

# Overcoming Fear of Speaking in English through Meaningful Activities: A Study with Teenagers\*

## Superación del temor a hablar en inglés a través de actividades significativas: un estudio con adolescentes

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This article reports on a study implemented in a public school to explore some learning strategies to overcome speaking fears and anxiety. After a preliminary inquiry to find out the possible causes of the problem, we proposed an artistic and academic space called Cultural Moment, adapted from the Spanish class. It is a task-based cooperative learning environment. The students have the possibility to try their aesthetic abilities and interact in English within an unstressful and enjoyable atmosphere. To gather information we used interviews, field notes, and audio and video recordings. This study suggests some possible strategies to reduce language anxiety and promote oral interaction in the classroom.

*Keywords:* Learning strategies, cultural activities, overcoming fears, cooperative learning, oral interaction

Este artículo da cuenta de un estudio que se realizó en un colegio oficial para explorar algunas estrategias de aprendizaje con el propósito de superar el miedo y la angustia al hablar. A partir de una indagación respecto a las posibles causas del problema se abre un espacio artístico y académico denominado Momento Cultural, inspirado en la clase de español. Las actividades de clase se desarrollan en un ambiente de aprendizaje cooperativo basado en tareas. Los estudiantes tienen la posibilidad de mostrar sus habilidades estéticas e interactuar en inglés en una atmósfera de confianza y alegría. La recolección de información se hizo a través de entrevistas, grabaciones de video y audio y notas de campo. El estudio sugiere algunas posibles estrategias para reducir la ansiedad y promover la interacción oral.

*Palabras clave:* Estrategias de aprendizaje, actividades culturales, interacción oral, superación de miedos, aprendizaje cooperativo

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*“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”*

Franklin D. Roosevelt

## Introduction

Throughout our experience as EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers we have found that speaking is one of the most desirable skills that English learners want to develop. Bygate (1987) claims that speaking deserves more attention due to its importance in students' current lives. However, in our context they do not see English as a necessity but rather as a curious task they want to pursue. It is important to mention that even though Bygate's insights were different from ours, some of the strategies to teach speaking outlined in his study are found in our Colombian EFL situations.

In some public schools the students have had prior courses that instead of promoting oral communication are, unconsciously, promoting boredom. In addition, the majority has not had English classes in primary. In our case, we met a group of adolescents in secondary with great expectations and high motivation towards the foreign language in the first grades, but those who are in ninth to eleventh grade felt insecure and nervous about speaking. It was during the preparation and celebration of the first English Day that the idea to explore some strategies and activities to help them overcome these barriers emerged. Their recognition of this event, called The Cultural Moment, as an enjoyable and pleasant experience constituted the starting point to

explore and implement a series of cultural activities to achieve the goal.

The cultural moment is an artistic and academic environment, which has been developed in Spanish classes for several years. Furthermore, it is an opportunity for the students to show their artistic abilities in different areas like dance, music, chants, cartoons, literature, and drawing. The learners are required to participate and everybody must do it. They prepare their own presentations and show the final result once each term. After some time we proposed doing it in English. Once they had the experience to perform in English as they do it in Spanish classes, both, the students and the teachers agreed to implement the cultural moments in English classes as well.

As part of our project we decided to focus on answering a main question: What strategies do the students use to overcome their fears to express themselves orally?

The first objective of this project is to promote oral communication in English by reducing the language anxiety and nervousness in the classroom created by the insecurity of being teased for making mistakes. Secondly it is to identify the causes of speaking fears, and explore some strategies to see if they are effective in diminishing these fears. We intended to adopt and adapt enjoyable and meaningful activities to create a relaxed atmosphere thus helping students have an interactive role within a cooperative environment. In order to carry out our proposal we have been working within the constructs of cooperative learning and meaningful learning. These constructs will trace the path to follow during this challenging journey, bearing in mind that teachers

must be aware of the social responsibility of helping students develop their capacities and communication abilities. They expect to qualify their possibilities now and then, when they are at the university or become part of the workforce.

### **Context and Participants**

This study was carried out at José Asunción Silva public school in the afternoon shift; it is located in zone 10 of Bogotá, Colombia. There are about 1,500 secondary students in two shifts. Despite one of the emphases of the Ministry of Education being English, some institutions devote insufficient time to English class. At this school there are only three hours weekly. It should be pointed out that speaking is the ability that our students prefer, but it is the one to which some teachers devote less attention.

We have been implementing activities in order to foster oral interaction in different grades but the specific population selected to work on this project was a group of thirty-three tenth graders, sixteen female and seventeen male, between fifteen and nineteen years old. It is important to mention that three students did not participate actively in the process due to their fears of speaking in public. In spite of the support of teachers and partners, they did not even try. The learners' prior experience in speaking, as they said in the interviews, was limited (Appendix 1), they were used to the traditional grammar classes, having to learn lists of words or to conjugate verbs; they also expressed that their previous teachers did not use spoken English. It was noticeable that this group

was eager to talk and listen to the foreign language. Once they engaged in the project to face their fears and overcome them, developing the speaking skill became their challenge.

Now let us describe how we have accomplished this endeavour. The first part contains the literature review. In the second, we examine the findings of the study "Language Anxiety and classroom Dynamics" reported by Anna Turula; then we outline the pedagogical procedure we implemented at the school, and the last part deals with the findings and the conclusions.

### **Literature Review**

We begin with two studies related to oral interaction carried out by in-service teachers of public schools, and the theoretical support of our project: cooperative learning, meaningful learning, and learning strategies.

The key aspects we have found in the works we have revised are: the necessity to change the methodology, an interest in promoting oral communication, the use of games and enjoyable activities to create a relaxed atmosphere that helps the students overcome their fears, insecurity and nervousness about speaking in English within a cooperative environment. In addition, we can see teachers are concerned about how to engage the learners in this process, giving them an interactive role. To reach that goal we explore different strategies such as cognitive, methodological, psychological and socio-affective.

Castrillón (2003) in her project "Encouraging the development of children's oral communicative competences through

play” shows that activities such as linguistic games, drama, songs, sketches, presentations of little tasks, constitute useful tools for the students participate actively and require them to work cooperatively. She also suggests taking into account relevant aspects when using games for learning purposes such as the learner’s characteristics, their lives, interests, and cultural contexts in order to define and “contextualize the language through the use of concrete activities related to the children’s lives” (p. 64). We sometimes use games to motivate them or at the end of a term, but diminish their pedagogical use not just as an essential axis around which language is learnt and oral production can be promoted; we often forget that many other abilities and values can be acquired.

On the other hand, some findings highlighted by González in her project “Encouraging interaction by cooperative learning” (2001) confirmed it is possible to increase oral production of secondary students through team-work and ludic activities. Furthermore, it provides some ideas about the way to build teams and to be aware of the concept it entails. It fosters the rupture with traditional sequential organization of the classes and the adoption of a new structure. Cooperative learning (CL) is more flexible and more time-demanding too, but useful in order to negotiate with the students how to work on helping each other to overcome difficulties, to make decisions about the tasks, to plan, and to solve conflicts. Some of the advantages and principles of CL are examined below.

### *Cooperative Learning*

According to Nunan (1989), adopting CL means facing a challenge and changing. In CL students are not considered as relatively passive recipients of knowledge, but rather active participants and responsible for their own learning.

Kohonen (2000) compares the traditional structure of secondary schools with the experiential model. This theory is summarised in his own words: “In cooperative learning situations learners work together to accomplish shared goals... can foster learner growth both in terms of academic achievement, personal growth and the development of social and learning skills” (cited by Nunan, 1989, p.33). He highlights five factors which are necessary for successful CL:

1. Positive interdependence, a sense of working together for a common goal and caring about each others’ learning;
2. Individual accountability, whereby every team member feels in charge of their own and their team-mates’ learning and makes an active contribution to the group. Thus there is no ‘hitchhiking’ or ‘freeloading’ for anyone in a team –everyone pulls their weight;
3. Abundant verbal, face-to-face interaction, where learners explain, argue, elaborate and link current material with what they have learned previously;
4. Sufficient social skills, involving an explicit teaching of appropriate leadership, communication, trust

- and conflict resolution skills so that the team can function effectively;
5. Team reflection, whereby the teams periodically assess what they have learned, how well they are working together and how they might do better as a learning team.

There are certain limitations to face in our educational system, for they are opposite to the characteristics of cooperative learning. One of them is the way we are used to evaluating and grading students' progress. Based on pre-established achievement indicators, teachers define the objectives, we also decide what, how and where learning takes place, we are the ones who select materials and decide on levels and criteria of acceptable outcomes, monitor the learning program and process too. The challenge consists in the willingness to change these roles. Fortunately the process has started and we are determined to carry it out and we have reflected on how we have done it until now. We also have to work against automatic promotion of the Decree 230 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia, 2002) which establishes that at least 95% of the students should pass the school year. This has had a negative impact on many students who feel they will be promoted even though they do not learn or do anything.

### *Meaningful Learning*

Our school adopted meaningful learning as a paradigm to orientate it. According to Brunner (1980), the learner incorporates the new ideas into his/her

previous knowledge through a process by which he/she develops critical thinking and the ability to make decisions about what is relevant and meaningful, so new knowledge reinforces previous knowledge. Furthermore, Vigotsky (1978) states that to be meaningful, learning should be articulated both in a social context and in the daily life of the learner, thus children have an active and creative participation in the construction of knowledge.

### *Using Games: An Option to Create the Right Atmosphere to Talk*

We consider this is the most accepted strategy by learners; they are always requesting to play. Lee (1979) highlights its relevance and utility to promote spontaneous communication, since during a game learners are not thinking about correct grammar or syntax. When fun activities are used to improvise a class, the pedagogical value is ignored; they ought to be the axis of teaching foreign languages. Other voices have expressed the contributions of games. Richard-Amato (2005) recognizes their advantages as an entertainment strategy which can lower anxiety and permits a foreign language acquisition without stress. Lewis (1999) has also described various reasons in favour of games: Students show acceptance because they create a learning environment where students can experiment, discover, interact, promote new ideas games; such as increase motivation and break the monotony in the classroom; besides, a game fits perfectly as a way to stimulate adolescents, even those who are shy or extremely nervous; and a game brings the target language to

life. Games may be used to provide an appropriate environment to speak.

### *Language Anxiety*

Jones (2004) defines this phenomenon in language learning situation as a fear provoked when the learner is asked to speak in the second or the foreign language in public, with the risk of social embarrassment. Oxford (1990), Jones (2004), Von Worde (2003) and Turula (2004) conclude that anxiety has a negative effect in language learning. Fears, nervousness, insecurity and lack of self-confidence are related to language anxiety.

### *Causes of English Speaking Fears*

Although some authors recognize anxiety occurs during test taking, writing and reading, we focused our study in speaking skill since it is when fears are more evident in our context. Turula (2004) identifies four categories of possible causes: academic, cognitive, social and personal. Based on the studies reviewed we identify some factors that may cause language anxiety in our context, which can be summarized within four categories shown in the following diagram: Psychological, cognitive, methodological and social-affective.

Although it is not possible now to describe each factor in detail, we include

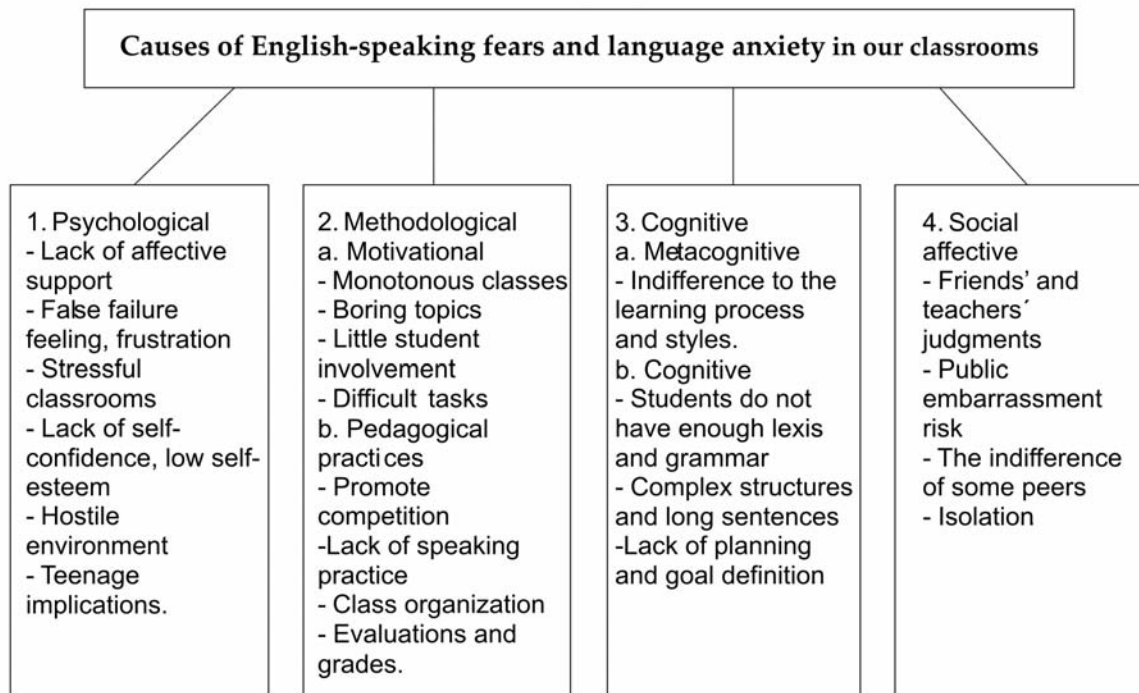


Diagram 1. Causes of English-speaking fears and language anxiety in our classrooms.

some relevant considerations related to teenagers, which is the population we deal with. Speaking is a stressful skill when they have to interact or do an oral presentation. Furthermore, in public schools not many teachers devote time and effort to develop the speaking skill, perhaps because it is not required in learners' current lives, while in first and second language contexts it does deserve more attention. "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. It is the vehicle... of social ranking, professional advances and of business" (Bygate, 1987, p. 1).

### *Anxiety and Nervousness*

These relevant issues have been analyzed in the literature as key factors that reduce motivation and achievement. Anxiety is the result of different situations that students live daily at school; they are accountable for responding to teachers' questions, completing assignments, taking tests, organizing presentations, etc. Most of the time these performances are monitored, graded and reported to their parents. These accountability pressures might be tolerable under conditions of privacy and consistent success, but they become threatening in classrooms where failure carries the danger of public humiliation (Brophy, 1998, in Dörnyei, 2002, p. 82).

### *Lack of Confidence*

This is another remarkable factor of anxiety and fears. Students need to have a

healthy self-respect and need to believe in themselves as learners. "Self-esteem and self-confidence are like the foundations of a building; if they are not secure enough, even the best technology will be insufficient to build solid walls over them. The teacher can employ the most creative motivational ideas, but if students have basic doubts about themselves they will be unable to 'bloom' as learners" (Dörnyei, 2002, p. 87). Moreover, people with a low sense of self-efficacy do not perceive difficult tasks as challenges but as threats, and in this situation they become more concentrated on their personal deficiencies and obstacles rather than on how to perform the tasks successfully. Consequently, this kind of people can likely give up on whatever activity because they lose faith in their capabilities and a shadow is always behind them, presenting them from getting past the insecurity and fear.

### *Effects and Manifestations or Symptoms of Language Anxiety*

We know that language anxiety has a negative effect on learning. Von Worde (2003) identifies some physical behaviours such as playing with hair, objects, nervously touching object, hiding behind a partner or looking at the ceiling; and internal symptoms like forgetting what to say, petrified, voiceless, trembling, tears and anger. Some of them were noticeable in the video and audio recordings we gathered in our project and others were reported by the students during the evaluation after each activity, as illustrated below:

Teacher (T): What is the cause of the nervousness and fear?

Students (several): laughter, criticism and taunts.  
(Field notes)

### *Suggestions to Reduce Language Anxiety and Fears*

The mission for teachers is helping students to diminish language anxiety providing the right tools and avoiding problematic situations for them. Dörnyei formulates the key question: How can we turn the language classroom into an anxiety-free-zone? The answer is obvious: By removing the factors that can lead to anxiety and fear. Therefore: “avoid social comparison, even in its subtle forms, promote cooperation instead of competition, help learners to accept the fact that they will make mistakes as part of the learning process and make tests and assessment completely transparent and involve students in the negotiation of the final mark” (Dörnyei, 2002, p. 92-94).

Since reducing language speaking fears does not only depend on the teachers, let us look at what concerns learners, what learning strategies exist and how they can be classified (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Dörnyei, 2002).

### *Learning Strategies*

“These are the specific procedures learners use with individual learning tasks” (Richards & Lockhart 1994, p. 63). Each student looks for and uses his/her functional method in order to succeed in the proposed tasks. Another definition of learning strategies is “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed,

and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p. 9). O’Malley & Chamot state that “strategies begin as declarative knowledge that can become proceduralized with practice and, like complex cognitive skills, proceed through the cognitive, associative, and autonomous stages of learning” (p. 85). Dörnyei aims to illustrate to teachers how to motivate learners in the language classroom through thirty-five specific strategies. Next we include two taxonomies of strategies: Language learning strategies (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990) and motivational strategies (Dörnyei, 2002).

### *Language Learning Strategies*

Based on their descriptive studies, O’Malley & Chamot (1990) outlined two classifications of Language Learning Strategies (LLS). One for the strategies used by Second Language Learners (SLLS) and the other for the strategies used by Foreign Language Learners (FLLS). For our purpose, to identify what strategies our students use to overcome their fears to express orally, we chose the first group: metacognitive, cognitive and social / affective.

In connection to metacognitive strategies, “Metacognition has been used to refer to knowledge about cognition or the regulation of cognition... Examples of metacognitive strategies are directed attention, or consciously directing one’s own attention to the learning task, and self-evaluation...” (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990, p.99). Within this category we have taken four: Functional planning, self-management, self-monitoring and evaluation. Once our students select the topic, they start planning and rehearsing; we



made initial agreements about respect and support to assure the conditions that help them learn and do their presentations with permanent monitoring and evaluation.

Cognitive strategies refer to those specific learning activities that would include using operations or steps in learning or problem solving that require analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. The students carried out actions such as resourcing, deduction, use of visual images, previous auditory representations, note taking, summarizing and translation.

On the other hand, social-affective strategies help learners interact with other people. When students are asked to work with other students most of them enjoy and celebrate since they think the work will be easier and faster working in groups. It is not the same as an individual presentation in public. Working together with one or more peers to solve a problem, pool information, check a learning task, model a language activity or get feedback on oral and written performance constitutes one of the pillars of our study.

### *Motivational Strategies*

Dörnyei, (2002) identifies motivational strategies as the relevant actions to make learning stimulating and enjoyable. We took into account the ones that are closely related to reducing language anxiety in the classroom. They are: Breaking the monotony of learning, making the tasks more interesting, increasing students' involvement, making learning stimulating, and using contracting methods so that we agree with the learner on what to learn and how to assess, protecting the learner's self-esteem and increasing their self-confidence.

This last strategy was the most relevant in our study. We know that "Teenagers are the most insecure people in the world, their lives vulnerable to a host of different pressures: pressures about dating, pressures about drugs, pressures about gangs, pressures about parents, pressures about clothing, pressures about sexuality, pressures about race, pressures about grades" (Scheidecker & Freeman, 1999, in Zoltán, 2002, p. 87). The students that decide to participate in speaking in English take a real risk of losing their image, so we as teachers must protect it, encourage them with motivating classes and interesting materials and engage them in challenging activities by providing opportunities to succeed, reducing language anxiety and teaching learning strategies.

### **Research Design**

We carried out this study under the principles of qualitative case studies (Merriam, 1988) and action research (Burns, 1999). They allowed us to focus on individuals, identify a problem of practice and collect data seeking to understand the phenomenon. Once we noticed that the students refused to participate in speaking activities because of anxiety and nervousness we engaged in this project. First we defined the research question and the objectives, and then we presented the proposal to the chosen group, which consented to participating actively. We planned the pedagogical design on the basis of meaningful learning, Brunner (1980) and the steps for project work suggested by Ribe & Vidal (1993). Second, we revised the literature about language anxiety, language learning strategies and

motivational strategies. Then we discussed the proposal with the learners to adjust the tasks and made some agreements on having an appropriate learning environment. To collect data we started with a survey to identify students' needs and preferences. We decided one of us would carry out the class sessions while the other observed, took notes and recorded. Lastly, we organized the reflections and preliminary findings, product of permanent discussions and analysis, to validate them.

### *Techniques to Collect Data*

The instruments and procedures we used were firstly surveys, to collect information about the students' interests, needs and likes regarding language learning; their experiences in oral practices, their emotions during performances and learning strategies (Appendixes 1, 2 and 3). Secondly, we used classroom observation because "It enables researchers to document and reflect systematically upon classroom interactions and events, as they actually occur rather than as we think they occur" (Burns 1999, p. 80). In addition, to register what we observed we used field notes and recordings. A teacher observed the class and took notes while the other developed the activity. This instrument was very useful because we could look more deeply into different situations that happen in a common class since the teacher is concentrating on teaching or explaining a topic included in the general program, rather than on researching her own process or the variables surrounding the classroom process.

Finally, it should be mentioned that we used audio and video recording to identify

the level of students' security or insecurity. This permitted us to discover if students liked to speak in public and to be listened to by others. For the students it constituted an innovation and awakened their curiosity to hear their own voices in English. Video recording helped us to see the students' manifestations of fears and anxiety. Since the students had the opportunity to watch themselves performing, they became conscious about what they had to refine in their presentations.

### *Pedagogical Design*

Our proposal, *The Cultural Moment*, which is an artistic and academic environment inspired by Spanish classes in our school, is illustrated in Diagram 2. It is the result of experience, observation, analysis and judicious literature review. As can be seen, we worked on some strategies to make English enjoyable and attractive to promote oral communication. We never did it systematically in previous years; we have just tried some strategies and activities and chose the ones that worked, and then included them in the program and shared the ideas with other teachers in order to persuade them to apply them in their classes.

- Songs. At the beginning we selected one or two songs per year. The lyrics are related to the topic or grammar we are studying. Then we ask the students to participate in the election according to their knowledge and preferences in music. This year they were required to choose a song per period, that's four songs a year. First they sing in the group, then they learn the lyrics

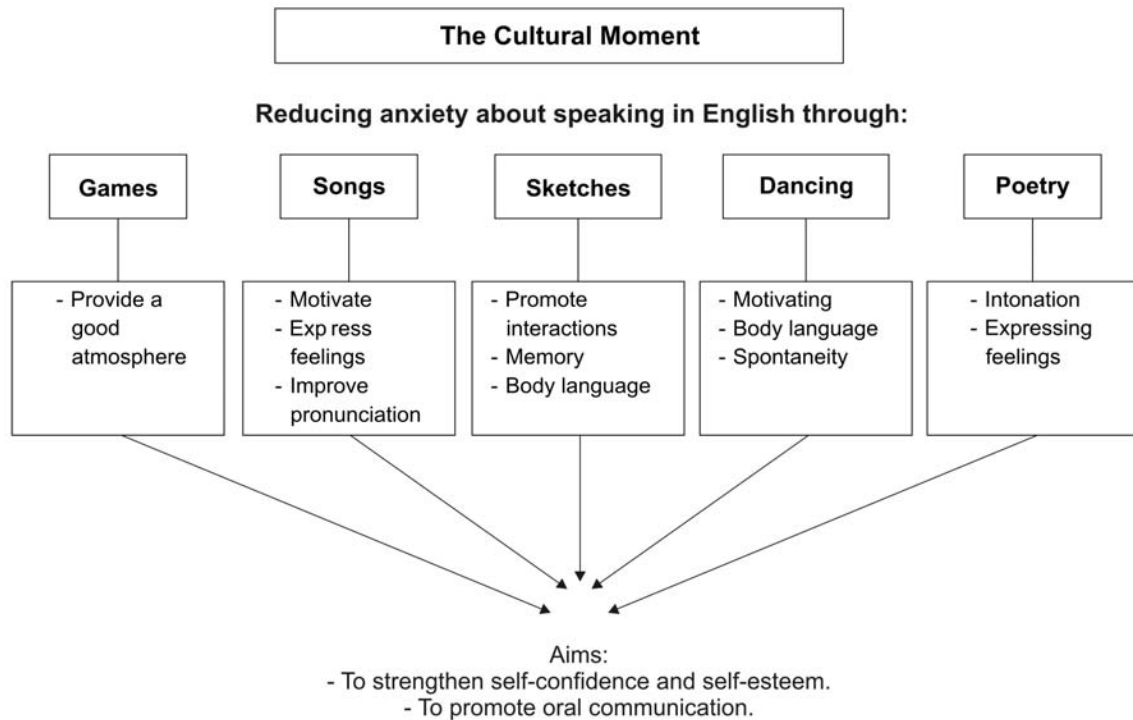


Diagram 2. Pedagogical design.

- and perform in smaller groups in front of others; they also illustrate it with posters or their clothes and body language.
- Videos and movies. The students also participate in the election of the movie. While we watch it, we combine some tactics like audio in English and subtitles in Spanish or vice versa. After that, they work in groups to reconstruct the story by defining and illustrating the characters, actions and places; then they combine the words to make sentences and present the story in a defined number of scenes. Finally they do their presentation orally in front of the group; some prefer to do it in front of the teacher. They are allowed to do so.
- Dancing. The majority of them love dancing, so they are encouraged to perform a dance and they have to present its history, characteristics, main exponents, etc. in English.
- Poetry. They choose an author and one of his/her poems. Then they memorize it, practice the intonation and finally recite it. Furthermore, the students illustrate the author's biography. This can be done individually or by groups.
- Games and contests. According to the topics, the students choose one and they design a kind of game (board games, contests, lotteries, bingo, etc). Then they explain the rules to their partners and guide the game. They previously have to research vocabulary and ask the teacher how to write instructions.

- Sketches and plays. This is a more complex task that requires selection, adaptation, and many rehearsals of the text. The group accepted the challenge to perform “The Happy Prince”. Some students acted it out and the others designed the scenery.

Finally, at the end of the year the best performance in each category is rewarded and they are given the honor of being presented in a general celebration called *The Cultural Moment* during the English day of the school.

## Findings

The main objectives of this project were to find out what kind of strategies help the students overcome their fears of expressing themselves orally, to explore meaningful activities to help students feel confident and to provide opportunities to strengthen oral communication. The analysis of data led us to four main categories summarized in Diagram 3. They were based on the studies on language anxiety carried out by Turula (2004), Jones (2004), Dörnyei (2002), Brophy (1998), Davies & Rinvolucri (1990), Von Worde (2003); and on the studies about learning strategies by Oxford (1990) and O’Malley & Chamot (1990), and learning strategies for communication by Bygate (1987).

One important finding was that despite students and teachers’ willingness and efforts to build an appropriate learning environment, it is not possible to have perfect classrooms for everybody. There were three students who really did not want to participate, and nor did they make

a different proposal. This is one of their comments: “I really did not participate in any activity because I felt fear of my partners and I was very ashamed” (field notes transcription). This deserves more attention for further research.

Another finding worth remarking on may be that in the activities of reciting a poem, reading a text or singing there is not really oral interaction in terms of “real communication” (Bygate, 1987) since they just memorize a text or read it. Therefore, it is necessary to complement this proposal bearing in mind this factor.

Let us now comment and illustrate with samples some of the strategies implemented by the students and teachers engaged in this study.

### 1. *Psychological Strategies*

In relation to this, it is necessary to bear in mind our learners’ age and its implications. “The self issues (self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-worth) are particularly sensitive areas in primary/secondary school learning because students are often in the developmental age... Let’s not forget that the foreign language is the only school subject in which one cannot even say a simple sentence without the danger of making a serious mistake” (Dörnyei, 2002, p. 87). Though one of the agreements was that nobody would laugh at or tease each other, some of students do not trust their partners. In fact they did laugh at times but we intervened to reduce the impact. One participant commented after the third task that he/she felt “a little bad because of the criticisms, but I felt good at the same time”. Furthermore we emphasized

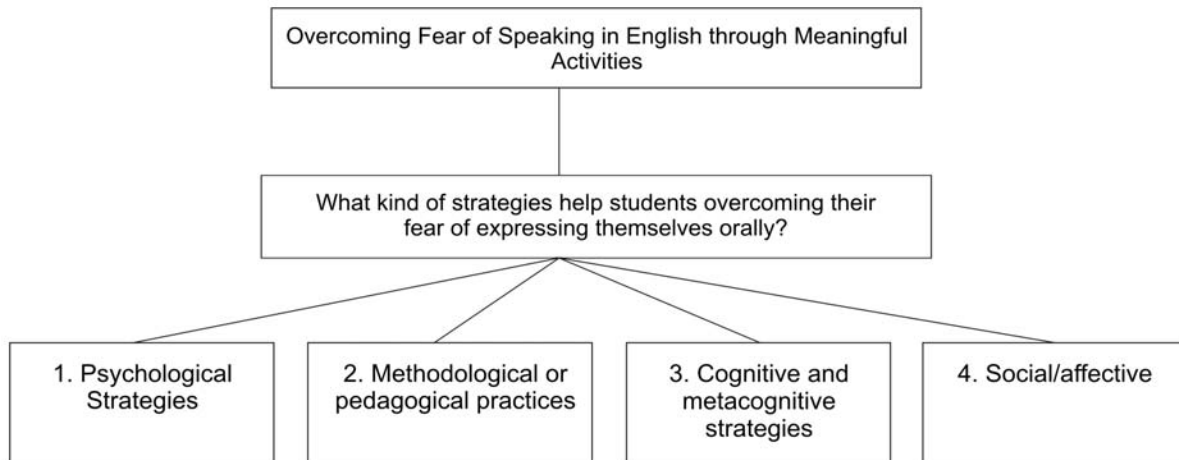


Diagram 3. Categories found in the data analysis.

in classes that they were in the process of learning, so mistakes are part of it; and that peers may encourage each other and

strengthen each others self-confidence, as shown below.

Description	Teacher's comment
1:40 Another student passes, the class encourages him. They laugh when he starts. Lu <sup>1</sup> declaims "England in 1819" Students say wooo, Buena.	Students are worried about pronunciation rather than meaning. PS.

Extract from a field note, during the presentation of poetry.

## 2. Methodological Strategies

Within this category, some motivational strategies deserved recognition. To begin with, we should point out that the activities used with students helped in breaking the monotony of learning as Je expressed: "The activities are funny and very appropriate to avoid the fear of speaking in English, we have also increased confidence and the self-esteem; moreover we have the teacher's help".

Another student expressed: "This experience was terrific; it is fantastic to

<sup>1</sup> We identified students with the first two letters of their names to protect their identities.

live different experiences and to speak in English more than writing. During the activities I practiced my pronunciation and I was able to become less timid. I also discovered that fun activities help me to avoid fear and I can learn more easily" (Field note after the presentation of "The Happy Prince"). This sample evidences that students recognized variety is an important element to making tasks more interesting.

We also witnessed increasing students involvement: "The classes were very amusing, I was very glad, especially when I danced, I think these activities help us to learn easily, thanks" (Di). Learners were active participants in different stages of the project.

Some got the information required on the web, others read, others acted and made presentations.

Our activities also provided more opportunities for success. Students' answers when we celebrated the English Day and they shared the final outcome of a chosen activity highlighted the evolution in gaining security to interact in English. As they were frequently exposed to oral activities they became more secure; the more they practiced the better they felt. As these students' quotes revealed in the second task: "It was the first time so I felt very strange but fine", "I felt better than the last time" (Line 28); "I discovered that I like these activities more and more and I increase in self-confidence" (Line 60); "I feel more confidence in English classes" (Line 49), "Finally, I felt very well" (line 35); "Excellent, I enjoyed it very much and I overcame my fear and nervousness" (Line 37). Security was also witnessed in the survey about how they felt in class activities: "I enjoyed it very much", "This year the classes have been very appropriate to overcome our shyness and fears to speak English in public" (Taken from Appendix 3).

In addition, students liked challenging tasks and demonstrated that they faced the obstacles to overcome them: "We were a little nervous because we had not done it but it was fantastic" (Line 31, field note after the second task of poetry).

Rehearsal and repetition were the most-used strategies to learn and become more secure for presentations in public. Learners devoted hours repeating, reading aloud and asking for confirmation of pronunciation. Certainly, rehearsing was present during the development of these activities; in a certain way it constitutes

the umbrella which covers other cognitive strategies such as simplification, inventing words, speed elaboration or identifying mistakes.

Providing opportunities, time and frequency are relevant conditions to have students communicate orally. First of all, the frequency of the presentations was a positive influence in reducing their nervousness: "I would like dancing and theatre activities to be performed with more frequency and not only in the classroom but in the whole institution" (Da, field note). Other students felt more time was required to prepare, because the duration of English classes was not enough: "Some students do not participate because they feel shame" (Transcriptions of audio recordings of the evaluation). Sometimes, we had to ask other teachers for time, in other classes, and also during the break, to rehearse.

Finally, we should refer to difficult texts. Probably suggesting poetry was not a very appropriate task. Students searched about this topic and chose Shakespeare's sonnets, and some texts written by Walt Whitman, Oscar Wilde, Emily Dickinson and Charles Bukowski among others. These texts were not easy for them to pronounce and memorize; as Ka expressed after her performance of poetry: "I felt ashamed because poetry is much more difficult in English"; "The pronunciation was complicated" (Field notes). In the initial survey we did about preferences students never mentioned poetry as one of their favorite activities. Even so, we intended to make literature part of each task, but it did not work this time.

### 3. Cognitive Strategies

In some situations, more than one strategy is present almost simultaneously,

such as in these examples, which evidence the use of social, psychological and metacognitive strategies.

Line	Description	Teachers' comments
29 30 31 32 33 34	1:30 Two students ask me for pronunciation and they wrote in Spanish the way they heard the pronunciation. Ka declaims "Mother to son". She was very nervous, so she stopped. (Students say: "relax, let her", She sits and waits some time to be quiet).	Students look for useful and practical strategies to pronounce well. Their fellows' support encourages whoever.

Extract from a field note, during the presentation of poetry.

Students were very interested in identifying errors or difficulties in pronunciation. It was evident students' main concern was to pronounce well. The learners were constantly asking about it and listening to the cassette or reading

aloud in small groups, This is illustrated by some of the answers to the question: how did you feel in each activity? (Appendix 3): "nervous because I don't know how to pronounce well"; "I felt a little nervous, the pronunciation was difficult for me".

Line	Description	Teachers' comments
1 2 3 4 5 6	12:30 The teacher organizes the classroom and asks the students to be ready for the poetry presentation. Some students are practicing softly (reading on the cards) Pao and Kar read the poem in front. The class listens seriously.	Each student is concentrated on his/her poem and presentation.

Extract from a field note, during the presentation of poetry.

"Metacognition has been used to refer to knowledge about cognition or the regulation of cognition. Knowledge about cognition may include applying thoughts about the cognitive operations of oneself or others" (Brown & Palincsar 1982, in O'Malley & Chamot 1990, p. 99). Students engaged in these tasks through the use of planning, identifying errors, solving the problems and self-management. In this process students also evidenced the use of the mother tongue to gain confidence

and as a tool to learn the English pronunciation.

L1 as a tool to get confidence in pronunciation is probably another important finding in our study. Learners made transcriptions of the pronunciation in Spanish. They seemed to be more confident when they knew they were pronouncing correctly. Pronunciation was one of their main concerns, as one of the participants said during an informal interview during break-time (October, 2005):

- What are you practicing Nicolas?
- The pronunciation.
- How can you learn to pronounce?
- First of all I ask my teacher and she reads, then we practice reading aloud, if we have any doubt or question we ask you again or we take advantage of the best students in the group and they help us with the pronunciation.”
- Which activities can help you?
- Songs and all those related to music.

Likewise, some students took notes on the pronunciation while the teacher read. The following are some examples:

Between they wrote *bituin*  
 1920 – 1994 = *naitin to naitin naity for*  
 August 16, 1920 – March 9, 1994 = *ogost sixtin to*  
*... nain*  
 Life = *laif*  
 Main= *mein*  
 Tribulations = *tribuleichion*  
 Reviews = *revious*

We can say they made some equivalences between the Spanish and English phonetics by using their own notes

or formulas and previous knowledge. We consider this action as a metacognitive strategy due to the fact that the learners are employing a tool (Spanish) to help them remember pronunciation; in other words, they are learning how to learn. Furthermore, they participated in actively planning, setting goals and objectives, and evaluating their learning by self-monitoring.

#### 4. Social Strategies

Friends’ support and relationships are vital. We cannot deny the existence of sub groups in a class and other communities. They share some specific common interests, and they are close friends. So when one of the group presented, their friends supported them even if their performance was not the best, and each participant was especially encouraged by the others: “I felt more relaxed because I was with my friends” (Field notes).

Line	Description	Teachers’ comments
29 30 31 32 33	1:30 Two students ask me for pronunciation and they wrote in Spanish the way they heard the pronunciation. Kar declaims “Mother to son”. She was very nervous, so she stopped. (Students say: “relax, let her”, She sits and waits some time to be relaxed). After she would try again.	Students look for useful and practical strategies to pronounce well. The fellows’ support encourages each other.

Extract from a field note, during the presentation of poetry.

Nevertheless, there were also some tensions and rivalry among the groups of the class. Therefore, when a member or a group, which did not get along with the rest, did his/her presentation, the encouragement and recognition diminished, despite the quality. Sometimes the buzz during the activity or

the apparent indifference made them feel bad.

On the other hand, drawing on of observation and the analysis of the second survey (see Appendix 2) about their feelings and perceptions after the first three tasks (songs, poetry and dancing) we can say



Opinions, hunches, ideas	Participants
We know what we have to say, but we forget everything because of nervousness.	Nic
It was impossible for me to declaim because of the fear of being teased.	Shi
I felt more secure and relaxed declaiming at home when nobody was looking at me.	Lu
What is the cause of the nervousness and fear?	Teachers asked
The laughter, criticism and taunts.	Different students answered

Chart 1. Students' opinions after a task development.

that some causes of fears in our learners of speaking in English in front of a group are:

### **Lack of preparation**

Some students did not participate in the activities and they recognized the cause was they did not prepare the task: "I was nervous because I didn't learn the song"; "Fine, because we knew what we had to do".

### **Laughter**

The following chart illustrates this item. It contains a summary of feedback and assessment done after the presentation of the second task on poems and the authors' biography.

### **Lack of Meaning**

Becoming familiar with the pronunciation and intonation of poetry was not easy; getting the meaning was even more difficult, in some cases impossible. Therefore, students were attentive to *How* not *What* they were saying. But they accepted the challenge to declaim. Since we had clearly established the main purpose

was to recite a text, sometimes they read it aloud in front of the group; meaning was not a condition.

As has been shown so far, cultural moments are promoters of social interaction. Our pedagogical proposal was accepted enthusiastically by the students. They perceived it as a replacement of classes: "Well, this year the classes were really good, they were different and they fortunately changed for us, we hope this can follow in future years with the other teachers because it would be terrible if the project is developed only this year." "The classes are odd but very nice. We can participate a lot in the class. Each student can show the personal ability" (Answers gathered when we applied the survey included in Appendix 3). As can be seen, students perceived tasks as a space to enjoy and show their talents and abilities in communicating through dancing, singing or acting.

### **Conclusions**

The suggestion for pedagogical practice made by Von Worde (2003) seems to fit perfectly: "A relaxed classroom atmosphere or environment is significant in reducing

anxiety. This might include the teacher's individual personality as well as attitude toward both the language and the students. The participants stressed that anxiety decreases when teachers make the class interesting and fun. Similarly, using topics and themes relevant to the students' own lives and interests appeared to reduce anxiety and increase learner motivation" (Von Worde 2003, p. 16).

The results reported in this study show that cultural activities constitute a valuable option to contribute to free-stress environment and encourage English learning in the classroom. Students get involved more easily in the tasks when they do what they are good at because they enjoy doing it. This kind of activity breaks the monotony of learning. It means changing the way we usually develop current classes, which is the first type of motivational strategies proposed by Dörnyei (2002). This was recognized by most of the participants "OK, the activities were good, it was something different for a class, luckily for us, the English activities have changed, I hope this to be continued since just class and class is too boring" (Answers gathered in the survey included in Appendix 3).

However, three students were not engaged and they did not dare to participate in any of the activities proposed, and neither did they propose anything different. During the final meeting to decide about promotion, teachers confirmed that these students had the same attitude in other subjects. Their lack of motivation and commitment might be a matter of a further study. If we make these learners identify their learning strategies, it may be possible to engage them in autonomous learning

and they might have a better and more rewarding performance. It should also be said that others, six students approximately, participated only because of the evaluation; they just wanted to pass the subject in their final school report.

Regarding one of the main objectives of this study, we observed the cultural moments permitted not only an increase in the level of participation but also a reduction in learners' fears which contributed to the loss of confidence in expressing themselves orally in English in public.

Humor is also a way to reduce anxiety. The study also revealed that the teacher can use some embarrassing situations or mistakes to have fun and show it happens to others; that she/he is not the only one. When the students have a certain security that they are not going to be judged they are more likely to participate in the events. From the beginning we made agreements with respect to this in the group. We emphasized they were in a stage of the learning process, that it was common and normal to make mistakes in pronunciation or spelling; that they occur everywhere. "Mistakes are okay because without mistakes there is no learning and there is a lot of learning from mistakes" (Dörnyei, 2002, p. 93). They knew the teachers were going to support them and we were not going to accept any taunts. If something was funny we could laugh and enjoy the situation, but it was not against the person; it was necessary to understand it in this way, not with the intention to mock. A common funny speaking situation is when someone refers to some local places, food or proper names, the contrast of sounds of

mother tongue with foreign language makes them laugh.

One of the most significant findings in this study was the use of mother tongue, a strategy that permitted them to get confidence in pronunciation. As found through the surveys, pronunciation was one of their main concerns when they expressed themselves orally in front of the group. Thus, to improve, they asked us to read the difficult words or expressions aloud and slowly while they wrote in Spanish how to pronounce them. This evidences the use of cognitive strategies described by Oxford (1990, in Richards & Lockhart, 1998), which imply using formulas and patterns for learning. Another strategy students used to learn pronunciation was singing; they followed the lyrics and imitated the artists. They also asked the students who were considered to have good pronunciation to read the texts aloud. After having practiced the learners asked us to listen to them privately and correct if necessary.

In relation to the second objective of our study, which aimed to provide opportunities to strengthen oral communication, it is certain that cooperative work and project work increase it. In each stage of the tasks they had to speak, read aloud and participate in making decisions (this last one was done in Spanish). There were plenty of opportunities during the whole process: they had to rehearse permanently, so they practiced during an extra class; then we had a general pre-presentation in the classroom in order to give them feedback and suggestions on the materials and language they were going to use for the final outcome; after that, they did their presentations in the classroom, and, finally in front of the school community.

The same process was used during the four terms, from February 2005. It is evident the students got confidence through these different opportunities and that there might be continuity in the near future.

### Further Research

During the implementation of the alternative activities described in this paper, there were some common and fixed patterns that made us foresee further studies. One of them is competition, which is one of the causes of anxiety. Within competitive practices there is a winner and the others are left behind. The alternative is a long-term process of learning to work by teams, among the groups; the learners still need to learn how to work cooperatively, rather than being competitive. To achieve this goal it is necessary to change some criteria so that we evaluate their processes rather than the contents or results. In other words, the evaluation system established in the school seems to promote competition because they are attentive to who got a “five”, “three”, “one” or their equivalent “E”, “A”, “D”. Perhaps achievements could be recognized and expressed in a descriptive or analytical way. We also noticed that it is necessary to provide the opportunity for all the participants to be presented in front of the community, not only the best performances. To achieve this, teachers might be aware of the capacities of each student in order to search for the way to give them chances to succeed, that is, to assign tasks according to abilities.

Another factor is how to handle the pressure and power relationships among

the groups which may inhibit others performing because they sometimes intend to diminish other presentations; they tend to support just their friends and those they get along with, ignoring the others, even though their presentations and performances are good. These kinds of relationships exist among the groups and how to manage them should be taken into account in the future.

### **Pedagogical Implications and Limitations**

Despite time limitations, carrying out this project was of great value since we had the possibility to socialize this project with our colleagues in order to persuade them to implement some of these strategies in their classes, although they were not convinced by all of the strategies. In addition, the principal was willing to support us and permitted to have some meetings to coordinate actions and plan the presentations while the students were working on other assignments.

It is important to bear in mind that teachers should be flexible. A few students in the group reject the tasks proposed by the majority, so it is necessary to negotiate with them how they will participate. For example in music, there are some students who really do not like to sing or dance, even in their private lives. Therefore we had to encourage them and coordinate another option to participate. Project work provided this; some learners designed the posters and the scenery, unfortunately, we noticed their oral interaction in English was reduced. Thus, it would be interesting to examine other ways to engage them in

oral communication while painting or drawing.

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## Appendix 1: Survey to Diagnose Some Students' Preferences in English Class<sup>1</sup>

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

1. Who do you live with?: Parents \_\_\_\_\_ Grandparents \_\_\_\_\_  
Uncle or aunt \_\_\_\_\_ Others \_\_\_\_\_

2. Do you like English? yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

3. What is your favorite activity in English?  
Writing \_\_\_\_\_ Speaking \_\_\_\_\_ Reading \_\_\_\_\_ Listening \_\_\_\_\_

4. Do you practice English in other places or institutions?  
yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you have a relative or any friend to help you in English homework?  
yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

6. Do you enjoy the English classes at school?  
yes \_\_\_\_\_ no \_\_\_\_\_

Why? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Which specific activities do you prefer in English classes?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. What would you like to do in your classes?  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. Which topics would you like to develop?  
– Sports \_\_\_\_\_ – Science and technology \_\_\_\_\_  
– Music \_\_\_\_\_ – Fashion \_\_\_\_\_  
– Movies \_\_\_\_\_ – Others \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>1</sup> It was administered in Spanish to ensure students' understanding.

## Appendix 2: Second Survey for Students to Find Out How They Felt in Each Activity

Grade: 1006  
September, 2005

1. Answer bearing in mind the following activities.

Activity	Did you participate?	How did you feel?
Songs	yes_____ no_____	_____ _____
Poetry	yes_____ no_____	_____ _____
Music	yes_____ no_____	_____ _____

2. What is your opinion in relation to the activities implemented this year?

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Thanks!

### Appendix 3: Third Survey for the Assessment of the Cultural Activities

Grade: 1006  
October, 2005

1. Describe the English classes during the last years.

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2. Do you believe those classes created an appropriate atmosphere to speak in English?  
Did you sing, dance or play?

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3. Do you like the new proposal?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Why?

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Thanks!