not only their

professional and academic lives but also their knowledge of the world.

In the reflection stage, 25 participants took and interview in video (Appendix 2). They assessed the conversational club learning goals and methodology positively especially the fact that the tutors were in contact with them for over 100 hours.

Besides, the research team examined the outcomes in several ways. Observation formats captured the learners' progress supported by video recordings and tallies. A tally sheet, which for Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun (1993) is a "*device used by researchers to report the frequency of student behaviors, activities, or remarks*" (p. 17) helped recognize pronunciation, fluency and vocabulary as well as shyness or lack of confidence. Folse (2006) says fluency refers to the ability to produce an amount of language in a task including vocabulary taking into account students' EFL proficiency level. Table 1 compares the tallies of three sessions in which participation increases for every group and sub group.

Table 1. Tallies of the First Three Sessions

Group	Tally marks	Frequency		Group	Tally marks	Frequency
A	I	1		D	₦₦ II	7
B	II	2		E	₦₦ I	6
C	II	2				13/17
1ST SESSION		5/8				

Group	Tally marks	Frequency		Group	Tally marks	Frequency
A	II	2		D	₦₦ III	8
B	II	2		E	II₦ III	8
C	III	3				16/17
2ND SESSION		7/8				

Group	Tally marks	Frequency		Group	Tally marks	Frequency
A	II	2		D	₦₦ II	7
B	III	3		E	₦₦ IIII	9
C	III	3				16/17
3RD SESSION		8/10				

Frequency of participation in Table 1 derived from the analysis of tallies; each line represents the number of participations and at the end the total in relation to the number of individuals. For example, in the first session, five members of groups A, B and C participated. To analyze tallies, for example, we divided the tally marks in groups of five depending on the number of participants and their involvement.

Table 2 presents a snapshot of the participation of Group E. The letters P, D, O* characterized the participation of nine students. P means that students took part and tried to do their best. D means participation with difficulties to make themselves understood, and O* means absence of participation.

Table 2. Participation Format, Second Intervention. Group E

Student	Pre-Task	Task	Post-Task
1	O*	D	O*
2	P	P	P
3	P	P	P
4	D	P	P
5	P	P	P
6	P	P	P
7	P	P	P
8	O*	O*	O*
9	P	P	P
P Participated D Participated with Difficulty O* Did not participate			

In the reflection stage, data from classroom observation formats, participation tallies and video were compared to assess the progress learners made.

Pedagogical Intervention

The academy students attend a university or have full time jobs: Their ages range between 15and 40 years old and they take English as a requirement to graduate, for travelling or for job promotion. The 100-minute classes for groups of six students balance listening, speaking, reading and writing. After 12 hours of instruction, learners attend a conversation club weekly, which enrolls students from A1 to B2 levels (Council of Europe, 2018). The goal of the conversation club took the form of tutoring for the promotion of speaking. The study selected the five groups the authors were in charge of. Group A had two students 2, Group B: three, Group C: three, Group D: eight and Group E: nine. The first three groups (A, B, C) had members between 15 - 25 years, and the last two (D, E) between 25 and 40.

Under TST, students suggested topics, listed in Table 3, and the research team designed the tasks. For instance, the first topic "My life is a roller coaster" encouraged participation. It allowed sketching a picture of their current competence, and outlining an action plan for ensuing meetings. Students wrote a composition about what they considered difficult about EFL. They shared this information and lessons addressed their difficulties.

Table 3. List of Conversation Club Topics

1   My Life is a Roller Coaster
2   Getting acquainted
3   My job interview
4   How to be successful in life
5   Movie forum
6   Sharing personal experiences
7   Talking about my life
8   I am a dreamer

Tasks implemented for motivation and comprehension served as a basis to design a goal-oriented syllabus (Richards, 2013). Additionally, topics were germane to the needs and goals identified and they were retaken. For instance, topic No. 6 *Sharing personal experiences* connected with topic No. 1 *My Life is a Roller Coaster*. The level of difficulty of tasks increased. The assessment after each topic determined progress in task completion and in communication. The activation of prior knowledge aimed at promoting participation.

Findings

TST offered opportunities of creating meaningful learning and of promoting oral production so that students would recall, retrieve and apply information stored in long-term memory (Ausubel, 1978, Castillo, 2014). The data indicates that TST was instrumental in the students' progress and in their development of positive beliefs and awareness of what speaking entails. The pedagogical intervention revealed that: a) TST promoted cooperation, b) the degree of participation related to the students' purpose for learning, and c) TST raised their awareness on the acquisition of speaking. Table 1 presents groups A,B and C on the left, which had relatively lower participation than groups D and E, and that

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has to do with the purpose for learning English that was clear for the adults that conformed groups D and E.

Finding No 1. TST promoted cooperation

Observations, interviews, video recordings, observation tallies as well as the survey, aided the identification of traits of cooperation. Data revealed high cooperation among learners independent of their EFL proficiency levels. The commitment to achieve the goals proposed was evident; the peer support and feedback contributed to acquisition. As Moeller and Catalano (2015) claim learning another language allows people to communicate and increase their participation in real-life situations.

As discussed above and displayed in Figure 2, group membership varied from one intervention to the next. Groups A, B, C had members between 15 - 25 years and D, and E 25– 40 years old participants.
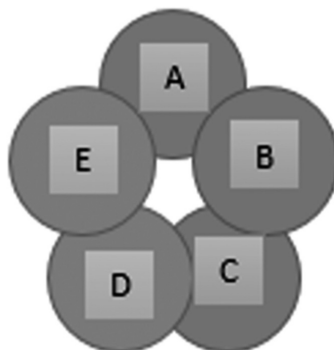

Figure 2. Group Arrangement

Beginners participated little in individual work, but their participation increased in pairs or teamwork. In the first two classes, groups A and B's participation was low since the tutees were beginners. In contrast, cooperation increased in the third session in Group C because there were mixed-ability students in which the most proficient assisted the less proficient. Participants claimed that with their classmates' help, goals were easier to accomplish. They agreed that cooperation played a central role since they felt more confident.

One more piece of data reinforces cooperation. Table 4 shows that learnes ranked higher two cooperative activities, games and

conversations, over others. According to the initial interview, which appears in Appendix 1, cooperation prevailed in the application of TST and Participants evaluated it positively.

Table 4. Learner's Assessment of Task Usefulness
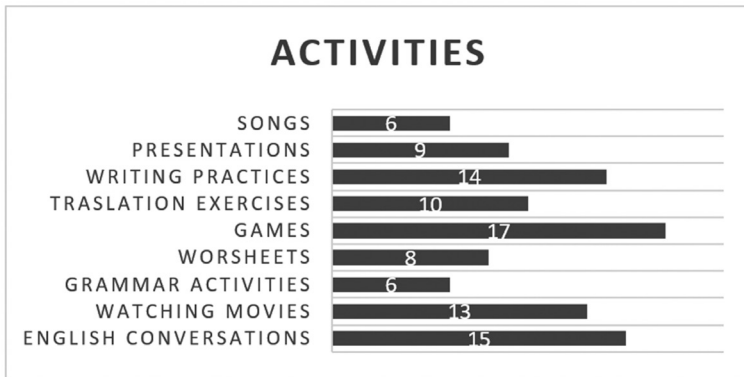
Finding No 2. Degree of participation correlated with their learning purpose

In order to establish which others factors contributed to oral fluency development, we scrutinized the data and found that individuals' goals played a part. Age, clarity of goals, and prior experience with English enhanced or hindered spoken interaction. Data in Tables 5 and 6 suggest that, in general, younger learners participated less. Groups A, B and C that had members between 15 and 25 years old, scored lower in participation than the two other groups that had older members (25-40 years old).

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Table 5. Participation in the Last Four Sessions

Group	Tally marks	Frequency	Group	Tally marks	Frequency
A	I	1	D	ɴɴ II	7
B	II	2	E	ɴɴ I	6
C	II	2			13/17
1ST SESSION		5/8			

Group	Tally marks	Frequency	Group	Tally marks	Frequency
A	II	2	D	ɴɴ III	8
B	II	2	E	IIɴɴIII	8
C	III	3			16/17
2ND SESSION		7/8			

Group	Tally marks	Frequency	Group	Tally marks	Frequency
A	II	2	D	ɴɴII	7
B	III	3	E	ɴɴ IIII	9
C	III	3			16/17
3RD SESSION		8/10			

Group	Tally marks	Frequency	Group	Tally marks	Frequency
A	I	1	D	IIɴɴIII	8
B	II	2	E	Iɴɴ IIII	9
C	I	1			17/17
4TH SESSION		4/8			

Class observations and interviews indicated that lack of confidence and fear of the classmates' comments affected participation negatively. After implementing TST, participation grew given that tutees could use the expressions taught to conduct discussions. For example, in an interview after the second session, one of the beginners, said about TST: "*When the teacher asks me something that I don't understand, I feel nervous and all the information that I have, goes out. For that reason, I don't like to talk.*" After four other meetings, the same participant claimed that on pre-task, the vocabulary presented helped her feel more comfortable than before since the knowledge was recent.

On the other hand, the age factor seemed related to the presence or absence of a sense of purpose. For teenagers and university students, English was only a requirement. For instance, some tutees responded:

"*Teacher, I really … don't know … I think my parents… want I learn English.*" Others said:

- "*I only study English because … the university … tell me to … do it, but I … don't like.*"

-*"For me ... I want to ... learn another language but ... not English because it is so difficult."*

Those who held a job expressed a purpose of professional promotion and advancement with English. One declared, "*I don't like ... English but it is ... important for work in the future.*"

Furthermore, learners who had difficulties at the beginning, tried to overcome them and they progressed. In most cases, participants improved and achieved lesson goals. Table 6 shows a significant improvement in the groups in terms of participation; they found TST interesting and they claimed mistakes were not an obstacle to express them.

Table 6. Participation in the Last Four Sessions

Group	Tally marks	Frequency		Group	Tally marks	Frequency
A	II	2		D	IINЫII	8
B	II	2		E	INNIIII	9
C	III	3				17/17
5TH SESSION		7/8				
Group	Tally marks	Frequency		Group	Tally marks	Frequency
A	I	1		D	IINЫII	8
B	III	3		E	INNIIII	9
C	II	2				17/17
6TH SESSION		6/8				
Group	Tally marks	Frequency		Group	Tally marks	Frequency
A	II	2		D	IINЫII	8
B	II	2		E	INNIIII	9
C	II	2				17/17
7TH SESSION		6/6				
Group	Tally marks	Frequency		Group	Tally marks	Frequency
A	II	2		D	IINЫII	8
B	III	3		E	INNIIII	9
C	II	2				17/17
8TH SESSION		7/8				

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In the analysis of the survey and of the interview applied at the beginning of the study, we identified that they were anxious about EFL due to their unsatisfactory previous experiences (see table 7).

Table 7. Participants' Perception of Previous Instruction in English
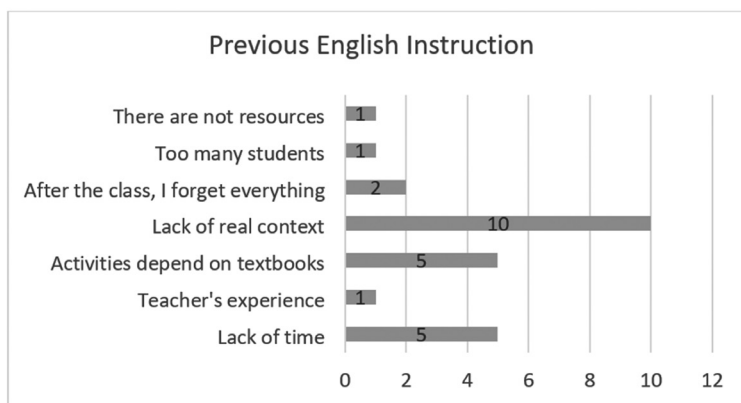
Most claimed that the lack of context for practicing accounted for the lack of purpose. They wanted to be able to understand the English-speaking environment of pop music, television, cinema and the Internet that surrounds them. Then, they argued that the lack of time reduced their study time and the opportunities to practice outside the academy. They looked forward to studying a variety of English and of topics that add significance to their acquisition. They also appreciated the suggestions, given in the sessions, to develop spoken interaction.

Finding No. 3. TST raised awareness on the acquisition of speaking

The last finding dealt with awareness of language acquisition and the growing interest in speaking. Observations and videos of the last meeting, in which the level of accuracy was compared to the diagnosis, learners showed enthusiasm in attending speaking sessions since the topics in the syllabus encouraged free expression following a guided process with a scaffolding that contributed to the achievement of the goal. On the other hand, Table 8 shows how the 25 participants assessed their skills. Oral and written fluency increased significantly. On the other hand, students considered vocabulary as a key point for listening and reading because it eases comprehension. students said
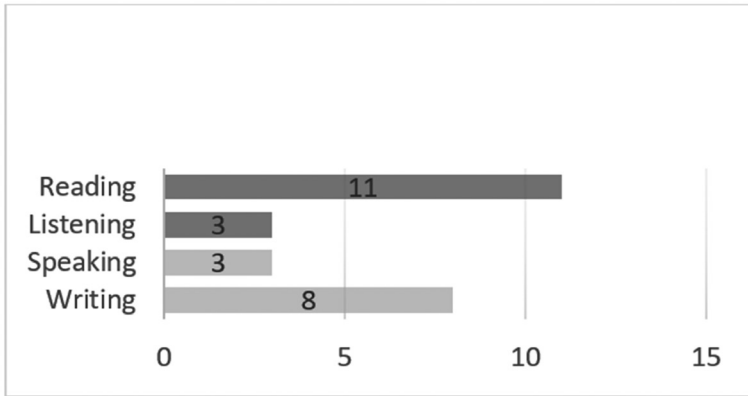
-"*Is easier to identify if you have read or listened [to] it*".

-"*When I listen something I have read before ... [It] is easier for me to understand*"

-"*If you know the words ... You will understand better and also you will speak with more confidence.*"

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Table 8. Self-Assessment of Skills

Even though reading and listening gave them confidence, students attributed progress to grammar, good memory, vocabulary and independent work. Accordingly, the goal of the intervention became the promotion of oral fluency in meaningful and contextualized tasks that showed vocabulary and structures in use as natural as possible.

Observations demonstrated that TST promoted autonomy and they did their best to accomplish tasks and goals when these related to their personal or professional development. Students had little fluency and inadequate pronunciation, but they overcame them with TST. In the speaking club, they tried to do their best, case in point, when they did not have the vocabulary they used other words to make themselves understood or resorted to gestures or miming. The testimonies that were videotaped supported the idea that tutoring sessions helped them enhance their oral fluency:

-I think it is good because different of [from] the other class and also practice with the partners.

-You are so right. It is important for me because now I like listening, speaking. I think that this class is very important because we need to speak more to the other people maybe in class you can learn different words or different I don't know and… but in tutoring [it) is different because you need to speak all the time. You try learning different words but you feel good because you need to speak all the time.

-Comparing tutoring session, I think I speak more than in the other class. [It] is good, I like I like.

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In sum, participants agreed that the intervention was successful because they were able to make themselves understood regardless of the cognitive and affective variables. They compared regular classes with the conversation club and said that the club enabled more participation and more speaking.

Discussion

This study aimed at solving a problem of oral proficiency development, at a language academy, of 25 young and adult learners who had little contact with English in their day to day. The study informs the educational community that Task-Supported Teaching allowed participants to feel that learning to speak was manageable with a syllabus that connects them to their goals and that applies to everyday life. The study revealed that students' interests, motivation, and attitudes depended on their goals; therefore, lesson plans were adapted accordingly.

TST encouraged talk among students, independent of their level of English language proficiency. Conversational partners were assigned for the term, to get to know each other. In addition, to discuss topics conversation strategies were considered, for instance, the conversational partners used diverse strategies for introducing the topic, for asking for opinions, for advancing their own opinions, for activating the vocabulary needed, and to provide examples. The academy came to the realization that tutoring sessions required as much planning as a regular class and it supported our endeavours. The coordinator of the academy commissioned the research team to organize future conversational clubs stressing that conversation session requires preparation, clear goals and a supportive climate, among other things.

The inquiry enriched our roles as teachers. In addition, teaching activated the participants' prior knowledge and supported their EFL acquisition by proposing a flexible and situated syllabus, and by focusing on communication. Teaching demanded thoroughness, dedication and patience sustained for the planning, development and reflection stages. TST served to overcome the difficulty of meeting diverse interests, motivation, and goals.

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The limitations of the study relate to the nature of the intervention, which was devoted to speaking. Studies that integrate o listening, reading and writing under the umbrella of TST would be welcome. On the other hand, although students' responses dealt with vocabulary development, our observations did not tally this factor. However, this study hopes to inform practitioners on the suitability of TST for promoting speaking in an environment of a tutor type of conversation club.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1. Student survey to decide on the content of tasks

Objective: Identify students' experiences through their English learning process as a foreign language.

Institution…

Age: _____ . Occupation: _____

English Language proficiency level: _____

Where do you study English _____

How long have you studied English? _____

1.   Have you traveled to any place in which you need English?

     Yes _____   No _____

     Where did you travel? Was it a difficult experience?

     _____

     _____

2.   From 1 to 5 (1: Badly, 5: Excellent) _____ How do you grade the English teaching in your school? Why?

     _____

     _____

3.   Why are you studying English?

     _____

     _____

4.   Choose the statements that better describe your feelings in an English class:

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English is a language with much vocabulary.		English is an easy language to learn.
English is a difficult language understand and talk.		English is a language to learn, with many opportunities.
English is a language where pronunciation is difficult.		English is a huge problem.
To learn English is necessary time.		I have invested a lot of money and it did not work.

5. How many hours do you practice English outside the institute? _____

6. In which skill do you consider yourself stronger?

    Listening _____ Speaking _____ Reading _____ Writing _____

7. What is most important to learn in an English class for you? Number from 1 to 6 in which 1 is most important and 6 less important.

    Listening _____ Speaking _____ Readin _____

    Writing _____ Gramma _____ Vocabulary _____

8. Describe an English class that you consider accurate and appropriate to your learning.

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

9. Why do you believe you have not learned English well?

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I don't have enough time to study.		After each class I feel that I don't learn and I give it up.	
The teacher does not how to teach English.		We're a lot of students so we can't learn.	
The methodology and activities are based on a book.		We don't have enough tools to learn English.	
I cannot practice in real contexts.		Other :	

10.   Choose the activities that help you speak: Number from 1 to 6, in which 1 is most important and 6 less important.

English dialogu _____ Watch English movies _____

Grammar explanation _____ Worksheets _____

Game _____ Short tales' translation _____

Writing tests _____ Vocabulary exercise _____

Expositions _____

Thanks so much!

Appendix 2. Video interview questions for learners.

1. What were the language-spoken skills you could increase during the tutoring sessions? Why?

2. What difficulties did you have to speak in English? Why?

3. Do you consider these tutoring sessions were helpful for solving real-life problems? Why?

4. Were your classmates relevant to the tutoring sessions? Why?

5. Being with students with different levels of English, did it help you? How?

6. Have these sessions been important as a complement of the other classes that you have had in this academy? Why?

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