Developing Speaking Skills Through Speaking - Oriented Workshops[1]

Desarrollo de la habilidad de habla a través de talleres orientados al habla

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Abstract

This paper aims to share the results of a small-scale research project, focused on developing speaking skills through the implementation of speaking-oriented workshops. The workshops incorporated the use of puppets as an interaction

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strategy and were based on "healthy lifestyles", a cross-curricular project developed in the school. This project was carried out with a group of fourth graders in a Colombian public school in Tunja, Boyacá. A field diary, video recordings, interviews and workshops were used to gather information in this action research study. Findings revealed that through the use of these workshops students became more confident and developed their speaking skills while enhancing their cooperative learning abilities.

Key words: Speaking-oriented workshops, speaking skill development, puppets as interaction strategy in the EFL classroom, cooperative learning.

Resumen

Este documento comparte los resultados de un proyecto de investigación a menor escala, enfocado en desarrollar la habilidad de habla a través de la implementación de talleres orientados al habla y el uso de títeres como estrategia de interacción en la clase de inglés. Este proyecto se llevó a cabo con un grupo de estudiantes de grado cuarto en un colegio público colombiano en la ciudad de Tunja, Boyacá. Un diario de campo, videos, entrevistas y talleres fueron usados para recolectar información en esta investigación acción. Los resultados revelaron que a través de los talleres, los estudiantes ganaron confianza al hablar en inglés y desarrollaron su habilidad de habla, al tiempo que mejoraron sus habilidades de aprendizaje cooperativo.

Palabras clave: Talleres orientados en la habilidad de habla, desarrollo de la habilidad de habla, títeres como estrategia de interacción, aprendizaje cooperativo.

Introduction

For learning a language, it is important to communicate with each other, therefore, one of the best and most effective ways is to develop the speaking skill in the foreign language. Bygate (1987) affirms that "speaking is an undervalued skill and it is often thought as a popular form of expression" (p. 7). However, speaking is a skill that deserves attention as much as literacy skills, in both first and foreign languages.

This research project was based on developing the speaking skill through speaking-oriented workshops based on healthy lifestyles in fourth graders. These workshops were supported by the use of puppets as an interaction strategy and were implemented and based on healthy lifestyles, with topics such as: discovering myself, daily routine, food and sports. Thus, through the workshops students were engaged in speaking about their own habits and expressing their likes, preferences and opinions.

Using puppets helps students to interact with each other. Gronna, Serna, Kennedy & Prater (as cited in Khameis, 2006, p. 113), believe that puppets can be used to teach language functions and social skills, such as: greetings, responding in conversations, and initiating conversation. That is why we decided to use puppets as an interaction strategy while developing the workshops. They had an important role in the students' learning development in that the students loved making their own puppet, playing with them, and most importantly, learning and developing their speaking skills.

Statement of the Problem

Most of the students were often hesitant to participate in oral classroom activities due to their limited understanding and development of their speaking skills in English language. The fourth graders at Institución Educativa Silvino Rodriguez - sede Dorado in Tunja, were students coming from different social backgrounds who often had issues with self-esteem and school disinterest which made the teaching and learning processes more difficult. Also, this specific group was stigmatized as over-active and somewhat prone to conflict. They liked to speak among themselves but when they had to say something in public, they could not do it because they were too afraid and shy; besides, they said that they did not feel comfortable when speaking in English due to their lack of knowledge and their pronunciation mistakes.

In the English class, it was evident that the students wanted to express their feelings and thoughts, but their English speaking skills were weak; they did not know how to pronounce some words and they had difficulty with grammar and vocabulary. Also, they were timid when they had to

speak in a foreign language or say something in front of their classmates.

Thus, this proposal was based on speaking-oriented workshops supported by the use of puppets as an interaction strategy, with the idea of developing the students' speaking skill. Moreover, the research question that guided this project was "How do speaking-oriented workshops based on healthy life styles develop the speaking skills of fourth graders at Silvino Rodriguez School El Dorado campus?"

Theoretical Framework

The following theoretical constructs were considered: Speaking skill development, speaking-oriented workshops, puppets as a strategy and cooperative learning.

Speaking Skill Development

According to Harmer (2001) "the ability to speak fluently presupposes not only knowledge of language features, but also the ability to process information and language 'on a spot' " (p. 272). From our point of view, the speaking skill involve more than certain rules of grammar. It is related to the ability that the speaker has to spontaneously convey and understand ideas, opinions and comments in different communicative contexts.

Wallace (1978) affirmed that "oral practice (speaking) becomes meaningful to students when they have to pay attention to what they are saying." (p. 98). Thus, students can learn better the ability to converse or to express their ideas fluently with precise vocabularies and good or acceptable pronunciation as they use these vocabularies to talk about known situations, namely, the healthy life styles.

Speaking-Oriented Workshops

Many language learners regard speaking abilities 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. (Bahrani & Soltan, 2012, p. 205).

Therefore, it is relevant to consider that language learners need to recognize that speaking implicates three specific 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. (Burkart, 1998, p. 26).

According to Richards (2006, p. 16), in the communicative model of language teaching, learning is facilitated when learners are engaged in interaction and meaningful communication. In this study, the students with the help of their teachers developed the ability to produce well-structured sentences, suitable to specific contexts, using comprehensible pronunciation.

Puppets as an Interaction Strategy in the EFL Classroom

Students' interaction in the English class can be highly improved by the use of puppets. Gronna et al., (as cited in Khameis, 2006, p. 113) affirm that using puppets in the English class contributes to social skill development as much as language skills development, considering greeting, responding to conversation, and initiating conversation.

For quite some time, puppets have been used a traditional teaching tool in teaching and learning processes in many cultures. Burn (1989, p. 9) mentioned that puppets have united people of the world through a language unique to puppetry, consisting of more than words. It is a language that conveys feelings, ideals, and passions through a combination of gestures and words. He also suggested that the use of puppets makes risk-taking feel a bit safer for children while at the same time, offering great opportunities for teachers in elementary school classrooms to help students improve communication skills, overcome language barriers, and teach self-control.

Lennon & Barbato (2001, p. 2) mention how play therapists have used puppets successfully as a tool to encourage children to express their feelings, and even to change their behaviors. Hunt & Renfro (1982) points out that young children can usually accept puppets as non-threatening, sympathetic friends.

In EFL classrooms, students often are not comfortable and feel hesitant to speak English because they are not totally sure about how language works. Ozdeniz (2000, p. 3) states that "when a child speaks through the puppet he or she feels support and assistance". In this project, puppets were used as an interaction strategy to encourage students in speaking English.

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, p. 11), 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 other's learning. This creates a positive interdependence among the learners because they perceive that they can reach their goals best when others in the same learning group also do as well as possible.

Research Design

Type of Research. Action research has to do with the data gathering and analysis related to some concerns of our professional practice, the implementation and effects of teaching methods, learning strategies, learning styles, classroom interaction, role of teachers and learners and so on. The type of research applied in this project is qualitative, or more precisely, action research. Reason & Bradbury (2001) pointed out that action research aims at posing and solving problems, understanding, changing, or innovating classroom processes by collecting information in a spiral way through four stages: Plan, Action, Observation, and Reflection. In this

project, the research circle was given as follows:

- *Plan:* After an observation process of the population, a problematic situation became evident. It allowed us to put forth the following research question: How do speaking-oriented workshops based on healthy life styles develop speaking skills in fourth graders at Silvino Rodríguez School? In addition some objectives to accomplish the answer of the research question were developed.

- *Action:* It started with the creation of the speaking-oriented workshops and their implementation, based on an in-process theoretical framework construction.

- *Observation:* This part of the research process is evidenced in the field diary that the researchers wrote throughout the process. First of all, it allowed for the identification of a problematic situation concerning language learning. And secondly, it allowed for a reflection process.

- *Reflection:* Reflection was given in all the stages of the research process. It contributed to the making decisions process.

Research Setting and Participants

Setting. This project was carried out at Institución Educativa Silvino Rodríguez sede Dorado, a public school located in Tunja. It is a small institution, with classes from kindergarten to fifth

grade, which hosts students who mostly come from towns around Boyacá. There are also a small number of students who hail from other towns in other Colombian states. So, the students have different social backgrounds and needs. One of the school's goals is to foster the development of their students' skills in the different subject areas including English as a foreign language. Thus, it looks for alternative, innovative teaching strategies designed to aid in the English language learning process which are based on the communicative approach.

The participants in this project were 31 fourth graders, including 14 girls and 17 boys whose ages ranged from 8 to 10 years old. Most of them were very spontaneous and easy going with the teachers and classmates. All of them shared an interest in learning the English language despite their differences as regards of social backgrounds and needs.

Data Collection Procedures

The instruments that were used for gathering information were as follows: Field diary: These written notes became useful as they allowed the researchers to note and verify the student's improvement and be attentive to the day by day experiences of the students when working on the speaking-oriented workshops.

Video Recordings: They became useful when analyzing the students' speaking development during the workshops' implementation. Also, they were a great help in providing evidence about and documenting the plans' application. In this research project, all workshops were recorded from the first workshop when students made their puppets to the last speaking activities.

Interviews: Interviews were used to explore the students' considerations and feelings after developing individual and group activities proposed for each one of their workshops. A final interview took place at the end of the data collection in order to validate and corroborate the information gathered during the whole process.

Instructional Design

This small-scale project was composed of six speaking-oriented workshops. These workshops were focused on speaking exercises and activities that could be appealing for the students and supported by the use of puppets as an interaction strategy in the EFL classroom. The workshops were based on healthy lifestyles, a cross-curricular project developed in the school. Topics such as: personal presentation, daily routine, healthy and unhealthy food, sports, among others, were considered and related to the contents proposed by the school curriculum.

On one hand, the speaking-oriented workshops were an interesting way to let the students develop their speaking skill while on the other hand, these workshops were a pedagogical proposal that offered a perspective of teaching and learning in which the students were encouraged to develop several activities. These activities were different from those usually offered by language teachers at school and, allowed the students to develop their speaking skill while exploring more of the English language and learning new items.

Findings

The data, collected during a two-month period of two hours per week, showed that some categories had emerged after analyzing and reanalyzing the data. Aspects related to the grounded theory, as well as the processes of disassembling and reassembling data mentioned by (Freeman 1998), were considered during the whole process. In general, two main categories were found. The first one related to English language speaking development and the second one related to cooperative learning.

English Language Speaking Development

After implementing the workshops and collecting the data throughout this research study, the students' excellent output became clear and was noted in the video recordings. The students' attitude towards the English class was changing throughout the development of the workshops. Making their own puppet was motivating for them even though they felt shy about speaking English. Once they had their puppet and the proper input was given (vocabulary, language patterns and simple structures), the students were more attentive and really willing to participate while practicing and developing their speaking skills.

Children were anxious to learn with the puppets and play with them. They used the puppets as a means to speak and it was through small dialogues that children started to use the foreign language. They wondered, questioned and participated while feeling less hesitant about speaking English and much more enthusiastically enjoying learning (Taken from the field diary).

During the interview, when the students were asked about their opinions in regards to the usefulness of speaking-oriented workshops, most of them mentioned that they felt embarrassed at the beginning because they lacked enough confidence to speak in English. With the activities and the use of puppets as an interaction strategy in each workshop, the students were gradually developing confidence to speak English while at the same time enjoying learning.

Other samples were noticed in the workshops like when the students

used the puppet as a means to speak. Through the small dialogues children identified personal presentation vocabulary and structures to tell everybody about their puppets. In the third workshop, the students demonstrated the use of the foreign language when talking about food, which evidences a progression in how comfortable they felt when they spoke English.

Finally, the research evidenced the beginning of an interaction process between the students. In the second workshop, students were performing better when they spoke English. By speaking about what they did they obtained more vocabulary and interest and students shared their daily routine with the class by asking-answering language patterns. In the third workshop, they kept helping each other in order to complete the proposed activities in which they had to use simple language patterns or vocabulary. In the fourth one, they were willing to help each other in order to clarify language aspects or vocabulary, even in the presence of the teacher (Taken from the field diary).

Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991) point out that tasks as the ones in which students are expected to negotiate meaning in the process of completing an interactive task, are particularly appropriate to language development.

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 students showed a relevant increase in confidence while working in groups. The analysis of the video recordings and field notes demonstrated that as a result of the speaking-oriented workshops, the students had the opportunity to work together in groups and help each other in their learning process.

During the interview, when asked about the effectiveness of the speaking-workshops that were carried out, most of the students mentioned that they enjoyed working in a group with their classmates, because they did not normally have these kinds of activities and because it was a great opportunity to challenge themselves to speak English. As well as that, they proposed group goals for the different activities they had to carry out and tried to help each other through their difficulties while asking for the teacher's help if necessary.

Finally, it was noticed that during the development of the workshops, with activities in which the students were required to negotiate meaning among themselves in the course of completing it, was particularly suited to language development. (Taken from the field diary).

In relation to this point, Jacobs (1998) pointed out that cooperative learning in essence consists of students' learning from each other in groups. Thus, teachers teach students cooperative or social skills so that they can work together more successfully.

Conclusions

Considering that this project aimed at developing the speaking skill through the implementation of speaking-oriented workshops and the use of puppets as an interaction strategy in the EFL classroom, the following was concluded: Students' use of the foreign language increased as they felt comfortable when speaking in English through the development of speaking-oriented workshops and by using puppets.

Using the presentation, practice and production model (PPP) improved students' speaking skills, because students could recognize and contextualize the foreign language.

By making the foreign language practical and communicatively applied in the speaking oriented-workshops, the students were allowed to develop their speaking skills using topics that were related to students' daily activities and previous knowledge about healthy lifestyles.

The activities and materials proposed in this project were related to topics and aspects of language taught in the English class. Moreover, by designing and using a puppet as a strategy, the students became more interested in learning and felt comfortable speaking; it helped them to increase their confidence when speaking and having fun.

Speaking - oriented activities developed during the workshops, allowed the students to interact and gave them the opportunity to construct their own knowledge in company of those who they considered their equals. Moreover, the use of puppets contributed to the development of the students' speaking skills, as it engaged them in the English learning process by motivating them to learn by "playing".

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