ORAL INTERACTION IN 9TH GRADERS AT INSTITUTO TECNICO AGROPECUARIO IN GUAVATÁ, SANTANDER[1]

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Abstract

This small scale research Project aims at exploring, understanding and analyzing how ninth grade students interact orally and the different aspects that can affect it, among them gender at a public school in Guavatá Santander. Activities such as discussions, some exercises in English and translations in English were carried out with these students and allowed them to interact with one another and develop some special behaviors. Data was collected through audiotapes, teacher journals and formats among others. The analysis of the data showed that interactional patterns depend on gender, the role of the teacher and the role of the students.

Key words: oral interaction, teacher's role, students' role.

Resumen

Este proyecto a menor escala pretende explorar, entender, y analizar cómo interactúan oralmente los estudiantes de novena grado y los diferentes aspectos que pueden afectarle, entre ellos género en un colegio público en Guavatá Santander. Actividades como discusiones, algunos ejercicios y traducciones en inglés se llevaron a cabo con ellos y les permitieron interactuar entre ellos mismos y desarrollar algunos comportamientos especiales. Los datos fueron recogidos a través de grabaciones, el diario de campo del profesor y formatos entre otros. El análisis de la información recogida mostró que las pautas interacciónales dependen del género, del papel del profesor y del papel de los estudiantes.

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INTRODUCTION

Oral interaction in EFL in high school classrooms is a topic that has called my attention because during my experience as a teacher in some schools in the rural area I have observed that it is a factor that affects the learning process of the adolescents.

According to Hall and Verplaetse (2000) interactive processes are not strictly individual or equivalent across learners and situations; language learning is a social enterprise, jointly constructed, and intrinsically linked to learner's repeated and regular participation in classroom activities. The authors state that the role of interaction in additional language learning is especially important. It is in their interactions with each other that teachers and students work together to create the intellectual and practical activities that shape both the form and the content of the target language as well as the processes and outcomes of individual development.

As the objective of this project was to look for aspects that influence the oral interaction among students of ninth grade, this article reports the findings gotten at Instituto Técnico Agropecuario at Guavatá, (Santander, Colombia).

Considering what was stated by the previous authors, I aimed at solving the following question: How are oral interactional patterns shaped in 9th graders at Instituto Técnico Agropecuario at Guavatá (Santander, Colombia).

1. RESEARCH METHOD

Context:

The school where this small scale project was carried out is a public one. It is called "Instituto Técnico Agropecuario de Guavatá" and it is the only school in the town. It is located in a rural area ten minutes from the town in the "vereda" Pavachoque. There are two groups of each level, except tenth and eleventh grade, which consist of only one group each. The school focuses on agriculture and cattle.

Participants:

This project was carried out in a 9th grade class. The group was made up of 20 students; 14 females and 6 males, aged between thirteen and sixteen. The students were observed while they were in their English classes.

The students belong to a rural area far from the school (more or less one and a half hours' walk) and they take two hours of English per week. I am the only English teacher in the town and in the school. I have been working there for two and a half years. During this time I have been in charge of teaching English to the whole school.

As the focus of the research was the analysis of oral interaction in the classroom, the students were observed when interacting in the English classes. However they can hardly communicate in English. I chose this group because they show interest in English. Furthermore, I have worked with this group for two and a half years and I know their weaknesses and their behavior, and that fact helped me to conduct my project.

Instruments:

I audio taped some of the classes and

analyzed some conversations that I guided. The students chose a topic and discussed it in a round table. The topics were about sexual education and music. I wrote a journal in which I made an analysis of each class and the students' behavior during it. I also used formats to check student's oral interactional patterns such as turn - taking and kinds of questions.

Kind of Study:

This project is qualitative because my objective is to describe the natural behavior of the students in the classroom taking into account factors that are related to the way oral interaction happens inside the classroom. I did not attempt to change anything; I tried to explain the behaviors. Taking the background and reasons why those behaviors were present into account.

According to Larsen and Freeman (1994) cited by Ramos (2006) the prototypical Qualitative methodology is an ethnographic study in which researchers do not set out to test hypotheses, but rather to observe what is present concerning their focus, and consequently, the data can vary freely during the course of observation. Seliger and Shohamy (1989) cited by Ramos (2006) also suggest that Qualitative Research aims at providing descriptions of phenomena that occur naturally without the intervention of an experiment or an artificially contrived treatment.

This small scale research is also a Case Study too, and I am in agreement with the description of this method made by Yin (1984) cited by Susan K. (1997) which defines it "as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used". Taking this definition into account I can underline that with this investigation I pretend to study the real-life context of my 9th grade students and analyze their actions in depth while they interact during my English classes.

Furthermore, I agree with Tellis, (1997) who says that case studies, on the other hand, are designed to bring out the details from the viewpoint of the participants by using multiple sources of data. In this case I use surveys, field notes and audiotapes that give me many points to solve my research question.

Another author who talks about case studies are Yin (1993) cited by Tellis (1997) has identified some specific types of case studies: Exploratory, Explanatory, and Descriptive. Explanatory case studies may be used for doing causal investigations. Descriptive cases require a descriptive theory to be developed before starting the project. In this case this research is Descriptive and the theory about oral interaction, classroom behavior, teacher and students' role among others are taken into account. These topics helped me to understand the different situations and results given during the investigation.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Oral Interaction:

Brown (2000) affirms that "interaction is an important word for language teachers. Interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication;

it is what communication is all about" I believe in this premise because through interaction we, as human beings, can improve our language and of course our communicative competence, since during interaction we are in constant contact with other people and that helps us to correct our mistakes and improve our speaking.

According to Rivers (1987) "through interaction, students can increase their language store as they listen to or read authentic linguistic material, or even the output of their fellow students in discussions, skits, joint problem-solving tasks, or dialogue journals. In interaction, students can use all they possess of the language —all they have learned or casually absorbed— in real life exchanges". In other words, this activity allows

us to shape our language, our personality. Another author that talks about interaction is Chaudron (1995), cited by Ramos (2006), who says that interaction is acting reciprocally, acting upon each other. That means that the teachers influence the class, and the group reacts in a positive or negative way to it. Here it is important to say that the teacher plays an essential role in the classroom given that he/she can change the behavior or thoughts of the learners. Different authors such as Thomas and Brown have addressed interaction from different perspectives: teacher´s talk, students 'talk or silence.

I am in agreement with Flanders' categories of description for classroom behavior which have been cited by Malamah Thomas (1987, Pag. 21):

Teacher talk
1. Accepts feeling: accepts and clarifies the feeling tone of the students in a non-threatening manner. Feelings may be positive or negative. Predicting and recalling feelings are included.
2. Praises or encourages: praises or encourages student action or behaviour. Makes jokes that release tension, but not at the expense of another individual. Nodding head or saying 'um hm?' or 'go on' are included.
3. Accepts or uses student ideas: clarifying, building, or developing ideas or suggestions by a student. As teacher brings more of his own ideas into play, shift to category five.
4. Asks questions: asking a question about content or procedure with the intent that a student may answer.
5. Lecturing: giving facts or opinions about contents or procedures; expressing his own ideas; asking rhetorical questions
6. Giving directions: directions, commands, or orders with which a student is expected to comply.
7. Criticizing or justifying authority: statements, intended to change student behaviour from non-acceptable to acceptable pattern, bawling someone out; stating why the teacher is doing what he is doing, extreme self-reference.
Pupil talk:
8. Student talk-responses: talk by students in response to teacher. Teacher initiates the contact or solicits student statement, or structure the situation. Freedom to express

own ideas is limited.
9. Student talk-initiation: talk by students which they initiate. Expressing own ideas; initiating a new topic; freedom to develop opinions and a line of thought, like asking thoughtful questions; going beyond the existing structure.
Silence
10. Silence or confusion: Pauses, short periods of silence and periods of confusion in which communication cannot be understood by the observer. Following the above description it is important to cite the foreign language interaction extension made by Moskowitz (1976) cited by Malamah Thomas, (1987). Student talk: • Specific: responding to the teacher within a specific and limited range of available or previously shaped answers. • Choral: Choral response by the whole class. • Reads Orally: A student or students read aloud to the class. • Open-ended or Student-Initiated: Responding to the teacher with students' own ideas, opinions, reactions, feelings: giving one from many possible answers which have been previously shaped but from which students must now make a selection. Initiating the participation. • Off Task: Acting fresh. Being off the subject and non-task oriented. Being disorderly. This category refers to individual students. For interaction analysis it is possible to cite the instrument of Bowers' categories of Verbal behavior in the language classroom (1980) cited by Malamah Thomas (1987) Responding: any act directly sought by the utterance of another speaker, such as answering a question. Sociating: any act not contributing directly to the teaching/learning task, but rather to the establishment or maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Organizing: any act which serves to structure the learning task or environment without contributing to the teaching/learning task itself. Directing: any act encouraging non-verbal activity as an integral part of the teaching/ learning task. Presenting: any act presenting information of direct relevance to the learning task. Evaluating: any act which rates another verbal act positively or negatively. Eliciting: any act designed to produce a verbal response from another person.

ORAL INTERACTION AND TEACHERS' ROLE:

Another important element in classroom interaction is the teacher, as he/she allows communication to take place in a good way, and he/she stimulates interaction among students. According to Brown (2000) there are various roles of the teacher (as controller, as director, as manager, as

facilitator, as resource) that I have taken into account for this project:

Teacher as Manager: here the teacher is the one who plans lessons, modules and courses, and who structures the larger, longer segments of classroom time, but who then allows each individual player to be creative within those parameters.

Teacher as Facilitator: the teacher is described as facilitating the process of learning, of making learning easier for the students: helping them to clear away roadblocks, to find shortcuts, to negotiate rough terrain. The facilitating role requires that you step away from the managerial or directive role and allow students, with his/her guidance and gentle prodding, to find their own pathways to success.

Another author that calls my attention in reference to this topic is Nobrega (2008) who says: "oral interaction tended to occur more when the pedagogic and institutional strategies were not at stake but of the contact and of spontaneous type, the ones that favor humor, affection, thus a more friendly and informal interaction between teacher and students." I agree with this notion because I consider that the space has considerable influence on the students' participation; however, the use of another language, in my case English, prevents the fluency of both girls and boys, because they feel afraid of making mistakes, thus keeping in silence, and that totally damages the interaction in the classroom.

Continuing with the previous idea, it is also pertinent to cite Consolo and Vani (2006): "the class becomes boring and,

consequently, learners turn out shy and with no motivation to share their knowledge among them." Taking this comment into account, it can be said that it is a possible reason for my students to not participate in the English classes — they do not feel motivated and for that reason they come across as shy. It is really difficult for a pupil to understand the importance of another language, when they are not in contact with it; for example, I think that my students are not interested in learning English because they are not in contact with it, they do not have the possibility of listening to English radio programs, watch English TV programs, or read English magazines or newspapers, and I consider these elements as a very important tools when you need to learn something. Unfortunately they do not have the opportunity to be in contact with the language, so how can they improve their abilities?

ORAL INTERACTION AND STUDENTS' ROLES:

According to Allwright (1984), there are three types of learners:

1. COMPLIANCE STUDENTS: their utterances are very much dependent on the teacher's management of classroom communication e.g. when they reply to the teacher's questions.

2. NAVIGATION LEARNERS: they take the initiative to overcome communication breakdowns, as in request for clarification of what has been said. This may seem as a simpler type of negotiation of meaning that can help comprehension and may contribute to language development.

3. NEGOTIATION STUDENTS: the teacher's and student's role may become less asymmetrical and interlocutors attempt to reach decision making by consensus.

I consider that this theory fits perfectly with this project because in this course I have the three types of students, and the navigation learners participate more in class than the others and this enables them to have better academic outcomes.

FINDINGS:

As it was mentioned previously, the data was collected through observation, formats to check students' oral interaction patterns and audio recordings of the classes. I analyzed the oral interaction among students of ninth grade. For that reason I used some activities such as discussions about two topics proposed by them: sexual education and music. The following table shows the question I wanted to solve and the answers provided to it.

How are oral interactional patterns shaped in 9th graders?	Gender issues
	Teacher's role Students´ role

Gender issues

Based on these activities I want to answer How oral interactional patterns are shaped in 9th graders, and I can conclude that there are gender issues such as: the girls tend to be more talkative than the boys in relation to topics that interest them. The boys are shier than girls and when they decide to participate they only make short but concrete interventions about the topic. The following is a short example of the discussion about sexual education with the students of ninth grade. We did a round table and each person could give their opinion:

"Profesora: vamos a hablar de educación sexual en general…
Carolina: hoy en día hay muchos métodos de protección y tantas niñas de 14, 15 embarazadas
Profesora: ¿a qué creen que se deba eso?

Rigoberto: a la no protección….
Shirley: ahora la gente no hace eso como antes y no tenían que preocuparse, estaban era por amor y que sin protegerse y que los hombres creen que simplemente así porque no le gusta que algunos hombres que compran eso, qué oso comprar un preservativo en alguna droguería….
Profesora: un hombre que hable…
Hablan todos los hombres: (todos dicen) no"

In this example I can see the role of the girls in the oral interaction, they do not feel afraid to express their opinions; they feel comfortable talking with their partners while the boys only listen and answer all at the same time. They feel afraid to express their opinion.

According to Godinho (2004), in secondary settings, it is the girls who more frequently initiate talk and maintain the dialogue or the

conversational flow in whole class and small-group discussions. This notion confirms finding that boys are shier than girls, maybe because the girls feel more confident and comfortable with the teacher, the class and the topic and this situation allows them to participate more in the classes.

Teacher´s role

An additional finding that we can observe is the teacher´s role; in that case the most recurrent paper is teacher as a controller, taking into account the definition of (Brown 2000) because she gives the floor or the turn to students to participate. Furthermore she makes comments that guide the discussion and the students follow her advice. I think this is possibly a mistake since the students feel restrained because of this attitude and avoid talking. As we can observe in the following example:

"Profesora: ¿a qué creen que se deba eso? …todos hablan
Rigoberto: a la no protección
Profesora: si van a hablar respeten la palabra del compañero, a la no protección, ¿a qué se refieren con eso?
Rigoberto: que cuando van, así a tener relaciones no piensan sino en el placer y no hacen lo adecuado que debe…tanto en las mujeres como el hombre protegerse de dejarlas embarazadas, o que se les prenda una enfermedad.
Profesora: Shirley
Shirley: ahorita la gente no hace eso como antes hacía que estaban era por amor y que sin protegerse y que los hombres que creen que simplemente porque así no les gusta que algunos hombres que comprar eso, qué oso comprar un preservativo en alguna

droguería es es normal comprar una persona porque protegerse de quedar embarazada.
Profesora: un hombre que hable… ¿a ustedes les da pena?
Hombres todos en coro: no
Profesora: no les da pena (empiezan a hablar todos)"

In Brown's (2000) interactive principles, there is one that is helpful in this analysis: risk taking.

Students´role

Another finding that we can observe is the students' role; in this case the more recurrent paper is the student as navigation, defined by Allwright (1984) as who take the initiative to overcome communication breakdowns, as in request for clarification of what has been said. This may be seen as a simpler type of negotiation of meaning that can help comprehension and may contribute to language development. As we can observe in the following example, where the student Juan answers quickly and does not let other students answer the teacher's questions

"• Teacher: what is the meaning of travel?
Juan: Profe, cual es la traducción de travel, fácil viajar
• Teacher: what kind of word is this?
Juan: profe una acción…un verbo, de los que hemos visto en clase
• Teacher: give more examples of verbs that are in the text please,
Juan: do-hacer, live-vivir, work-trabajar…"

Undoubtedly in activities in English the boys are more secure and participate more — they try to answer a lot. Miguel says about

his classmates' participation: "In the English classes I hear my classmates because they are not conscious of their mistakes; they simply try to participate and do not take into account if the answer is correct or not." On the contrary, the girls prefer to keep in silence most of the time; they know the answers but they are afraid to take the risk and participate because they fear to be judged by their male classmates. María comments: "I do not feel very satisfied because boys behave inadequately and they do not allow us to speak in the classroom; they believe that they are the owners of the situation."

However, when the topic is in Spanish the boys prefer to keep silence and only participate if the teacher asks them to do so; we can see it in the following example: I work with them in a reading activity, they have to describe some pictures and translate the text, they make homogeneous groups and in all the activities the majority of boys finish faster than the girls. For that reason, I can conclude that adolescents work better when they choose to work with a partner of their same sex.

One more finding is that students tend to participate more when they are sure they know the topic. Regardless of their gender, boys and girls feel more confident when they know and manage the topic that is being addressed in the classroom. For that reason, I regard as important that we teachers take this point into account, given that it can have an influence on the performance of the adolescents and obviously on their outcomes.

In the teacher journal there are the following notes: *"during the first classes the students show some fear for the activities proposed by the teacher since they are a little afraid and they do not feel secure to participate in activities overall in English. This is because they do not feel comfortable talking in another language, they are afraid to make mistakes and the classmates make fun of them. After two classes the majority of them try to participate and ask the teacher to do this kind of activities more often".*

Furthermore, the teacher journal talks about the attitude of some students who prefer to stay in silence yet when they have the answers, many times it is necessary that the teacher use the grades as a stimulus for their participation. In other words, it was necessary that teacher forced them to participate or or they would lose the subject. In this way they made the activities. Another note was with respect to the behavior of the naughty students, some of them try to avoid their participation making jokes, or concentrating on their activities such as talking with the classmates, listen to music or playing with the phone. For that reason it was necessary that the teacher call their attention and ask in a nice way that they collaborate. They participated but not with great pleasure, and that in some way damaged the activities because the teacher had interrupt the tasks while he/she talked with these students and forced them to participate.

CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Oral interaction plays an important role in the learning process of students. For that reason, I consider that we, as teachers,

should keep this point in mind when we are planning our classes as this aspect can foster or prevent a good performance of our students in the classroom.

The teacher should look for strategies that encourage balanced participation of boys and girls, given that the differences in gender could affect academic outcomes. If teachers praise more one group than another, it could damage the learning process of the adolescents and they could feel relegated by the attitude of the professor.

It is essential for teachers to use different strategies to improve the participation of the whole group in any activity. It does not matter if it is in English or Spanish because the language should not be an impediment for oral interaction in EFL classrooms. The schools are spaces for socialization and interpersonal relationships. These processes are given by means of language conversational interactions that become meaningful depending on the circumstances and setting.

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