



COMMUNICATIVE TASKS IN A GROUP OF CHILDREN AT THE INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE INSTITUTE AT THE UPTC

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Abstract

The development of English speaking activities where students can communicate can be a challenging endeavor. Some of the reasons for this are the tendency of using the native language and the possibility of finding students who simply do not feel comfortable speaking. That is why, a number of communicative tasks should be conceived in order to facilitate student interaction and where learners can improve their speaking skill. Two communicative tasks were designed and applied to a group of eleven children at the International Language Institute at the UPTC. Their understanding of the rules, attitude, and speaking performance were observed. It was possible to find that, through these activities, students

Resumen

El desarrollo de actividades de habla en inglés en donde los estudiantes se puedan comunicar puede ser una tarea desafiante. Esto se debe a la tendencia de usar la lengua materna y la posibilidad de encontrar estudiantes que simplemente no se sientan cómodos hablando. Por esta razón, una serie de tareas comunicativas debe ser concebida con el fin de facilitar la interacción entre los estudiantes y en donde ellos puedan mejorar su habilidad de habla. Se diseñaron y se aplicaron dos tareas comunicativas a un grupo de once niños en el Instituto Internacional de Idiomas de la UPTC. Se observó su comprensión de las normas, sus actitudes hacia las actividades y su desempeño en el habla. Fue posible

were able to use only English to communicate.

Key words: Communicative task, communicative competence, speaking activities.

Introduction

Communicative tasks are not just repeating words; they are cognitively difficult because students have to follow a series of different processes. According to Widdowson (1978), it is necessary to use sentences as a way to achieve communicative purposes, and not just as isolated linguistic units. Levelt (1989) states that speaking as a communicative activity requires planning the message content, putting words and phrases together, articulating and self-monitoring. In classrooms, there are activities that are considered as speaking activities, for example, repeating words the teacher says, or memorizing a role play and performing it. However, these are not communicative tasks because they do not follow the processes exposed by Levelt. Considering that, there could be a classroom with people doing plenty of speaking, yet that does not necessarily mean that they are communicating.

For Lee (2000) in a communicative task, learners are required to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language, having the control of the activity. When the learner is in control, it is going to

be real communication. If the teacher has control of the activity and what is being said, it is a guided practice. Finally, if an activity is only focused on getting perfect phrases in terms of pronunciation and grammar, it is an oral practice. When an activity focuses on transmitting a message, it is a communicative task.

Palabras clave: Tarea comunicativa, competencia comunicativa, actividades de habla.

From August to November 2012, I had the opportunity to teach English to a group of 11 children at the International Language Institute at the UPTC. I was able to see a group of students with different characteristics in these classes. Their ages went from 7 to 10 years old, which means that they were in different grades in elementary school. Some of them went to public schools and some others to private schools. Some of them seem to feel more comfortable with the language while some others struggled some more. It could also be said, based on my judgment, that some of the children had a better English level than the others.

It is possible to find children with different characteristics in the classrooms of the International Language Institute. This makes the development of communication tasks a

challenging endeavor. For example, students tend to use their native language instead of using the target one. There is also the possibility of finding children who feel shy and might not feel comfortable speaking. That is why, a number of communicative tasks should be conceived in order to facilitate the interaction of students and where they can improve their speaking skill.

Brandl (2009) expresses the benefits of communicative activities. Firstly, there are more opportunities for self-expression and a wider use of language functions, therefore, the student has more opportunities to narrate, make questions and descriptions. Secondly, in communicative activities, students tend to use more complex grammar structures going beyond themselves. Thirdly, there is an increase in self-correction because, unlike traditional classroom activities where students are always expecting to be corrected by the teacher, learners have to correct themselves and be more aware of the language they are using.

Objective

To describe students' understanding of the rules, attitudes, and speaking interaction in two communicative activities developed at the International Language Institute.

Theoretical Framework

This study focuses on the use of communicative activities with children. Therefore, it was necessary to look into the following concepts: communicative competence, operationalizing communication, and designing communicative tasks.

Communicative competence

Hymes (1972) coined the term communicative competence and defined it as the knowledge of both rules of grammar and rules of proper language use in a context. He proposed that in communication there are grammatical and cultural rules of an utterance which depend on personal factors such as memory, emotions, and behaviors, as well as the social environment.

Canale and Swain (1980) understood communicative competence as a synthesis of a system of knowledge and skill needed for communication that requires the active involvement of the learner in the production of the target language. Canale and Swain argued that the ability to communicate required four different sub-competencies: Grammatical competence which is the ability to create grammatically correct utterances; the sociolinguistic competence which deals with the ability to communicate according to social norms; the discourse competence or ability to produce coherent and cohesive discourse that takes the interlocutor's perspective into account; and the strategic competence, which is the ability to solve communication problems during interaction. In most classrooms, the grammatical competence is seen as the most important one; however, all four of them are equally important and should be taken into account.

According to Levelt (1989), speaking as a communicative activity requires four processes: The first one is *conceptualization*, which is planning the message content and it starts with an idea, an image, a feeling, etc. The second one is *formulation* or putting

words and phrases together in one's mind. After that, the *articulation* takes place; this is the actual use of speech organs to produce an utterance. Finally, *self-monitoring*, or a constant checking of the own speech. All these processes happen immediately in native speakers, but in beginner learners, passing from one process to the other takes more time. For example, learners might have an idea to express and might know the grammar rules to make a proper sentence, but if they cannot articulate it, there would be no communication. On the other hand, repeating sentences in a class would only be articulating because those sentences do not start from the learners' own conceptualization, and consequently it would not be a communicative activity either.

A relevant aspect in communicative competence is the affective state of the learner. According to Krashen (1982), affective factors have a connection with the second language acquisition process. These affective factors include motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. If those factors are not optimal, the development of communicative competence will be least favorable. This suggests that when designing communicative activities, affective factors should be taken into account.

According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), learners' topical knowledge, affective state and language ability influence their communicative competence. The important feature in this competence is their language ability which is comprised of two broad areas: language knowledge and strategic competence. Language knowledge consists of two main components: organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge.

Organizational knowledge is the ability to produce grammatically correct utterances and understand others utterances. Pragmatic knowledge refers to knowledge of the practical and social conventions for creating and interpreting discourse. Strategic competences involves having a goal in the communication, having the knowledge of the context where the communication is taking place, and planning what will be said.

Richards (2006) defines communicative competence as possessing different aspects of language knowledge. The first of those aspects is the knowledge of how to use language for different purposes. Secondly, individuals who are communicatively competent know how to vary their use of language according to the context, as in knowing when to use formal and informal speech. Thirdly, another aspect of language knowledge that is relevant in communicative competence is the knowledge of how to produce and understand different types of texts, for example, narratives, reports, interviews, or conversations. The final aspect is the knowledge of how to keep communicating despite having limitations in one's language knowledge

Operationalizing communication

Lee (2000) outlines criteria for operationalizing communication, which means creating a workable pedagogical activity based on real communication. First of all, there must be extended discourse, in this case, if an activity consist of only saying a random word, it would not be communication. Second, there must be an information gap, in other words, information that one of the interlocutors does not know

about the other one, so they have something to talk about. There must also be uncertainty that comes from the information gap itself, which means that the speakers do not know what exact words and sentences they will produce or hear, in this case, reading a script aloud would not be communication; however, it is also important to consider Rickheit, Strohner, and Vorwerg (2008) who state that in most communication situations some referential knowledge that connects the speakers has to be present, so apart from an information gap, speakers should share a set of common knowledge. Another of Lee's criteria is communicative activities being goal oriented, for example trying to transmit a message successfully or trying to obtain a service from the other person. Finally, speakers have to think and organize the information they will utter right in the minute.

Designing Communicative Tasks

Bachman and Palmer (1996) claim that a task is an activity where individuals use language in order to achieve a particular goal or objective. Skehan (1998) proposes a broader definition saying that a task is an activity focused on meaning transmission where there is some problem to solve, also, there is some sort of relationship to real-world activities, and its priority is the achievement of a goal. Lee (2000) argues that a task is a classroom activity that has an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants, a structure that sequences that interaction, and a focus on meaning exchange. A task requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language.

Lee (2000) also suggests that a designer of a communicative task should identify the desired information that is supposed to be extracted from the interaction, make sure that learners have the linguistic support needed for the activities, then, break down the topic of the class into subtopics, and finally, create a sequence of concrete activities to explore those subtopics. There are also three task demands suggested by Brandl (2009) that have to be considered when trying to design a communicative task. The first one is the linguistic complexity of the activity, for example making sure that learners know enough vocabulary and grammar to do the activity. The second task demand is the cognitive demand, whether the learners are familiar with the topic or not, if it is a simple or complex task for them and the memory requirements learners will have to use. The final demand is the communicative stress, in other words, if it is an emotionally stressful task, the number of people who will participate, the relationships of those involved, and the duration of the activity.

Sometimes a task might be linguistically, communicatively or cognitively too difficult. This would generate that the task fails and learners would start either speaking in their native language again or stopping doing the activity altogether. On the other hand, tasks that are too simple will not be very rewarding or productive.

As it is expressed by Richards (2006), one of the goals in communicative tasks is to develop fluency in language use. This means the natural use of language in a meaningful and ongoing interaction despite limitations in communicative competence.

It is possible to develop fluency by creating classroom activities in which students negotiate meaning, use communication strategies, correct misunderstandings, and work to avoid communication breakdowns. According to him, more authentic communication will occur if students go beyond practice of language accuracy and use their linguistic and communicative resources in order to obtain information. Also, Richards states that communicative tasks are designed to be carried out in pairs or small groups. By doing activities in this way, learners will obtain several benefits such as learning from the language used by other classmates, using a greater amount of language, and becoming more motivated to learn.

Methodology

With the development of communicative tasks in English, this project enters the appellation of qualitative research because it takes into account the fact that studying the experiences and behaviors of the human being is a subjective reality. For Johnson and Christensen (2004), qualitative researchers often focus on the dynamic aspects of behavior, which is seen to be more dependent on the situation and the context. Qualitative researchers do not want to intervene in the natural flow of behavior because they believe that this intervention would change the behavior. Qualitative researchers study behavior holistically.

Case study has been the research method used in this study. For Johnson and Christensen (2004), case studies can be used to address descriptive research objectives. According to Cohen & Manion

(1994) and Yin (2003) a case study method selects a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals as the subjects of study. This method typically observes the characteristics of an individual unit, in this case a group of eleven children. The purpose of this observation was to analyze students' actions in two communicative tasks: the first one where they had to describe similar landscapes to find the differences, and the second task, where some students had to describe the image of a person to other classmates so they could reproduce it by drawing only based on the description. Observations were used to collect data from the different activities. The aspects observed were participants' comprehension and respect of the rules of the activity, their attitude towards the activity, and how speaking and communication developed during the activity.

Participants and Setting

This study was developed at the International Language Institute at the UPTC. One of the objectives of this Institute is to offer instruction and qualification in language learning. That is why, apart from the languages courses provided to UPTC students, the International Language Institute also offers courses to external users. These external users are organized in different groups according to their age and level of proficiency.

The participants in this study were eleven children. The group consisted of three boys and eight girls. The children's ages ranged between 7 and 10 years old. They went to different public and private Elementary Schools and therefore they did not know

each other before the beginning of the course. They signed up to the A1 level English course.

Activities

As it was previously explained, in order to design and apply a communicative task, it is important to make sure that students have enough knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and the topic to perform the activity properly and successfully. The vocabulary and sentences structure needed for the activities had been taught and constantly reviewed in previous classes. In the first activity, called **describing a landscape**, some of the vocabulary items that were used included the words *mushroom, sun, cloud, flower, insect*. In the second activity, called **drawing a person**, it was used vocabulary related with the parts of the body and adjectives.

Activity 1: Describing a landscape

In this activity, students describe and note the differences between two pictures of a landscape only by speaking. There are groups of two children. Both members of the group have an image of a similar landscape with four differences. Student should describe their own images and ask questions about his/her partner's image. They are asked not to show the images to each other. The activity ends when they have found the differences.

Activity 2: drawing a person

In this activity students describe an image of a person using vocabulary of the parts of the body and adjectives. There are groups of two children. One of them is the «drawer»

and the other one is the «describer». The latter has to describe a picture of a man while the former has to draw it the best he/she can. Then, the roles will be interchanged and a different image will be used. Finally, students will compare all the drawings and will vote to decide which of all of their drawings resembles the most to the original ones.

Findings

As it was mentioned, the data was collected through observation of the classes. The first one was the children's comprehension and respect of the rules. This aspect included the easiness of the rules, if they were fully understood, and if children did not break them. The second aspect observed was the children's attitude towards the activity and if they were emotionally involved in it or not. The third aspect was the children's use of language, if they use Spanish or English, and how they used those languages.

Activity 1: Describing a landscape

- **Comprehension and respect of the rules of the activity:**

Rules were easily understood and it was not necessary to spend a long time explaining them. The children made sure of not letting their partner see the image of the landscape by covering it with their books. Some doubts emerged as the activity was progressing, such as if it was possible to write the differences on their notebooks. The children achieved to find the information about the differences using sentences in English.

- **Attitude towards the activity:**

The children participated actively. There were no cases of children not wanting to be part of the activity. It was possible to see that they helped each other correcting their partners in the way of saying the phrases. They also showed excitement during the activity.

- **Speaking and communication:**

Their use of the language was acceptable enough to promote communication and meaning exchange. The children were able to find the differences in the images only by speaking. Also, it was possible to see that they could use most of the vocabulary previously learned (flowers, mushrooms, pond, insects, trees, and the numbers) in a practical way. They used phrases such as *How many trees are there?*, *there are two mushrooms*, or simply saying a number e.g. *three*. When the children were not saying the phrases to find out the differences, they would speak in Spanish to express their excitement or frustration towards the different events happening during the activity. In one of the cases when Spanish was used, one of the boys could not ask grammatically correct questions in English, so his partner tried to help him first but finally became frustrated, consequently saying to him to use Spanish instead. I had to intervene and say that they could only use English.

Activity 2: drawing a person

- **Comprehension and respect of the rules of the activity:**

Firstly, the students reviewed the vocabulary of the parts of the body and some adjectives that were necessary to perform this activity. Later, some of the children in the classroom were described as an example of the oncoming activity. Then, a drawing on the board was made and it was asked to children to describe it. After that, the children understood what they had to do. They also made sure of not letting their partner see the image they were describing.

- **Attitude towards the activity:**

The children were more excited in this activity than in the previous one since they had the opportunity of drawing and being more creative. They also enjoyed having to vote and decide which of the drawings resembled the most to the original ones.

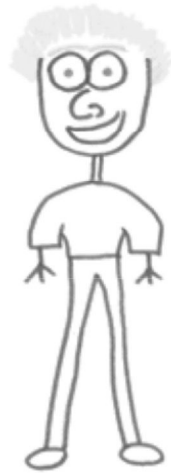
- **Speaking and communication:**

The objective of reproducing an image only by speaking was accomplished. As it is possible to see on images 1 and 2, the children were able to describe an image, interact, and make a drawing based on the descriptions. The drawings made by the students show a great resemblance to the original drawings. Also, it was possible to use in a practical way most of the vocabulary previously taught about the parts of the body. They used phrases such as *he has blond hair*, *he has long arms*, or *he has short black hair*. Some of them tended to say phrases such as *he has legs short* or *he has feet big* and it was possible to see that most children pronounced *hair* as /hair/. Nevertheless, the children used

only English to describe the image and achieved the purpose of transmitting a message. Not taking into account the word *hair*, all the other words were well pronounced. They would only use Spanish to ask me how to say certain phrases.

Original image Drawings made by students only based on the oral description of the original image made by their classmates.

Original image



Drawings made by students only based on the oral description of the original image made by their classmates

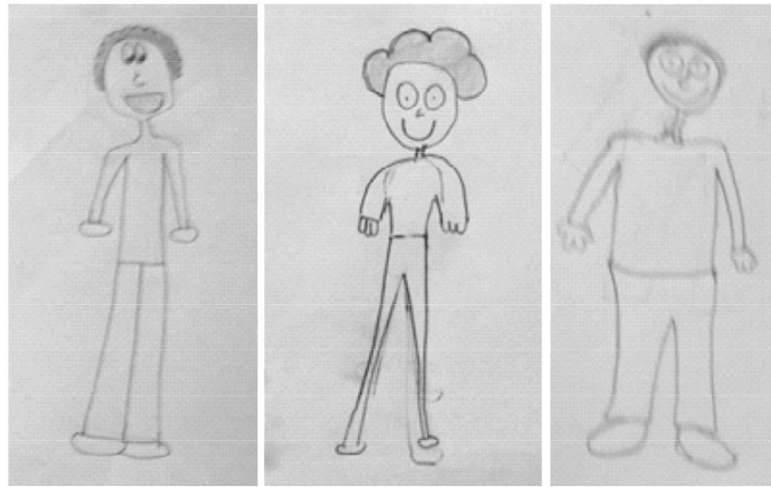


image 1

Original image



Drawings made by students only based on the oral description of the original image made by their classmates



image 2

Pedagogical Implications

These tasks look forward to be applied by other teachers who may want to see their groups of students speak in the classroom. The use of these two communicative tasks has proven to be a successful way to make students have more opportunities to narrate, make descriptions and ask questions. It is important to note that for these activities to be performed successfully, students need to have a linguistic support, that is to say, the vocabulary and the grammar necessary to develop these activities must be taught in advance. However, some questions emerged. Would the activities proposed in this article be successful with older students? What would happen if these activities are applied in larger groups? Those are questions that would have to be solved in future studies.

Conclusions

This research has identified children's achievement of the goals of the activities, how children used mostly English, their attitude towards the activities, and the effectiveness of the communicative tasks.

- Children were able to accomplish the main goal of both activities since they were using English to describe the images of the landscape and the person.
- It was possible to find extended discourse during these activities. Children were not using random words but they made use of phrases with a purpose such as *he has blond hair* or *how many flowers do you have?* in order to discover and exchange certain information.

- Children showed a good attitude during both activities. They did all the descriptions and questions in English and they followed the rules of the activity without showing any sign of indiscipline or apathy towards the tasks. Most kids developed good relationships among them. It was not an emotionally stressful task and children had fun with it.
- These were complete communicative activities since the children were using sentences that they could use in their real lives; what they said was only controlled by them and they were not asked to repeat sentences in a scripted way; both tasks focused on meaning exchange and not on accuracy. In fact, it was possible to see that some of the sentences or words they were saying were not perfect in their grammar or pronunciation (only in a few cases), however, the children were able to express what they meant using the English they knew.

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