



LEARNER-CENTERED CURRICULUM: A STEP TOWARDS ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILL IMPROVEMENT OF NON-ENGLISH TEACHERS

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Abstract

This article aims at sharing the results of a small scale research project focused on guiding non-English speaking teachers of a Colombian bilingual school to perform their tasks in English within a school environment, through the implementation of a learner-centered curriculum based on English speaking-oriented workshops. Through the implementation of this curriculum, it was seemed that the teaching, incorporation and use of some expressions of the English language, such as: greetings and farewells, common classroom expressions, commands and vocabulary, related to the specific subjects or topics those teachers teach, in addition to other aspects closely related to those topics, such as pronunciation. This project was conducted at a Colombian bilingual school with a group of 11 teachers in different subjects. Informal conversations with the teachers, interviews, questionnaires and workshops were used

Resumen

Este artículo muestra los resultados de una investigación a menor escala enfocada en guiar a profesores no bilingües de un colegio bilingüe, para desempeñar sus tareas cotidianas usando el idioma Inglés dentro del entorno escolar, a través de la implementación de un currículo centrado en el aprendiz, basado en talleres orientados en la habilidad de habla. Así, a través de la implementación de este currículo, se buscó la enseñanza, incorporación y uso de algunas expresiones del idioma Inglés, tales como: saludos y despedidas, expresiones comunes del salón de clase, comandos y vocabulario relacionado con las áreas o temas específicos que estos profesores enseñan, junto con otros aspectos íntimamente relacionados a estos temas, como lo es la pronunciación. Este estudio se realizó en un colegio bilingüe colombiano con un grupo de once profesores de distintas áreas. Para recolectar la información en este estudio de investigación acción, se emplearon

to collect the information in this action research study. Findings revealed that through the use of speaking-oriented practice in the workshops, those teachers could reflect on their own foreign language learning process. They became confident and improved their speaking skills. They had the opportunity of working and enhancing their autonomous and cooperative learning skills.

Key words: learner-centered curriculum, speaking-oriented workshops, autonomous learning, cooperative learning.

conversaciones informales con los profesores, entrevistas, y cuestionarios junto con los talleres. Los resultados mostraron que el uso de la práctica orientada en el habla, buscada a través de los talleres, permitió que los profesores pudieran reflexionar sobre su propio proceso de aprendizaje del idioma extranjero, ganaran confianza y mejoraran sus habilidades de habla. Además, ellos tuvieron oportunidad de trabajar y afianzar sus habilidades de aprendizaje autónomo y cooperativo.

Palabras clave: currículo centrado en el aprendiz, talleres orientados en la habilidad de habla, aprendizaje autónomo, aprendizaje cooperativo.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt, that becoming a teacher is difficult and hard work. What happens when a teacher is not a trained English teacher who does not have a basic command of the English language and is accepted to work in a bilingual school. It is compulsory to use a foreign language in order to contribute to the schools bilingual education program. More than likely, those teachers have the desire to learn the English language in their specific areas of study, such as; science, math, social studies, arts, music, physical education, among others. This can help them in two ways: improve their social language skills and improve their abilities in a classroom setting. In addition to these, they are able to participate in the school bilingual processes and study programs. If they were invited to take part in a bilingual process and they wanted to have better performance within their subject, it would be necessary to learn a little English.

In this specific case, those non-English speaking teachers within different subjects of the schools' curriculum have to look for contributing ways to incorporate the English language into the day to day practice within the school environment. In the school where this study took place, the expectation is that at least fifty percent of the class time would be devoted to the regular use of the English language. The atmosphere, time, materials, activities and assessment will then have a closer relationship to bilingualism with the use of this foreign language. The expectations of the bilingual school also tend to lean towards the practice of this language within the school environment, having the idea of achieving its bilingual proposal. As such, it is expected that one of the main goals to be achieved will be to guide the students to learn and communicate correctly, meaningfully and successfully through the use of that foreign language.

This study was focused on guiding non-English speaking teachers, of this bilingual school, to perform their tasks in English within the school environment and initiate their learning of English, through the implementation of a learner-centered curriculum, through and based on speaking-oriented workshops, so that they could start to interact with their students through this language.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The teachers of the bilingual school, where this research was carried out, are non-English speaking teachers who teach different subjects of the curriculum such as: science, math, social studies, arts, music, physical education, among others. Wherefore, the use of the English language is required within the classrooms. This is required to reinforce and contribute to the foreign language process of their students.

In order to work at this bilingual school, they are required to take an English exam to demonstrate their level of proficiency with the English language. The majority of the teachers demonstrated very little knowledge of the English language and the remaining teachers demonstrated basic to intermediate knowledge of the English language. This was especially true in their reading and writing skills. Thus, the idea of creating a program in which teachers could consolidate and improve on their listening and speaking skills, for using within the school environment with their students, is without a doubt an aspect to be considered. As such, the main purpose of the project was that those teachers would be able to contribute within their classroom subjects in

the reinforcement of the language process and incorporate some of the language fundamentals that are expected in the classroom. The teachers are able to achieve English language use and comprehension as a result. Therefore, the research question that guided this project was, “*How to assist non-English speaking teachers of a bilingual school, perform their tasks within the school environment in English?*”

RESEARCH SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

The Context

This research was carried out at a private bilingual school in Colombia. This school opened approximately three years ago and offers high-quality bilingual education. The school administrators made the decision to include the English language as a fundamental part of the daily curriculum, in which several subjects are taught in English.

The Participants

The participants of this research were 11 non-English speaking teachers who specialize in different subjects at the school. Bearing in mind that they are not English teachers and that they had to contribute in the bilingual process of the school, they had to take an English test to demonstrate their level of proficiency within the English language.

The majority of the teachers demonstrated very little knowledge of the English language while the remaining teachers demonstrated basic to intermediate knowledge, particularly in the areas of reading and writing.

The Teacher

This research study was conducted by the author of this paper (who was a teacher-researcher). He currently works as an English teacher and as the academic coordinator at this Colombian bilingual school. His desire is to contribute through his qualifications and experience in assisting non-English speaking teachers in developing English language skills. He currently holds a Bachelors' degree in Modern Languages and is presently enrolled in a Master's degree program. He has been trained in curriculum development, therefore, he plans the teachers courses according to what he considers are the teachers' needs as a result of oral and written interviews. Through his experience he was able to bring new materials and activities to the school that the teachers would find useful in their English language skills development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the study was focused on guiding non-English speaking teachers of a bilingual school, perform their tasks in English within the school environment, the implementation of a learner-centered curriculum, based on speaking-oriented workshops, the following concepts were considered: learner-centered curriculum, speaking-oriented workshops, autonomous learning and cooperative learning.

Learner-centered curriculum in foreign language learning

Despite the existence of multiple theories regarding the learner-centered curriculum,

there is a definition that clearly explains it. A curriculum will contain similar elements to those contained in traditional curriculum development, that is, planning (including needs analysis, goal and objective setting), implementation (including methodology and materials development), and evaluation. Nunan (1987), points out that the key difference between learner-centered and traditional curriculum development is that, in the former, the curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught.

Speaking-oriented workshops

Many language learners regard speaking ability as the measure of knowing a language. These learners define fluency as the ability to converse with others, much more than the ability to read, write, or comprehend oral language. They regard speaking as the most important skill they can acquire, and they assess their progress in terms of their accomplishments in spoken communication.

According to Burkart (1998), language learners need to recognize that speaking involves three areas of knowledge:

- Mechanics (pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary): Using the right words in the right order with the correct pronunciation.
- Functions (transaction and interaction): Knowing when clarity of message is essential (transaction/information exchange) and when precise understanding is not required (interaction/relationship building).

- Social and cultural rules and norms (turn-taking, rate of speech, length of pauses between speakers, relative roles of participants): Understanding how to take into account who is speaking to whom, in what circumstances, about what, and for what reason.

In the communicative model of language teaching, instructors help their students develop this body of knowledge by providing authentic practice that prepares students for real-life communication situations. They help their students develop the ability to produce grammatically correct, logically connected sentences that are appropriate to specific contexts, and to do so using acceptable (that is, comprehensible) pronunciation.

Autonomous learning

Holec (1981), points out those autonomous language learners take responsibility for the totality of their learning situation. They do this by determining their own objectives, defining the contents to be learned and the progression of the course, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring this procedure, and evaluating what they have acquired.

There is, nevertheless, broad agreement that autonomous learners understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness (Little, 1991). In other words, there is a consensus that the practice of learner autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for

reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others. This working definition captures the challenge of learner autonomy: a holistic view of the learner that requires us to engage with the cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social dimensions of language learning and to worry about how they interact with one another.

Effective communication depends on a complex of procedural skills that develop only through use; and if language learning depends crucially on language use, learners who enjoy a high degree of social autonomy in their learning environment should find it easier than otherwise to master the full range of discourse roles on which effective spontaneous communication depends.

Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is a method of instruction that has students working together in groups, usually with the goal of completing a specific task. This method can help students develop leadership skills and the ability to work with others as a team.

According to Kohonen (1989), in cooperative learning situations learners work together to accomplish shared goals. Their achievements are evaluated on a criterion-referenced basis. However, since all group members now share a common goal, they are motivated to work together for mutual benefit in order to maximize their own and each others' learning. This creates a positive interdependence among the learners: they perceive that they can reach their goals best when the others in the same learning group also do as well as possible.

Research methodology

The type of Research

This research may be classified as an Action Research study, bearing in mind that it comprises three main characteristics of this type of project, according to Cohen & Manion (1994, p.186): a diagnosis of the problem, the implementation of a proposal and the evaluation of the proposal.

Data Collection Procedures

The instruments that were used for gathering information were as follows: informal talks with the teachers, interviews, questionnaires and workshops. The informal talks were carried out before and after each workshop and were focused on listening to the teachers' perceptions and expectations regarding the activities they had to develop. The questionnaires and interviews were addressed to explore the teachers' considerations and feelings after developing the individual and group activities proposed for each one of the six workshops. A final interview took place at the end of the data collection in order to validate and corroborate the gathered information during all the process.

The Pedagogical Proposal

The pedagogical proposal that was seemed through this research was divided into three parts or steps: the first one in which a diagnosis of the problem was made; the second one in which the implementation and action of a proposal took place, and a third one that was related to evaluate the action.

Step 1. After analyzing the information gathered from a questionnaire and informal talks with the teachers involved in this research, I established the following findings for the diagnostic step:

- Most of the teachers were not proficient in English language.
- Teachers prefer a communicative learning style, taking into account that they wanted to acquire some aspects of the English language in order to get in contact and communicate in a better way with their students inside the school environment; and in this way, help them to develop and practice the foreign language in a more meaningful and successful way since the subjects each teacher teaches.
- Most of the teachers were in agreement with the course would cover aspects related to: greetings and farewells, classroom common expressions, classroom common commands and classroom common vocabulary for each subject.
- Teachers wanted the activities to be developed during the course were speaking-oriented workshops related to: individual and group work, pronunciation exercises, peer feedback sessions and having real situations to put into practice the things they learnt.

Thus, after developing this step, it was found that teachers wanted to be instructed on the incorporation and use of some aspects of English language (greetings and farewells, classroom common expressions, commands and vocabulary) to be used within the school environment, in order to get familiar with some these aspects of the language that allowed them to perform their work in a more successful way.

Step II. For responding to the above concerns, a proposal was drawn up and implemented. Thus, the teacher in charge of the course decided to implement a learner-centered curriculum, based on speaking-oriented workshops, taking into account aspects related to autonomous and cooperative learning.

The course was focused on five speaking-oriented workshops based on the Communicative Language Teaching approach. These workshops looked to engage the teachers in a sort of a communicative language to use with their students in specific situations (classes and brief encounters) and contexts (school and classrooms). Each workshop had three sections: the first part was the presentation of the material to be worked and the instructions to develop it. The second part was related to the input by part of the teacher and the development and practice of the proposed activities in the workshops, and the third part was related to the speaking practice and output of the aspects considered in each workshop.

The purpose of these workshops was to guide teachers on how to enhance their speaking skills in English in order to incorporate and use some aspects of English language (greetings and farewells, classroom common expressions, commands and vocabulary) in the environment of the school and also, get familiar with some aspects of English language that allows them to perform their work in a more successful way. Besides, the workshops and classes were guided in autonomous and cooperative learning.

The materials for each workshop were designed by the teacher in charge. These

materials included worksheets, recordings according to the purpose of the workshop, and the instructions of the activities to be developed individually and in groups.

In each of the workshops the teacher started by giving the instructional part setting a specific object; for instance, to get familiar with some greetings and farewells inside the school environment. After that, the teacher gave an input to the other teachers through exemplifications of pronunciation aspects related to the topic of the workshops. Then, the teachers were asked to practice the recordings through individual and workgroup in order to involve them in autonomous and cooperative learning, and finally, the teachers were asked to produce in oral way what they taught through oral mini-presentations, reports or pronunciation tests according to the purpose each workshop had. Usually, there was an extra activity to be developed depending on the workshop. All the workshops followed the same pattern of instruction, practice and oral production.

Step III. In this step of the study the workshops were evaluated. Data from this step were analyzed using the following instruments and techniques: questionnaires for the teachers after each workshop, which were given in Spanish in order to get more viable information. Also, informal talks with the teachers after each workshop were made in order to get information about the teachers' perceptions.

Findings

The data collected during a two month period of three hours per week showed that some categories had emerged after

analyzing and reanalyzing the data. Aspects related to the grounded approach as well as the processes of disassembling and reassembling data mentioned by Freeman (1998) were considered during the whole process. In general, three main categories were found. The first one related to English language speaking improvement, the second one related to self-confidence building, and the third one related to cooperative learning.

Towards English language speaking improvement

After implementing and collecting data throughout this research study, I found that those non-English teachers reported a significant increase in English language speaking improvement. Through the collected information from questionnaires after implementing the workshops, teachers mentioned aspects related to the improvement they achieved during the speaking practices and the understanding of the different issues developed during each workshop, related to the English language contents in which they were taught.

In a group interview, when asked about the workshops carried out and their usefulness within the school environment, one of the teachers pointed out:

“The different workshops helped me to get basic aspects of English language which, without doubt, are of great usefulness when being in contact with my students inside and outside the classroom. Also, I consider that the activities developed were meaningful because I developed self-confidence

speaking English a little with my students and they made positive comments to me about it. Finally, I felt pretty good because I had to assume the risk of speaking and using English in my teaching practices (Interview 1 – Manuel).”

This showed that those teachers relied on using different contents which were taught through the workshops in order to perform in English within the school environment, having the opportunity and the challenge of practicing what they taught in the classroom daily.

During the interview, when asking teachers about their opinions with regard to the usefulness of speaking-oriented workshops, most teachers mentioned that they felt ashamed at the beginning, because they did not have enough confidence to speak English. With the activities in each workshop, they were developing gradually confidence to speak English more frequently.

They also mentioned that through the individual and group activities, they had the opportunity to monitor their own progress and challenge themselves to achieve the goals proposed within the group. These are characteristics of the autonomous and cooperative learning.

Self-confidence building

In addition to increasing their self-confidence in speaking English while they were working in the workshops, the teachers indicated a relevant increase of confidence in working independently. The analysis of the questionnaires, interviews and informal conversations with the teachers revealed

that, as a result of the speaking-oriented workshops, teachers were more motivated in learning English by themselves for their professional improvement, development and qualification.

When asked about the effectiveness of the speaking workshops they carried out, teachers provided the following answers:

“The most relevant aspect about doing the activities and exercises proposed in the workshops was that I had the opportunity of monitoring and became more conscientious about how to learn by myself. I felt motivated to learn the different contents because of the activities. I had to develop and challenge myself and know that I could achieve by my goals without help. (Interview 1 – Angela).”

“The most difficult issue was to cope with the pronunciation, but the materials and activities during the workshops allowed me to study and practice by myself. They helped me to become more confident in my own English learning process. In the beginning, I believed I could not do it because I felt incompetent when speaking English. I was able to develop my own strategies to face my fears at the moment I would speak English (Informal talk 3 – Diana).”

In relationship to this, Dawn (2003) points out that when students know how they learn and the strategies that best work for them, their attitude and motivation increase.

Towards cooperative learning

Beyond increasing their self-confidence

speaking English and learning by themselves through the development of the activities they were working on in the workshops, the teachers indicated a relevant increase of confidence in group working. The analysis of the questionnaires, interviews and informal talks with the teachers demonstrated that as a result of the speaking-oriented workshops, teachers had the opportunity of working together in groups and help each others in their learning process.

When asked about the effectiveness of the speaking workshops they carried out, teachers provided the following answers:

“I really enjoyed working in group with the other teachers, because it was a great opportunity to challenge ourselves speaking English. Besides, we proposed group goals for the different activities we had to develop and tried to help each others through our difficulties and the correction of mistakes in a friendly way (Interview 2 – Ivonn).”

“The most relevant aspect about doing the activities and exercises proposed in the workshops and working in groups was that we share the responsibility for completing, developing, and actively participating in the activities. In this, we motivated each other to achieve mutual learning. The group of teachers had different levels of English proficiency, so, the teachers with a better level helped the other teachers in their learning process (Informal talk 4 – Mery).”

In relationship with this point, Jacobs (1998) points out that cooperative or collaborative

learning essentially involves students learning from each other in groups. Thus, in cooperative learning teachers teach students collaborative or social skills so that they can work together more effectively. At this point, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), point out that tasks in which learners are required to negotiate meaning among themselves in the course of completing an interactive task are particularly suited to language development.

CONCLUSIONS

Before developing the workshops, it was evident that the teachers who participated in this study were not enough prepared to cope with spoken English in the school environment, because they knew little, if any, English. They also felt incompetent or ashamed of their inability to speak in this foreign language. However, after implementing the five speaking-oriented workshops, it became evident that the use of a learner-centered curriculum did contribute to the teacher learning some relevant issues regarding their abilities to use the English language to communicate and interact with their students in the bilingual process. There was no doubt that the teachers' perceptions and expectations changed towards the English language. Through proper guidance in the English language learning process, teachers were able to develop at the same time during their autonomous and cooperative learning and, as a result, they were able to increase their confidence in speaking the English language in varied degrees.

The outcome of this research also indicates that English courses based on a learner-

centered curriculum are effective, because this curriculum is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners. This is doing in part because the learners are closely involved in the decision-making process regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught. This type of curriculum allows for the opportunity to include other aspects related to autonomous and cooperative learning, without doubt, contribute in a meaningful methodology in foreign language acquisition.

Finally, some further practical implications which emerged from this study are as follows:

- Regardless of the course offered as a part of a curriculum, instructional sessions or workshops should be aimed to increase the students' level of confidence in working in both autonomous and cooperative learning. Taking into account autonomous and cooperative learning as meaningful and useful issues in the foreign language acquisition process.
- It is relevant that schools or educative institutions which tend to incorporate English as a foreign language look for the staff qualification on the language. In this way, the teaching of it may be addressed in a correct and coherent way.

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