Developing Oral Skills through Communicative and Interactive Tasks

Desarrollo de las habilidades orales a través de tareas interactivas

Dorelly Gutiérrez Gutiérrez

yggd@latinmail.com

Institución Educativa Distrital Britalia

This article describes a research project carried out with a group of ninth grade students at the Institución Educativa Distrital Britalia, in Bogotá. The starting point was a needs analysis which revealed the lack of practice regarding speaking skills. Three interactive tasks, a free conversational activity, and basic oral defenses were designed and implemented. Direct observation, videos and audiotapes provided evidence of the improvement of students' oral communication. The changes in the pedagogical practice, in the role of the teacher, in the syllabus design and in learners' attitudes towards their learning process were recorded as the main results of the action research project.

Key words: Oral communication, interactive tasks, task-based learning

Este artículo describe un proyecto de investigación desarrollado con un grupo de estudiantes de noveno grado en la Institución Educativa Distrital Britalia, en Bogotá. Se partió de un análisis de necesidades que reveló la ausencia de práctica en habilidades orales. Se diseñaron e implementaron tres tareas interactivas, una actividad de conversación libre y sustentaciones orales básicas. La observación directa, los videos y audio casetes evidenciaron el mejoramiento de la comunicación oral de los estudiantes. Los cambios en la práctica pedagógica, en el papel del maestro, en el diseño del programa y en las actitudes de los estudiantes hacia su proceso de aprendizaje fueron los resultados principales del proyecto de investigación acción.

Palabras claves: Comunicación oral, tareas interactivas, aprendizaje basado en tareas

INTRODUCTION

One of the main necessities in the learning of a foreign language is the development of the four skills, which are listening, speaking, reading and writing. But in the Colombian context, especially in public schools, those skills are not developed enough due to a set of factors such as the number of students per classroom, the lack of learning resources, and the exaggerated use of grammar approaches which cause some students to lack motivation in the learning of English.

As a consequence, learners have many problems, especially in oral communication. When they try to express themselves orally, they only pronounce isolated words and disconnected sentences making their production poor and meaningless. Since speaking is required in academic and professional performances, the lack of oral production skills becomes a serious disadvantage when compared to private school students.

This project proposes the implementation of a research activity which includes the application of some communicative and interactive tasks directed to improve oral skills. Bearing in mind task-based learning and communicative and interactive views, learners can approach speaking as a way to negotiate meaning and to establish social relations with others.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

• What is the role of interactive tasks in students' oral production?

• What are the teachers' and learners' roles during the development of oral tasks?

• In which way does feedback contribute to developing speaking skills?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learners of foreign languages in our context usually do not like to speak the L2 and most of the time they exhibit a passive attitude in class. Training in oral skills which let them communicate and interact in a meaningful and fruitful form, that is, exchanging information, negotiating meaning, supporting ideas, facing oral defenses, is a way to

motivate students to see the foreign language as a vehicle for social interaction.

Humans are social beings who are in continuous communication and interaction with each other. For that reason, it is important to foster situations in which learners can face real communication in a foreign language. An argument that supports this view is found in Bygate (1987: 1), who states: "Our learners often need to be able to speak with confidence in order to carry out many of their most basic transactions. It is the skill by which they are most frequently judged, and through which they make or lose friends."

"In interaction students can use all they possess of the language, all they have learned or casually absorbed in real life exchanges" (Rivers, cited in Brown, 1994, p.159). This quote addresses the importance of real interaction which gives the learners the opportunity to demonstrate what they can do in the foreign language. Interaction is the basis of human communication and all elements of communicative and interactive competence (grammar, discourse, sociolinguistics, pragmatics) are involved in human interaction. They must work together for successful communication to take place.

On the other hand, it is important to create a positive environment to encourage the learners' interaction. As such, they can express their ideas, feelings and opinions without feeling afraid of making mistakes. Students can also carry out communicative tasks in an effective way. Willis (1996) states that creating a low stress atmosphere and using the language for real purposes are ways to get meaningful communication and through interaction learners have the chance to acquire discourse skills. Willis also highlights the essential conditions for effective language learning, such as exposure, use, and motivation. With this view of language, task-based learning offers many advantages in the designing of communicative activities and the development and improvement of oral skills.

Nunan (1991: 279) says that task-based learning views the learning process as a set of communicative tasks that are directly linked to the curricular goals

they serve. Task-based teaching involves an approach where communicative tasks are important because students need to engage in interactions inside and outside the classrooms. This view changes the approach of designing tasks to be developed in the classroom. It means teachers and students must be engaged in tasks which involve meaningful contexts where learners use the foreign language in a real form not only for a grade but for their daily life. Task-based learning lets the students develop a set of discourse strategies such as opening and closing conversation, introducing a topic, etc. Also, the learners have the opportunity to interact in different situations, in different groups and audiences. At this point I want to highlight the importance of group work because when learners work in groups, they have the chance to rehearse their speech and also give and receive feedback.

METHODOLOGY

Since the purpose of this research project was to inquire about the development of oral production and how interaction and the task-based approach could contribute to improve the quality and the development of students' speaking skills, it was undertaken in the form of action research in which the teacher researcher reflected on the speaking tasks carried out with ninth grade students at Britalia high school.

Kemmis and MacTaggar (1985), cited in Jiménez, Luna, and Marín (1993) provide a view of action research. It deals with understanding, changing, and innovating classroom processes by collecting information in a spiral way. Moreover, action research allows teachers to inquire about learning problems and reflect on their pedagogical practice. Action research is an ongoing process of continuous reflection, redesigning and rethinking to improve pedagogical practice in each cycle. The implementation of each cycle of the research project let me reflect on students' needs and, at the same time, be aware of the main changes needed in the pedagogical practice. For instance, in the first task (speaking about music), I perceived

that video was a good input for the activity. The students enjoyed singing the Nirvana songs, but when they were required to speak about them, they were very scared. For that reason, I had to look for alternatives which solved that problem. I reflected on possible solutions such as interaction in small groups. Teacher and peer feedback were fruitful because in the second task, students were more confident in their oral communication when facing the whole group.

Setting and Population

The research project was carried out at Institución Educativa Distrital Britalia with a ninth grade group. Forty students participated in the project: twenty three girls and seventeen boys, whose ages ranged from 14 to 17 years old. Students share similar socio-economic status (middle – low). They receive three hours of English instruction per week. The Institución Educativa Distrital Britalia is a public school located in the Kennedy District, Bogotá.

Data Collection Instruments

The following list outlines the techniques and instruments I used: (1) Questionnaires. They were used in the needs analysis stage to inquire about students' opinions and experiences related to speaking skills. (2) Observation was carried out through proformas which gave me the chance to analyze what was happening in the classes and the students' attitudes toward the speaking tasks. (3) I also used a diary. It enabled me to reflect and rethink regarding my teaching practice and take notes about special or meaningful teaching experiences. (4) Videotapes and audiotapes became useful tools in the research project because I could capture valuable information and analyze it at different times.

PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN

The starting point was a diagnosis and needs analysis activity whose results helped me to design three communicative and interactive tasks which

let students explore their process of oral communication. The learners' personal experiences were of paramount importance in the planning and further implementation of new tasks. They were asked about personal points of view, telling information about past events and supporting ideas.

The first data were provided by needs analysis and a diagnostic activity. I used a questionnaire which was answered by forty students. They were asked about speaking skills and oral communication (See Appendix 1). The activity showed that the majority of students was conscious about the importance of improving speaking skills and the problems that they had in oral communication. Learners wanted to communicate in English and considered speaking in that language an important skill. But they wanted to communicate in writing rather than orally because speaking involves good pronunciation and fluency which they did not have. What is more, they felt scared when they spoke in front of people or when they made pronunciation or grammar mistakes. In addition, teachers in public schools have an average of 50 students per group so it makes it difficult to train the students in oral skills. Speaking demands a lot of time, especially when the students are not used to working in groups and monitoring themselves; they are dependent only on the teacher's feedback.

Among the favorite topics that learners liked to speak about were music, literature, films, stories, sports, and important people. Students preferred to narrate and describe instead of supporting ideas. Some students said that they did not like to communicate in English with others because they did not understand them. Consequently, they had some problems in listening skills too. Some of them pronounced isolated words or said incomplete sentences. I could observe that learners made a set of grammar and pronunciation mistakes (See Appendix 2). Also, students showed a lack of fluency and problems with word order, sentence structure, transferences, omissions, and pet words.

I concluded that students needed to carry out not only pedagogical tasks (tasks developed in the classroom) but also target tasks (tasks that students must accomplish beyond the classroom), which involved independent study and practice. I wrote a general report about the first findings. Periodical analysis and reflection were carried out during and after the implementation of each speaking task and their results were used to design the new actions or new tasks.

Three tasks oriented to improving speaking skills were designed and the following procedure was implemented:

In the first step, I looked for the students' preferred topics, the students' weaknesses and strengths, the available materials, and the designing of workshops and guides.

The second cycle was the implementation of speaking tasks. In the first task (speaking about music), students expressed their opinions about Nirvana, a rock music group and the principal singer, Kurt Cobain. They participated in different activities such a free conversation in small groups and giving points of view in a discussion. During the development of these activities, the majority of the group was stressed, but little by little the members avoided anxiety and were willing to participate in oral activities. The first participants were volunteers. In order to carry out this task, students required the following skills: to produce speech in a natural way using appropriate sentences and some cohesive devices in spoken discourse (See Appendix 3).

In comparison to the diagnostic stage, I could perceive an improvement of sentence structure, the students pronounced short sentences and used some paralinguistic devices (gestures, eyes and hand movements). However, some of them did not handle cohesive devices. This fact gave me the idea to reinforce the use of linking words in oral production and take advantage of writing as a strength in the group. The students could write a draft of their oral composition in order to give them constructive feedback. It fostered improvement of word order, sentence structure and pronunciation.

The second task, a photo-story, consisted of the narration of a story based on the students' photographs. Students enjoyed it very much; they inquired about classmates, family, childhood, elementary and primary

education, and the most important celebrations. This showed that it was positive to implement tasks where learners involved personal experiences. Nunan (1991) brings out this aspect in the designing of tasks. With this activity, I could see that students had difficulties related to fluency. They used pet words and repetitions. Although they tried as much as possible to keep correct word order, sometimes they did not remember specific words in their tales. It broke the narration of the story and the listeners became bored. The last situation gave me cues to design activities oriented to practice narration faster by using dumb stories to improve fluency and speed. Ferdinand's stories, for instance (See Appendix 4).

The final task was presenting a conversation about Maloka, a technological and interactive place in Bogotá. Students exchanged information through open questions. They gave points of views and supported their ideas orally. Students learned about some research experiences and watched an interactive film. Then, they carried out an interactive activity in groups of four people. Students had to discuss some open questions related to technological advances and the film. During the interactive phase, they received teachers' and classmates' oral feedback to rehearse, refine and improve their oral production. In order to develop the ability to support ideas, learners also carried out some activities such as small debates

Table 1. Summary of the diagnostic stage and findings.

Before the Implementation of the Project	After the Implementation of the Project
There was not a context of communication and interaction in the classroom.	There was a context of communication and interaction where students developed tasks focused on the practice of oral skills.
Speaking was assimilated as an isolated product. Students only repeated instructions and memorized dialogues.	Speaking involved learners' experiences and interests. They gave information about themselves, expressed their feelings, opinions and criticism.
Students perceived speaking as an individual activity, and they did not interact using the foreign language.	Speaking was seen as a social skill, where interaction, feedback and group work played an important role.
There were not clear or evident phases in the development of speaking.	Exposure, interaction, feedback were useful phases before oral production. They let students rehearse and refine their speech.
Students were not able to communicate orally. They were afraid of making mistakes and speaking in front of others.	Students perceived speaking as a developmental skill where pronunciation and grammar mistakes are part of the process of improvement.
Students' oral production was poor; they only pronounced isolated words or disconnected sentences.	Students improved their oral production. Isolated and disconnected sentences turned into meaningful and coherent texts.
Students did not use paralinguistic resources in their oral communication.	Gestures, tone of voice, hand and eye movements complemented their oral communication.
Students were not able to negotiate meaning and support their ideas.	Students exchanged information and negotiated meaning in their conversations. They expressed positions in a basic way.

about the advantages and disadvantages of technology for human beings. Finally, they held a group conversation, exchanging information and opinions about Maloka.

FINDINGS

With the information provided by the four instruments implemented, I analyzed the data to highlight the relevant information and establish the categories. The following table summarizes the findings before and during the implementation of the project. The information in the first column is the result of the diagnostic stage and the teacher's reflection regarding observation. The second column shows the most important findings during the development of the project taking as base the video and audiotapes and proformas.

On the other hand, I established some categories bearing in mind the collected information. The categories are related to the following stages to enhance oral communication among students:

Exposure: Students were put in contact with some patterns of the foreign language which provided models and, at the same time, created a stimulating communicative context. In that way, they were motivated to communicate in English. For instance, in the implementation of the first task the learners enjoyed listening to music and watching the videos and pictures of Nirvana. Some of them asked about the history of the group, the lyrics and albums. At the beginning, oral production was poor; students only pronounced isolated words or disconnected expressions, so their oral production was not meaningful for their interlocutors. Also, learners did not have confidence to communicate in oral form.

Interaction: Students carried out the interactive and communicative tasks practicing in small groups where they could speak without the teacher's control or grades. This was the phase where students ridded their fear and rehearsed their speech. In this phase, they improved their oral production due to the group work practice. Students exchanged information with different listeners using short sentences.

Feedback: It was one of the most important tools. Students received feedback from the teacher and their classmates because the development of the speaking activities required different listeners' contributions in order to establish meaningful interaction and fruitful communication. Feedback also contributed toward giving confidence to learners and, at the same time, contributed toward improving language use. Students received feedback in all speaking tasks (See Appendix 6). In this phase, they began to use connectors to make their oral production more coherent for their interlocutors.

Final Oral Production: Students incorporated feedback observations and refined their oral texts. They obtained fluency in their oral production and used pragmalinguistic devices to make their communication more effective. For example, students in the third task held oral defenses and simple conversations supporting and defending their ideas in front of others.

All interactive and communicative tasks involved the development of the following basic phases: exposure, interaction and feedback before the final production. I consider them to be useful in the implementation of activities because oral production is a meaningful process which requires time and practice.

CONCLUSIONS

Following the cycles of action research helped me to carry out the research and innovation project which took into account the needs and interests of students. It also let me reflect on my pedagogical practice and look for new alternatives to encourage oral communication among the learners.

The problems of the lack of an interactive and communicative context and speaking skills were addressed in this project. An approach to task-based learning proved to be effective for the population of this study. So the three speaking tasks were activities which let students express their ideas, feelings and opinions freely.

The teacher was a facilitator of learning. I interacted with students giving feedback, offering

solutions and assessing speaking in a collaborative way. Students were active participants during the course of the project. They interacted with others and asked for information or feedback which let them improve their oral production.

Feedback and group work let students assess themselves, refine their oral production and get confidence in speaking. They interacted all the time in a collaborative environment, leaving behind their fear of making mistakes and perceiving speaking as a process of continuous practice.

By developing interactive and communicative tasks, the students of ninth grade of Britalia could develop speaking skills, which let them interact in different situations using the foreign language in a fruitful form. They asked and gave information, expressed their ideas and supported them.

During the research project learners were encouraged to communicate in the oral form as much as possible. They used the foreign language by engaging in situations that replicated normal language use; for instance, speaking about the advantages and disadvantages of technology. Thus, I can conclude that the learners attained a certain level of knowledge and proficiency in the language use. But the most important point was that they could express and communicate orally, without the pressure of time or grades. They used language meaningfully and effectively.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This project implied a set of tasks based on interactive and communicative approaches with the purpose of helping students improve their oral skills. The analysis of findings suggests the implications for pedagogical practice as follows:

The creation of an interactive and communicative context contributes to the development of speaking skills and the improvement of oral production. Students work in small groups. This, in turn, helps them to improve oral production.

Task-based learning lets students carry out activities around their personal experiences. It is then important that teachers be aware of the students' knowledge of foreign language and of what they can do with it. For instance, when the students are able to interact with others or face an oral defense supporting their ideas.

Feedback is a useful element in foreign language learning. It lets students rehearse and assess their oral production. Feedback lets teachers perceive learning as a process. This way, they can analyze the students' mistakes and work based on their strengths and weaknesses to improve language use and communication.

Lastly, I can point out that the steps that teachers bear in mind in action research should become part of the daily teaching activity, especially for those who are really engaged in making their teaching practice an environment of reflection and improvement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Dorelly Gutierrez Gutierrez holds a B. A. in modern languages from the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia and participated in the "Red PROFILE" in-service program. She is working at the I.E.D. Britalia Kennedy. She is a master's candidate in the Master Program in Applied Linguistics to TEFL at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas.

REFERENCES
Brown, D. (1994). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy.* New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.

Bygate, M. (1987). *Speaking.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Jiménez, S., et al. (1993). *Action research guide.* Bogotá: COFE Series publications.

Nunan, D. (1991). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning.* London: Longman.

APPENDIX 1: NEEDS ANALYSIS SURVEY

The purpose of this survey is to inquire about the most important needs of the population and the students' attitudes to speaking skills.

Please respond precisely.

Grade: _____

1. Do you communicate in English?
Yes _____ No _____
Why

2. In which form do you communicate?
Oral _____ Written _____
Why

3. Do you consider oral communication important?
Yes _____ No _____
Why

4. What strategies do you use in oral communication?

5. What elements are required to express yourself effectively in oral form?

6. Do you speak with other people in English?
Yes _____ No _____
Why

7. Write some problems or difficulties that you face in oral communication.

8. What are the possible solutions to the above problems?

9. In your oral communication you prefer:
a. To describe
b. To narrate
c. To present
d. To support
Why

10. What are your preferred topics in conversations or in oral defenses?

11.   Would you participate in a speaking program oriented to improve your oral production?
Yes _____ No _____
Why

APPENDIX 2: TRANSCRIPTION OF THE DIAGNOSTIC ACTIVITY (Free speaking)

Students developed a simple speaking task. The patterns of oral language demonstrated that they have problems in their communication and their oral production was very poor.

Speech Sample	Comments
S1…Grunge movement (he moves his face) and breaks the conversation. The majority of the students look at each other and avoid the camera. Others hide their faces and when somebody speaks, they laugh very much. S1: Nirvana was //…the Grunge… T: what is the idea? S1: Nirvana was one Grunge band. Conventions // interruption … pause	I perceived that the students have many problems in oral communication. They did not want to speak because they are afraid to make pronunciation and grammar mistakes. Students only used isolated words and disconnected expressions. There was not a context of communication and interaction which encourages learners to speak.

APPENDIX 3: TRANSCRIPTION OF THE FIRST TASK (Speaking about music)

This extract illustrates oral production during the development of the first task. In this activity students began to use the foreign language to interact with each other.

Speech sample	Comments
S1: … the music is so *depressed&* T: what are the reasons that Kurt Cobain music was *depressed&* or sad? S1: but parents *divorced&* // in childhood… (she moves her hands) *depressed&* Kurt Cobain.	I could observe that both speakers are in a developmental process. They make different kinds of mistakes in their pronunciation and grammar structures. They omitted some verbs and there are some disconnected sentences. However, there is a relative improvement in word order and sentence structure.
S2: My opinion // it is *interesant**… in the band *i violence&* and problem in his family… (she moves her eyes and face) and *i* excellent band of Nirvana T: Do you like that music? S2: yes T: What is your preferred music?	In the oral production, students tried to express their opinions leaving the limitations of vocabulary or grammar structures and focusing on the messages. They used different resources (face, eye and hand movements, gestures, tone of voice and other ones) which helped them to communicate in an effective way and to improve their oral discourse.
S2: Romantic Conventions … pause & mistaken pronunciation // interruption * invented words i omitted word	I was aware of the lack of cohesive devices in the oral texts. For that reason, in the next task, students will develop a workshop about the different kinds of connectors in order to make their oral texts more meaningful and coherent for their listeners.

APPENDIX 4: TRANSCRIPTION OF THE SECOND TASK (Photo story)

This extracts shows that students improved their oral production and fluency. They were very encouraged speaking about their family, trips, memories of childhood and adolescence.

Speech sample	Comments
S5: …with *my&* family I *¿* work cared to *¿* … I visited *my&* grandmother// with my family… in the house. (she moves her eyes and looks the photography) S5: I *i* six in mother house in company The parents // After… I traveled with *my&* Family in Girardot. (she looks the photography) … On vacation I visited a grandmother in the Boyaca. // I celebrated *bautism* "veinte de" july&* I *eat&* chicken in the restaurant with godparents… Conventions … pause & mistaken pronunciation // interruptions * invented word *¿* misunderstand word *i* omitted word "" expression in Spanish	In this task, the student faced a presentation using different photos. The student had fluency in her speech; however, she used few connectors. I could perceive an improvement in the sentence structure and word order. The student tried to communicate by related sentences in each photo. The student expressed as possible the message in her presentation. Sometimes she used her native language in order to continue her oral text and avoid stops which could break the narrative sequence. In this stage of the project, students made pauses to express their thinking in English and avoid the direct translation from Spanish because they began to be aware about the differences between their native and the foreign language. Some of them told me that it was a difficult process.

APPENDIX 5: TRANSCRIPTION OF THE THIRD TASK (Speaking about Maloka)

This pattern illustrates the production at the end of the speaking tasks. In this activity, students were more confident in their interactions.

Speech sample	Comments
S4: Hello friends S4: What is your opinion about Maloka? S1: My opinion about Maloka is that it is a // a good place to learn. (he moves his eyes and hands) S2: My opinion about Maloka is good, *i* good because… because it *¿* for its games and experiments. S3: My opinion about *&* Maloka *i* is good for *incent** technology. S4: My opinion *i* is wonderful and beautiful. S3: What is the most important place for you? S4: For me *i* place was important is theatre and *¿* (students look each other and smile) S1: The place many important for me was the cinema, because *¿* was a beautiful for *your°* decorations. S3: My favorite place is *electrocut** and decoration… S3: Did you like the film Dizziness? S4: Yes, the film Dizziness is real and wonderful.	In the conversation, I perceived that students spoke spontaneously. They used different pragmalinguistic resources to make their communication more effective. Students smiled and moved their hands like native language speakers; also their tone of voice expressed enthusiasm. It was planned that students ask questions but not only one member of the group. At the beginning of the conversation, S4 began to ask questions and the rest of the students gave their opinions. However, S3 decided to ask all the questions. Perhaps it is the first time that students faced an oral presentation and they needed to develop other conversational activities. In the oral production, I could analyze that students improved their level of fluency. There was not a great number of interruptions and pauses despite their omitting words in some sentences and inventing new expressions. Learners emphasized bits in the message. They defended their ideas with the use of connectors of reason. Students highlighted Cinedomo as the most important place in Maloka. Additionally, they expressed their opinions about the dependence of men on technology. It is interesting that students used the foreign language to make judgments about the situation nowadays.

(Students look each other) S3: What are the *disadvantages&* of technology? S1: The *disadvantage&* of technology is that human depend of technology… S3: What invention do you consider important for human *beings&?* S1, S2, S4: Computer (they speak at the same time) S1: … ¡ Save information. S3: And chat Conventions … pause & mistaken pronunciation * invented word // interruption ¿ misunderstand word ¡ omitted word º wrong word	Students tried to support their ideas, they answered yes – no questions and complemented them with an additional explanation.

APPENDIX 6: FEEDBACK FORMAT FOR THE SPEAKING TASKS

Students received the form before the final production.

FEEDBACK

Fluency:
_____
_____

Pronunciation:
_____
_____

Interaction:
_____
_____

Vocabulary:
_____
_____

Use of language:
_____
_____

Coherence and cohesion devices:
_____
_____

Speed:
_____
_____

Suggestions:
_____
_____
_____