

Children's Oral Communication in English Class Activities: An Exploratory Study

La comunicación oral de los niños en actividades de una clase de inglés: Un estudio exploratorio

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It is important that teachers fully equip students with the skills needed to communicate effectively in the target language so that they can share and exchange their ideas, feelings, opinions, etc. This article reports on a study aimed at examining the development of children's oral communication in English and the way in which the activities and the teacher's roles created or expanded students' opportunities for learning. Data collection techniques included field notes, audio and video recordings and two interviews to the teacher. The study revealed that children's oral production was possible thanks to the teacher's efforts to provide children with topics and activities closely related to the students' particular interests and needs. Likewise, the teacher created an appropriate learning environment in which children were challenged to use English in meaningful ways.

Key words: Oral communication, young learners, teaching English, children, teacher's roles

Es importante que los maestros faciliten a sus estudiantes las habilidades necesarias para comunicarse efectivamente en la lengua extranjera, de tal forma que puedan compartir e intercambiar sus ideas, sentimientos, opiniones, etc. Este artículo reporta sobre un estudio encaminado a examinar el desarrollo de la comunicación oral de los niños en inglés y de la forma en que las actividades y los roles del profesor crearon y ampliaron las oportunidades de aprendizaje de los niños. Las técnicas de recolección de datos incluyeron notas de campo, grabaciones de audio y video y dos entrevistas a la profesora participante. El estudio reveló que la producción oral de los niños fue posible gracias a los esfuerzos de la profesora para brindarles temas y actividades estrechamente relacionados con sus intereses y necesidades particulares. Así mismo, la profesora creó un ambiente de aprendizaje apropiado en el cual los niños usaron el inglés de manera significativa.

Palabras claves: Comunicación oral en niños, enseñanza del inglés a niños, roles del profesor

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INTRODUCTION

Oral language is the principal medium of communication for young learners. Even when their literacy abilities are formed, it is the most important link with the outside world. Through it, children are able to share ideas, acquire new concepts, organize old ones, compose stories and create new worlds. Likewise, oral language takes children on a journey into the world of imagination where they can truly live the adventure of using language for communication. It is our role as teachers to make this journey a meaningful and enjoyable one.

But how can we help our children to develop these oral skills? There are important links between what and how children are taught and how they learn. Traditionally, the second/foreign language teacher has been seen as an expert and the learner as a passive receptor of information; the teacher spends hours and hours teaching by talking while the students sit listening passively. In such conventional teaching-learning environment there is no chance for students to gain knowledge and to explore ideas. As can be seen, children's oral language is indeed an important aspect in the process of children's learning that has been neglected in the classroom. It is also an intellectual issue which deserves more attention from both teachers and researchers. Hence, our interest in inquiring about children's oral communication during the development of the class activities in an English course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section includes the following relevant aspects related to our research topic: the general principles of teaching children and young learners, the definition of oral communication and what oral communication in children implies.

General Principles for Teaching Children and Young Learners

According to the Colombian National Education Ministry –Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia –M.E.N. (1999), the methodologies for

teaching English to children and young learners are more effective if they have the following characteristics:

Active and interactive methodologies that account for ludic or play principles: Active and interactive methodologies allow children to learn a foreign language by doing actions with it. Learners become actors who use the language to convey meaning in real situations both inside and outside the classroom.

Activities that promote the development of children's potential: According to Phillips (1993), the way children learn a foreign language depends greatly on their developmental stage. Therefore, activities need to match carefully the child's age and ability level if language learning success is to be attained.

Interesting and meaningful activities centered in the learner: If the learning process is focused on the learner, the activities have to be designed to fulfill his/her needs and interests; in that way the activities will be meaningful and directly related to the learner's daily life.

Methodologies that emphasize affective factors: If language learning is to take place, learners must be affectively open to second language input. Krashen (1981) asserts that learners with a good self-image and motivation interact more and obtain more input for acquisition.

Methodologies that integrate children's prior and new knowledge: Within the methodological process, teachers can include an element of reflection where children are drawn periodically into a personal synthesis of what they are learning. This process of reflection has the purpose of making children aware of the way new language knowledge relates coherently to the existing knowledge, forming an integrated whole.

Flexible methodologies: These methodologies allow teachers to select and adapt techniques and activities appropriate to the specific students' characteristics and needs.

Among the methodologies and approaches advisable for teaching English to children we can

find the natural approach, total physical response, project work, activity-based learning, whole language, content-based instruction and the communicative approach. All of these methodologies and approaches are widely known by the ELT community and, given the restrictions of space; we are not going to explain them here. However, with respect to the classes we observed, we could say that the methodology used by the teacher was mostly communicative. Oral practice was always emphasized and listening comprehension developed. The role of the teacher in these classes was to provide children with opportunities for meaningful interaction and to establish interesting and enjoyable activities which motivated students to learn the language. In this way, children experienced a real need of negotiating meaning and communicating ideas in the new code. Likewise, total physical response and natural approach principles were applied in class.

Oral Communication

"Since communication is a process, it is insufficient for students to simply have knowledge of target language forms, meanings and functions. Students must be able to apply this knowledge in negotiating meaning. It is through the interaction between speaker and listener (or reader and writer) that meaning becomes clear" (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p. 123). This makes us point out that the main goal when handling speaking in class should be to help the learner to produce fluent and accurate language appropriate to the speech situation. To attain this goal, the learner must receive comprehensible input to act on in order to activate and develop his/her own learning mechanisms. However, the concept of comprehensible input is not enough in itself to explain the development of second/foreign language learning. Learners also need opportunities to interact with other speakers and to negotiate meaning through interaction (Ellis, 1985, as cited in Glew, 1998).

In addition to the relevance of input and interaction, Reyes (2002, p. 22) defines the

importance of output in the process of acquisition: "Through exchanges with peers, or native speakers of the target language, the learners are not only receiving meaningful input, but they are also testing the efficiency of their output and the ability to convey the message. Besides, they are testing their ideas about the language and creating meaning through negotiation."

Successful second language learning also requires opportunities for students to obtain ample feedback. Through teacher's and peers' oral feedback, learners can refine and improve their oral production. Similarly, through error correction, students can incorporate new language elements from the correct forms of the teacher's responses.

Oral Communication in Young Learners

According to Dunn (1984), the process of second language learning in young children within the classroom context goes through three stages, namely: *silent period*, *intermediate period* and *breakthrough period*. In the silent period, as children can already communicate in their own language, they want to be able to use the foreign language in the same way. If they cannot say what they want, they feel frustrated or lose interest. Thus, to speed up the process of speaking, teachers can provide children with useful or prefabricated phrases helping to expand the children's repertoire of language. They can learn these as blocks of sounds the same way they did when they learnt their first language.

After a certain period of time children move beyond the silent period and begin using the prefabricated language in different situations. When young foreign language learners finally begin communication in the target language, that is to say, in the intermediate period, mainly learnt by imitation and repetition, researchers have observed two consistent features: the use of telegraphic speech and the use of formulaic speech.

Telegraphic speech refers to the use of a few content words such as an entire utterance without function words or morphological markers. Children

use these single words frequently, repeating them and practicing them. Then, the next step in this process involves an elaboration or extension made by the teacher which the children imitate. On the other hand, formulaic speech consists of children using short phrases. Through frequent imitation and repetition such phrases are learnt and used. These formulas often help children to communicate in the foreign language with speakers around them.

Finally, in the breakthrough period, children begin to put the learnt language together to express meaning. It is a process of incorporation. Children incorporate an utterance used by an adult into an already established phrase or one that is being produced from elements already learnt. In this way, children begin to recognize the rules that underlie the foreign language.

However, not all second language learners follow the exact same stages. There is a set of factors (psychological, sociological, cognitive, to name a few), known as individual variation, that may affect directly or indirectly the process of second language learning. Accordingly, some people could learn faster or slower than others, make more mistakes, etc. (M.E.N., 1999).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We intended to inquire about children's oral communication during the development of the class activities in an English course. Therefore, our main question was: What happens with children's oral communication in English when they take part in class activities? And our research secondary questions were: What is the nature of the class activities? And what is the teacher's role in the development of such activities?

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research followed the qualitative case-study principles. We chose a case study as our research method because it allowed us to identify significant factors and characteristics of the phenomenon while studying groups that were functioning (Merriam, 1988). Our role in the investigation was

researcher-observers. We accounted for children's oral production from an ethic perspective; that is, we tried to understand the phenomenon from outside the group.

Our research process began by identifying the phenomenon and formulating our research questions based on it. Then, we got literature in the field about the topic and we started to read and select the relevant information. Later, we chose the appropriate data collection techniques according to the nature of the questions. Once we had the information gathered through the four instruments implemented, we began to organize this data to make its reading and interpretation easier. We read and re-read the information several times to find similarities and differences and to establish patterns to which we then gave a name. After this initial identification of phenomena in the data, we grouped our first concepts under umbrella terms called categories according to their commonalities. The next step involved the naming and definition of the categories and subcategories. Finally, we engaged in the process of validating our findings.

Context and Participants

The National University of Colombia offers Saturday English courses to children from 7-8 years old. The program consists of four different learning projects divided into the following three levels: Pushers (beginners), Fighters (intermediate) and Challengers (advanced). The main purpose of the courses is to learn language by doing things taking into account that the potential development of children's creativity serves as the foundation to build an integral education.

Our study was carried out in the intermediate level of the "Universe Maniacs" project. The goals for this course were that children create and describe an alien, his/her activities, abilities, clothing and food as well as the planet where he/she lives. The participants totaled 16: a teacher, aged 40, and a group of 15 children aged 8-10. Our participant teacher had been working with the English courses since 1995 and specifically with

the Universe Maniacs project for two years. The children were in 4th and 5th grade and had been attending the courses at the university every Saturday from 9 a.m. to 12 for two years as an extra reinforcement to the activities developed by each of them at school.

Data Collection Techniques

Field notes: Field notes are direct observations of what is being said and done in a classroom as well as impressions and perceptions of the observers (Arhar, Holly, and Kasten, 2001). In our case we took notes for four months in every Saturday lesson. These notes allowed us to register behaviors, attitudes and the teaching-learning processes closely related to the purpose of our investigation.

Audio and video recordings: Audio and video recordings provided us with verbatim data of children's oral production. They also allowed us to look again at what happened in certain moments and to supplement the data gathered through field notes.

Interviews: Interviews were useful tools for understanding the children's experiences in oral activities and the meaning they made of those experiences. In other words, interviews were used "to have the participants reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study" (Seidman, 1998) (see Appendix 1).

It should be clarified that we got permission from the children's parents to audio and video-record children's oral production and to use the data gathered in our project. Students' real names were changed to protect their identity.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

Taking into account that with this research we wanted to measure children's oral production in English class activities, we are going to describe how the teacher organized activities so that children could talk.

Initially, the teacher asked students to stick some posters with useful expressions on the board. These expressions enabled children to participate

and maintain communication in English. For example, "How do you say _____ in English?" "Can I erase the board?" "Can you repeat, please?", etc.

Then, the different topics were introduced to the students through a sequence of activities from real and imaginary situations and through written and oral input. The objective was to provide students with useful vocabulary and structures that later would help them to describe their aliens and their new planet.

Next, children were given intensive practice in the vocabulary and structure under the teacher's guidance and control. The students, through a demonstration or an example given by the teacher, could understand what they were expected to do and take the teacher's production as a language model. After this, the students practiced using what they had learned with less control by the teacher since they could talk freely about the things they had invented after having developed a series of individual and group activities.

DATA ANALYSIS

In the process of analyzing data, our units of analysis were the evidence of children's oral production gathered through our field notes and the transcriptions of the audio and video recordings. This evidence shed an important light on the characteristics of children's oral communication and the way in which the class activities promoted this communication. Equally important were the impressions, opinions and experiences of our participant teacher regarding the class activities, her role as a teacher and the development of children's oral production throughout the entire course.

In the data analysis process, we scrutinized the data thoroughly and carefully to search for salient patterns. We used colors to codify the data and group the common elements in the information. This last stage, data analysis, involved some of the strategies suggested by Merriam (1988) to validate our findings: *triangulation*, to compare the same emerging findings in the different instruments;

member checking, by asking the teacher if she considered our results plausible; and *long-term observation* at the research site in order to increase the validity of the data.

We corroborated our findings by using two types of triangulation (Burns, 1999). On the one hand, we used *methodological triangulation* which consists of multiple ways to collect information. First, we gathered the information from the field notes and the interviews, and then we compared it with the audio and videotape transcriptions. On the other hand, we used *investigator triangulation*, as there were two researchers involved in this project.

RESULTS

There was an on-going revision and updating of the categories that implied returning to the raw data several times and re-naming and re-organizing

the categories we had found. The analysis of the information gathered led us to the categories and sub-categories shown in diagram 1, which evidences their connections with our research questions.

Relying on Previous Knowledge

We noticed that activities allowed students to communicate orally mainly when they could rely on previous knowledge. Teacher and students take a trip to the world of words taking off from the earthly platform where they have to refuel the tank of knowledge by reviewing and reinforcing the prior experiences they have about the world that surrounds them.

As is known by primary teachers, constructivism proposes that the learning process is an act of construction of meaning by learners

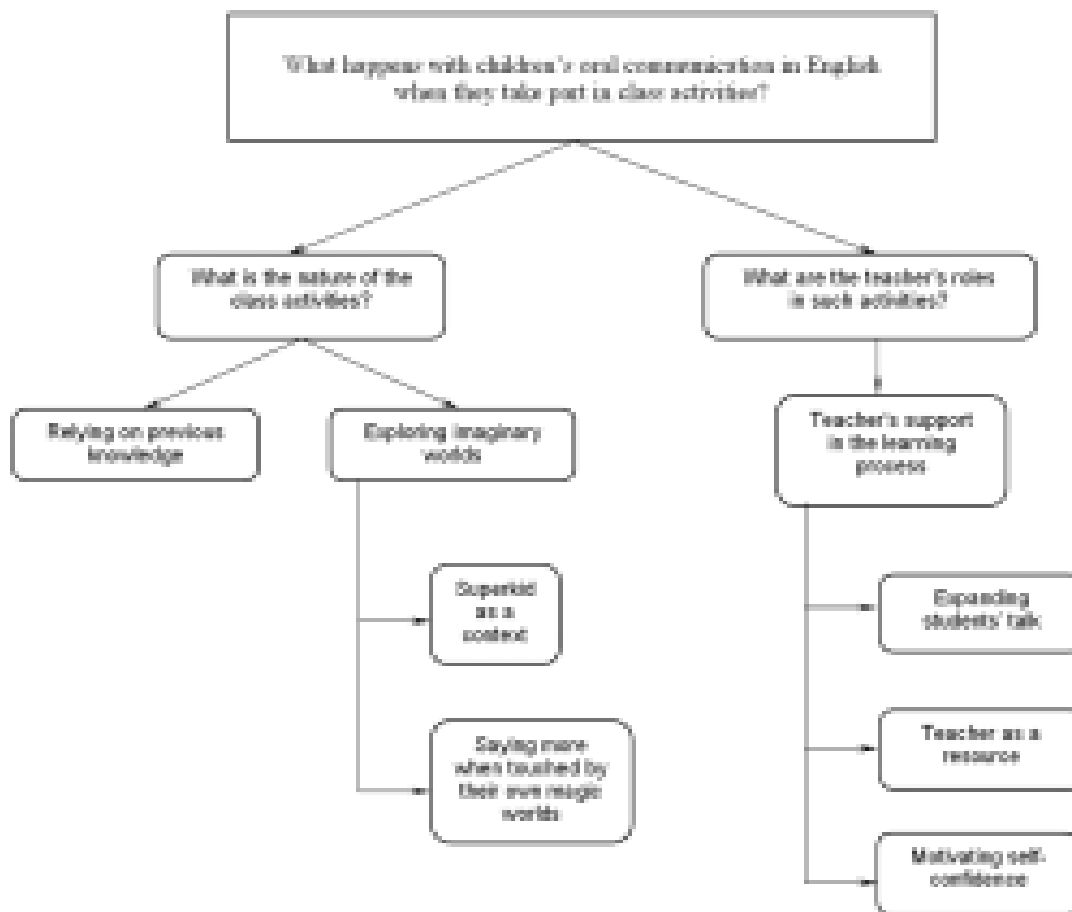


Diagram 1. Categories and sub-categories found in the analysis of the data.

within the context of their current knowledge and past experiences. People construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. When learners encounter something new, they reconcile it with previous knowledge and experience. They may use the new information, or they may discard it as irrelevant.

Analyzing the information we collected from the field notes, transcriptions and interviews, we found out that students were exposed to a variety of activities that had an element in common: They reflected what children already knew or had experienced in life. The following extract from our observations illustrates that common feature:

"T: Let's talk about the clothes... Alex, this question is for you. What is Katherine wearing today?

A: She is jacket

T: She is wearing...

A: Wearing jacket... ehh glove?"

(Transcription, April 24, 2004)

This example shows that students come to the language learning situation with already-formulated knowledge, ideas and understandings. This previous knowledge helps the teacher to review and reinforce the new language and to make sure it is meaningful and understandable for children. Thus, if the teacher uses the environment that surrounds children's lives to be expressed in English, young learners will see the foreign language as a means to express their experiences in their daily life:

"T: [...] Children already know many things; the teacher only has to see how to use those things they already know. Children know them from the T.V., the newspaper, the world that surrounds them and from stories at school. They come from learning English, they are studying English at school."

(Teacher's interview, June 7, 2004)

In this respect, the teacher provided the children with oral and written input closely related to their realities and their previous experiences with the foreign language, as observed in this instance:

"T: [...] This is the homework about you. The teacher writes on the board 'What activities do you do on Sunday?' 'Describe your Sunday, please. For example, I wake up at ten..., I watch TV, I go to the park... It's about you... Do this activity at home.'"

(Transcription, May 22, 2004)

As we noticed, students never came to class as empty vessels to be filled with several language elements. The personal and linguistic experiences they have lived in their first language constitute the foundation for foreign language learning (Cummins, 2001). All these experiences and knowledge acquired in the L1 learning make an important contribution to the L2 learning process. "The conceptual knowledge that students possess in their first language constitutes a major component of the 'cognitive power' that they bring to the language learning situation. Thus, it makes sense to value and, where possible, continue to cultivate these abilities both for their own sake and to facilitate transfer to English" (Ibid, 2001, p. 40).

The classroom activities also helped both teacher and students create a familiar framework for developing knowledge of the new language. However, successful foreign language learning requires opportunities for students to receive comprehensible input as well as to produce comprehensible output. This was especially so when the teacher applied different strategies to elicit information from the students, reinforcing the idea of meaningful interaction, as seen in the following example:

"T: Now you are going mention the color, o.k.? What is Daniela wearing today?"

S: A jacket.

T: She is wearing...

S: She is wearing a pink... a pink jacket and ... blue pants.”

(Transcription, April 24, 2004)

Vigotsky (1978), Piaget (1981), and Bruner (1980), among others, argue that meaning is the basis of the learning process. To be meaningful, this learning should be articulated both in a social context and in the daily life of the learner. In such supportive environment children will have the opportunity to construct their own knowledge in an active and creative way.

We conclude that children learn more easily when the learning environment reflects meaningful situations that include their daily life experiences. Accordingly, previous knowledge of the world is important when trying to teach a foreign language as it is the scaffolding children count on to reconcile the new knowledge with what they already know. (Bruner, as cited in M.E.N., 1999).

But how did the teacher connect children's prior knowledge to new knowledge and avoid falling into the boring, senseless and meaningless world of repetition? The answer to this question let us describe the second category which responded to one of the secondary questions of our research: What is the nature of the activities?

Exploring Imaginary Worlds

Going on with the amazing trip, both teacher and students took off from planet Earth in their spaceship of knowledge ready to explore the universe of language. Now, traveling through that never-ending universe, they will see magic worlds where imagination and fun will let them have some good times.

Cameron (2001) points out that general language learning principles and research have shown that young learners need the following models of language use to listen to, to notice and to assimilate; plentiful opportunities for repeated listening and plentiful opportunities to practice words, phrases and sentences. Taking this into consideration, children need constant questioning and redirection in order to process the information

and make it their own. Repetition, in different forms, allows consolidation of knowledge and deeper understanding. Accordingly, if repetition is to be meaningful and enjoyable, the teacher must take on the responsibility of adjusting tasks and topics so that they relate to pupils' interests and needs. In this respect, our participant teacher says:

“...To avoid the repetitive, boring description of the planet Earth, of human beings, for this is something they have been working on, to avoid that repetition of structures, [...] we create a planet, children create a planet [...] its inhabitants, their daily activities...”

(Teacher's interview, April 3)

This excerpt shows the strategy applied by the teacher to maintain a high degree of motivation and to make the English class an enjoyable, stimulating experience for the children. Therefore, topics and activities must stimulate thought and inspire children's imagination. This way, the foreign language becomes an easy and meaningful vehicle to communicate inside and outside the classroom.

In conclusion, children need activities which are exciting and stimulate their curiosity. They need to be involved in meaningful situations that emphasize interaction through the use of English as a foreign language so that they are able to express their needs and feelings, to question and explore their surroundings, and to create imaginary worlds.

Within this category, two subcategories are included: *Superkid as a context* and *Saying more when touched by their own magic worlds*. In the following paragraphs, we explain our interpretation of these elements in an attempt to account for the nature of the class activities and their relation with children's oral communication.

1. *Superkid as a context*

Among the communicative functions of language suggested by Halliday (1975), we can find the imaginary function, in which the language is mainly used for creating, exploring and entertaining.

Consequently, to reach these goals, the teacher has to give students many opportunities to speak in order to express their thoughts, feelings and insights for a variety of purposes using a variety of forms. In the particular case of our study, a form that appeared frequently was a fictional story created by the teacher. This story talks about a fantastic world where children, holding the teacher's hand, visited imaginary places and beings. The following extract taken from one of the teacher's interviews can be an example of this:

"The Superkid story is like, as we say in English, like an input, like a motivation, like a warm-up to what comes later, that is, what children actually produce, what they create, what they talk about later. Superkid creates the environment for those subsequent activities [...]."

(T's interview, June 7, 2004)

Stories provide foundations for learning. In this respect, Ellis and Brewster (1991, as cited in Barreto, 2002) listed some of the following thought-provoking reasons for using stories in the language learning classroom: Stories help students develop positive attitudes towards language learning; they foster imagination. Stories also provide a way to link fantasy and imagination with the child's real world. As children enjoy listening to stories over and over again, repetition allows natural language acquisition. Finally, stories allow the introduction or revision of new vocabulary and language patterns, as witnessed below:

"Teacher tells the students that today they are going to have the oral evaluation and that this is going to have two parts: first, retell the story of Superkid and second, describe their own aliens:

T: What is Superkid doing?

Sts: Pushing

T: Christian, what happens when he opens the space door?

St: Superkid is holding the parachute."

(Field notes, March 13, 2004)

As can be seen in the previous example, the Superkid story was an appealing framework to present a language model to the children. Indeed, many of the language structures present in the story were evident in the children's subsequent oral presentations. Based on the Superkid story, the teacher also proposed varied and interesting activities that captured students' attention, stimulated visual memory and improved their imagination. Accordingly, these activities reinforced children's speaking skills through many different exercises: retelling the story, drawing and describing pictures, questioning, answering and describing scenes of the story.

To sum up, story telling gave children the opportunity to participate actively and enthusiastically in the learning process. It was a good way for the teacher to interact with children as well as to encourage oral interaction among them.

2. *Saying more when touched by their own magic worlds*

Hill (1991) reminds us that children have to be recognized as individuals who develop and learn according to their specific characteristics, needs and environmental circumstances. For these reasons, teachers have to be in constant search of strategies that fit their students' characteristics. In this respect, our participant teacher says:

"Motivating activities... which are close to the children's world; the world of imagination. To create new beings or spaces, different, yet closely related to the vocabulary children already know."

(Teacher's interview, April 3, 2004)

The previous extract shows that after having stored a certain amount of language and structures, children had the opportunity to use foreign language in imaginary contexts created by themselves. We noticed that children learnt best when they were the creators of their own magic worlds. This can be seen further in the following examples:

"The alien is Spot, eh Spot is strong, eh Spot is... eh tall and short and fat. Eh Spot has a two black antennas, eh Spot has a short, curly, black hair. Spot has a big, Spot has a big, a big green??? Spot has... eh two, two big ears. Spot has a big, triangular nose, Spot has a big, a big red mouth [...]."

(Gabriela, Transcription, April 3, 2004)

"The planet is Katuska... in the planet woman wearing eh (S's gestures) yellow pants and eh pink boots, and, and transparent T-shirt. Eh in the ma, wearing, eh shorts, sandal (S's gestures) and T-shirt."

(Gabriela, Transcription video recording, June 12, 2004)

In the examples above we can notice that these types of activities stimulated the children's creativity. Their imagination took over and they truly lived the fascinating, fictional story. The children were eager to share their feelings and ideas and to speak out about the content of the activities. Regarding the development of the speaking skills, the children's spontaneous responses and reactions to the activities revealed how much they had really understood and processed. The following teacher's words describe this process:

"It has been difficult [...] at the beginning, children hardly produced. I have seen changes in them. They already produce, they are more confident now, though some of them still feel fear, [...] Oral production has improved remarkably, from saying two words, they speak more fluently now."

(Teacher's interview, June 7, 2004)

In conclusion, stimulating children's imagination and creativity can help both students and teacher make the English class more enjoyable because children like to share their ideas. It is also important to offer children a learning situation in which language development is an integral part of the whole learning process, and not the only final product.

Teacher's Support in the Learning Process

Our category is made up of three subcategories which helped us to identify the teacher's roles in the development of the class activities.

It is common knowledge that oral language is one of the most important means of learning and of acquiring knowledge. Through oral language skills people engage in intellectual dialogue and communicate ideas. Given this understanding of the importance of such skills, the teacher has to do more than tell the children what they are expected to do in class. Instead, the teacher has several different roles to play.

Bearing this in mind and analyzing the information we collected, we found that one of the teacher's roles in the development of the oral activities was to facilitate listening and speaking processes by giving young learners opportunities to use the language in meaningful and appealing contexts:

"T: You are going to create the inhabitants for each planet... Next class you are going to make or model the alien and say the description orally."

(Field notes, March 20, 2004)

In the previous example, we can see that a simple but effective way to promote students' oral communication was to connect topics with things that children already find interesting or attractive. Within these contexts, children also found that language learning was meaningful and understandable because the activities were stimulating and motivating.

In this same train of thought, and in agreement with Lastra (2004), we think that teachers are responsible for supporting students' learning and need to interact through a foreign language provision. This provision is possible when the teacher selects materials that are learner-centered, accessible (build on learners' prior knowledge of the world), meaningful, interesting, authentic and challenging. Likewise, the teacher designs activities that have a clear purpose, reduce the anxiety of

the learners and are easily modified to meet students' needs (Larsen-Pusey, 2004). This can be seen in the following excerpt:

"T: Since I have noticed that some of you still have problems with is/are; has/have, you are going to have. . . created the inhabitant for each planet."

(Field notes, March 20, 2004)

In the example above, we can see that as children progressed they developed certain language problems. The teacher was able to pinpoint precisely her students' needs and look for solutions that would help children to overcome these difficulties.

We can conclude that the teacher supported the children's learning process as she selected and/or designed activities or materials based on theoretically-sound learning principles and created spaces for meaningful interaction.

1. *Expanding students' talk*

In this subcategory we considered the strategies the teacher used to help children organize their talk into an extended piece of discourse. By students' talk, we mean the communicative use children give to the new language. Our analysis revealed that the teacher acted most of the time as an elicitor and instead of giving the information to the students, she tried to get the students to tell her what the topic was about or the answer to a given aspect:

"T: Well, we have the solar system, we have the sun, the planets. . . What other things are there in the solar system? What else so we have in the solar system?"

(Transcription, April 24, 2004)

Based on the sample above, being an elicitor meant starting from where the learners were and then embarking on new knowledge. Eliciting equally allowed the teacher to involve students more

actively in the classes in terms of ideas, language and pace (Scrivener, 1994). With this technique the teacher was able to reduce her talking time and maximize that of her students.

The teacher also made students become elicitors. Children asked their partners questions to find out more about their aliens and their planets. This way, the teacher provided opportunities for children to share meaning through the use of the foreign language, and children felt that they were active participants in the communicative situation:

"T: Ahh the next question, this one (pointing to the board). . . for the alien

Sts: What's your favorite. . . ?

T: Noo, Not me

Sts: (All at the same time) what her like, what does she like, what does she. . . like

S: What does she like?

T: Very good! Yess

Sts: Uauh yeah!"

(Transcription, April 17, 2004)

In the previous example, the children are the ones who elicit information from their partners. Although the teacher still gives the students feedback and encouragement, she decides not to take part in the activity in order to enhance children's participation. In other words, the teacher's passive role allowed students to become genuinely involved in the activity and, thus, promoted the development of children's communicative abilities.

In addition, the teacher also helped the children to expand their talk by asking questions. These questions prompted students to say more about their creations and reminded children things they forgot to say but that they knew fairly well, to wit:

"T: What about the antennas? Are they straight or curly?

S: Curly

T: The antennas are...

S: Curly"

(Transcription, April 3, 2004)

We conclude that the teacher expanded students' talk as she encouraged them to bring their ideas and background knowledge into the class learning activities. Likewise, children were given both an opportunity to speak and to explore their own thinking as well as that of the others. Finally, the teacher gave learners support for remembering and expanding the information to be included while talking.

2. Teacher as a resource

According to Harmer (1983), the teacher as a resource is a kind of walking resource centre always ready to offer help if it is needed. After all, it is the teacher who has the language that the students may be missing in a given activity. Throughout this study, we noticed that the teacher made herself available as a source of information so that students could consult her whenever they needed. This is illustrated by the following example taken from our data:

"S: How do you say 'lunares'?"

T: Spots. The spots (the teacher points to something on her face), spikes like the rose (the teacher makes the drawing), scales like the fish, the fish has scales."

(Transcription, March 27, 2004)

The previous sample reveals how the teacher provided children with necessary language items and how the children, when involved in their own work, called upon the teacher for guidance and help. Likewise, there were activities where the teacher either reminded or equipped the learners specifically with the vocabulary or the input they needed for such activities:

"T: Where does he live or in what planet if you don't remember the question you say in what planet does he live or where does he come from or what planet. ...right?"

(Transcription, April 3, 2004)

Finally, we observed that the teacher always made sure that learners understood what they were required to do in the oral activities. To attain this goal, the teacher provided the children with a language model that could be followed, namely:

"T: This is what you are going to explain next class in the exam, in the oral exam. For the recipe, for example I need cookies, cheese, wire [...] I need ink, and frosting [...] you take the cookies [...]."

(Transcription, June 5, 2004)

We can conclude that the oral activities developed during the course required careful and plentiful support for production. In this sense, the teacher provided the children with the input necessary to perform in the foreign language as well as with a model of language use. Her help and guidance were an important support for learners.

3. Motivating self-confidence

This subcategory is defined as the result of those pedagogical strategies the teacher used to help children focus on learning with ease, energy and determination. We know that speaking a foreign language in public can bring about feelings like fear. Fear of making language mistakes and, consequently, fear of failure. In a language class, this feeling can be so intense in some students that they prefer to stay silent than take the risk of speaking English. However, children are likely to overcome fear if they realize that the language classroom is a safe place where they can take risks in the foreign language without the fear of possible ridicule and correction. In relation to this, our participant teacher points out:

"If they are given confidence, they say I am going to say this, because the teacher confirmed what I was thinking but I was afraid to say. Or if I am wrong the teacher is not going to scold me or give me a bad grade..."

(Teacher's interview, June 7, 2004)

In agreement with Krashen (1981), we think that the affective factors related to foreign language learning such as fear, anxiety, self-doubt, apprehension, self-esteem, attitude and motivation have a major influence on language learning. Accordingly, we found that foreign language learning occurs more effectively when there is a supportive atmosphere in which certain affective conditions (positive attitudes, self-confidence, low anxiety) exist and are used for the learner:

"Children are going to present the oral evaluation but before, the teacher asks them to go out of the classroom and relax.

T: You are going to leave the classroom. You are going to the stadium. You walk and come back for the evaluation. Take fresh air. Don't take too much time."

(Field notes, March 6)

The previous sample demonstrates how the teacher's efforts to foster a friendly, relaxed learning environment gave children a sense of security and value as individuals. In such atmosphere, children were more likely to take risks with the new language as they felt comfortable and supported by those around them.

Another important element to be considered here, in relation to children's self-confidence, is encouragement (Dörnyei, 2001). Since the language classroom is a face-threatening environment where children are expected to communicate in a foreign language, it is of paramount importance that children feel that the teacher believes in them and values every single effort they make to complete tasks. Therefore, the opinion of an important figure like the teacher can reinforce or reduce children's self-esteem:

"T: How old is he? How old is he?

S: Three hundred years old

T:Uhm! Three hundred years old (enthusiastic voice)... Well Christian, I think Christian deserve eh deserves an applause (Students

clap). That's a very complete description."
(Transcription, April 3, 2004)

The previous example shows that the teacher recognized students' personal achievements and progress and took time to celebrate an effort. However, it is interesting to note that this recognition was not only made on the teacher's part; she also engaged the class in valuing students' accomplishments. This way, children also enjoyed the recognition of their partners.

Finally, we have to recognize that in order to enhance children's self-confidence, teachers who work with children need to have certain particular characteristics: They have to enjoy working with children and understand their development, needs and interests. When these aspects are reflected in every teacher's pedagogical practice, children begin to enjoy what they are doing and love English as well. These pedagogical principles are pointed out by our participant teacher:

"...children can find the activities interesting and meaningful, however, affection is even more important, yes, to give children affection. What for? To show them that the teacher likes what she is doing and they get infected with this feeling and love English as well."

(Teacher's interview, April 3, 2004)

CONCLUSIONS

The findings revealed that children's oral communication presented distinctive features. At the beginning, when children were asked to produce orally, they mostly used single words and phrases. This demanded from the teacher activities and roles that were constantly modified to meet students' needs and in which the teacher gradually built up the children's discourse skills. By traveling to the imaginary world of a story, children were exposed to a model of language in which new forms were met and familiar ones expanded. Children felt more confident using the language and, thus, their oral production was more extensive and fluent. Finally,

after having stored a certain amount of knowledge, children were challenged to share and exchange their ideas by creating their own imaginary worlds and by talking about them. In doing so, the children's oral communication became more meaningful, creative and spontaneous.

Regarding the nature of the class activities, we conclude that children came to the language classroom with their own understandings of the world and their past experiences with the first and the foreign language. These abilities or previous knowledge comprised the foundation for the construction of new meaning. Likewise, the teacher incorporated motivating, appealing and purposeful activities that allowed children to express themselves, to negotiate meaning, to give definition to their thoughts and to learn about the language, themselves, and their world. Additionally, the story presented by the teacher helped children develop their own creative powers and gave students a lot of opportunity for review, recycling and consolidation of language. In this sense, developing the children's communicative skills worked very naturally for them as they spontaneously took a more active participation in the speaking process due to their familiarity with the story and their own creations.

As for the teacher's role in the development of the activities, we found that the teacher supported the students' learning process in several ways. First, the teacher made the teaching materials and activities relevant and appropriate to the learners. Second, the teacher increased and maximized the students' interaction in class. Third, the teacher made learning stimulating and enjoyable. Fourth, the teacher created a pleasant and supporting atmosphere where children's self-esteem was protected and their self-confidence increased. Finally, the teacher's love and commitment towards English became latent for the children, instilling in them a similar feeling and interest in the subject.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

We stress the importance of acknowledging students' previous knowledge and experiences. As a matter of fact, we observed that children felt more confident and learning was more meaningful when they could face new situations using the knowledge they had already acquired and practiced during the entire course. Besides, it is fundamental that the activities suggested by the teacher are appealing enough to engage children in the process of learning. For this purpose, children's age, level, needs and individual characteristics have to be taken into account when deciding to use an activity. Thus, activities must be interesting, introduce novelty and fantasy elements and should promote and create spaces for meaningful interaction. The main goal of developing these activities is to encourage students to use the target language for communicative purposes.

Lastly, it is important and necessary that the teacher encourage interaction among learners. We could prove that getting children to ask questions and give information to each other is a useful way to maximize students' talking in class. These give-and-take exchanges of messages will enable children to use English in real-life communication.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on our findings, we found some evidence of the process children go through when developing their communicative skills. However, considering that this was not the purpose of our investigation, it would be a valuable topic for further research. Likewise, it would be interesting to account for the different communicative strategies children apply when they participate orally in English. Finally, it would be worthy to study how children's individual background and previous schooling affect their oral communication in English.

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APPENDIX 1: TEACHER'S INTERVIEW

Dear Teacher,

The purpose of the following interview is to know your opinions about some elements that have emerged from the preliminary data analysis of the research we are developing on children's oral production in your English class.

What can you tell us about the characteristics or features of the activities you use to get children to speak in the English class?

What is the role of the Superkid story in the development of such activities?

What do you expect from these activities?

What has been your role in the development of the oral activities? Has it changed?

To what extent has your role in the development of these activities helped to achieve the course objectives?

From the development of the activities, what can you tell us about the children's oral production?

Do you consider that children get more involved in the oral activities as such?

When do you see that children get more involved? What do you think the reason for this is?

We would appreciate your permission to use the information we get. We clarify that your identity will be protected all the time.

Thanks for your help and consideration