



Identification of influential factors in oral communication competence of the English learning in students

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Abstract

Speaking is an important skill that needs to be mastered as it is the best way to communicate with other people in order to deliver opinions and express ideas, but the fact is that secondary school students' ability in speaking English is very low in Colombia. This research intends to determine the factors that affect development of oral communication competence within a group of ninth graders at an official Institution in the Colombian Caribbean Coast. The main objectives of this study are to investigate the most frequently factors that influence the development of oral communication competence, and to describe the most frequent problems faced by students and teachers when developing effective oral communication competence in English. This study is a kind of exploratory case. For data-collection were used interviews, observation and a survey about students' opinions. The findings of this study showed four categories that were defined: motivation, exposure, authentic and funny material and classroom atmosphere. And among the factors that could have a positive effect on students' oral production, several categories were identified: attracting material, scaffolding, funny activities, disposition, and teacher's methodology... The result of this study provides useful insights for English language teachers in teaching speaking.

Key Words

Factors of the student, development of oral communication, communicative competence, oral English learning, identification of factors.

Identificación de factores influyentes en la competencia comunicativa oral del aprendizaje del inglés en estudiantes

Resumen

Hablar es una habilidad importante que debe ser dominada ya que es la mejor manera de comunicarse con otras personas para expresar opiniones y expresar ideas, pero el hecho es que la capacidad de los estudiantes de secundaria para hablar inglés es muy baja en Colombia. Esta investigación pretende determinar los factores que afectan el desarrollo de la competencia de comunicación oral dentro de un grupo de estudiantes de noveno grado en una institución oficial en la Costa Caribe colombiana. Los objetivos principales de este estudio son investigar los factores más frecuentes que influyen en el desarrollo de la competencia de la comunicación oral, y describir los problemas más frecuentes que enfrentan los estudiantes y los profesores al desarrollar una competencia efectiva de comunicación oral en inglés. Este estudio es una especie de caso exploratorio. Para la recolección de datos se utilizaron entrevistas, observación y una encuesta sobre las opiniones de los estudiantes. Los hallazgos de este estudio mostraron cuatro categorías que se definieron: motivación, exposición, material auténtico y divertido y atmósfera en el aula. Y entre los factores que podrían tener un efecto positivo en la producción oral de los estudiantes, se identificaron varias categorías: atracción de material, andamiaje, actividades divertidas, disposición y metodología del docente. El resultado de este estudio proporciona información útil para los profesores de inglés en la enseñanza del habla.

Palabras clave

Factores del alumno, desarrollo de la comunicación oral, competencia comunicativa, aprendizaje del inglés oral, identificación de factores.

Identificação de fatores influentes na competência comunicativa oral de aprendizagem de inglês em estudantes

Resumo

Falar é uma habilidade importante que deve ser dominado, pois é a melhor maneira de comunicar com os outros de expressar opiniões e expressar idéias, mas o fato é que a capacidade dos estudantes do ensino médio de falar Inglês é muito baixa na Colômbia. Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo determinar os fatores que afetam o desenvolvimento da competência de comunicação oral dentro de um grupo de estudantes do nono ano em uma instituição oficial na costa do Caribe colombiano. Os principais objetivos deste estudo são investigar os fatores mais freqüentes que influenciam o desenvolvimento da competência em comunicação oral e descrever os problemas mais freqüentes enfrentados por alunos e professores ao desenvolver uma competência efetiva de comunicação oral em inglês. Este estudo é uma espécie de caso exploratório. Para as entrevistas de coleta de dados, utilizou-se observação e levantamento sobre as opiniões dos alunos. Os resultados deste estudo mostraram quatro categorias que foram definidas: motivação, exposição, material autêntico e divertido e atmosfera na sala de aula. E dentre os fatores que poderiam ter um efeito positivo na produção oral dos alunos, várias categorias foram identificadas: atração de materiais, andaimes, atividades divertidas, disposição do professor e metodologia. O resultado deste estudo fornece informações úteis para professores de inglês no ensino da fala

Palavras chave

Fatores do aprendiz, desenvolvimento da comunicação oral, competência comunicativa, aprendizagem oral Inglês, fatores de identificação.

Introduction

This research Project was carried out in a group of high school students from an official institution in the Colombian Caribbean coast named Institución Educativa de Sabanalarga. This is the most important and biggest public state school in this town. It was founded on April 15, 1915 and is about to celebrate its one hundredth anniversary. It has a principal building where high secondary levels function, a pre-school facility and two separated elementary school buildings.

This institution has a population of approximately 4.000 students and 120 professors: 1.400 students and 60 teachers in secondary level. There are three shifts for classes in secondary level in the main building: morning, afternoon and evening shifts. In the morning, classes begin at 6:30 and end at 12:15. In the afternoon classes begin at 12:30 and end at 6:00. And in the evening classes begin at 6:15 and end at 9:30. The school is coeducational, it means both boys and girls attend classes in the same building. Their ages range from 10 to 18, and most of them are classified in a low socioeconomic level. Most of students are locals and the rest of the population comes from nearby villages. It offers pre-school, primary and secondary levels. It has emphasis in Natural Sciences, Communication and Computers areas. It means that graduated students are prepared to follow studies related to these areas of knowledge. The institution does not have any agreement with other institutions for educational purposes. Students finish their studies and start working or follow technical studies.

The school has a general curriculum in which English is taught as a foreign language. Three hours a week are devoted to teach at secondary level. English is not taught neither at pre- school nor primary levels. In the school, there is a Department of Humanities with twelve 'licenciados' (under graduate teachers) that teach Spanish and English. English text books from Oxford, Pearson and other editorials are used. However, many students do not bring or get the guide book or copies to work with.

Identifying learner's factors on the teaching activities that halt the speaking process

This study was paramount for the institution and this researcher due to the fact that students from this institution, especially those of ninth grade, were not motivated for learning a second language and show difficulties to develop the speaking skill competence

during the learning process, which is a consequence of the general academic level and other factors involved in the learning process, such as, social affective, pedagogical and cultural factors from their learning environment.

Students at public high schools in most of the official institutions from Department del Atlántico have shown low academic results in the Pruebas SABER 11 during the last ten years. Although this type of evaluation was not designed to measure fluency in English, Speaking is a primary indicator of lack of effectiveness in the learning and teaching process. Speaking is thus regarded as a critical skill in learning a second or foreign language by most language learners, and their success in learning a language is measured in terms of their accomplishment in oral communication (Nunan, 1998; 2001).

According to Widowson (1994), speaking is the active oral production skill. It is “the capacity of someone to communicate orally with others” (p. 35). The author points out that “somebody who has developed his speaking skill is known for his ability in using the oral language ‘fluently, clearly and attractively’” (p.35).

Soto, J. (2017) states out that speaking “is pluri-interpretive, as can be reached through multiple paths, as each reader is a way, this fits another aspect that has to do with how student learning, its thinking or what we call learning style or cognitive mode” (p.2). Speaking is using background and linguistic knowledge to create an oral message that will be meaningful for the intended audience (Chastain 1988). It is taking thoughts and putting them into words and saying them, with much of this process being done unconsciously.

In this respect, it is fundamental to say that speaking is a complex skill in which interaction is between a speaker and a listener. It means “it occurs when two or more people interact to each other with the aim of maintaining social relationship” (Brown, 1994, p.35).

These aforementioned definitions allow commenting that although it is a hard process to master this skill, it is necessary to implement and focus on some strategies that help the students to practice their language orally sharing ideas and opinions with a partner and using the target language all the time.

This study is a kind of exploratory case because it is conducted to provide a better understanding of the situation; in this case, about the students’ learning process. It looks for

clarifying the problem through gathering data and creating initial hypothesis about the possible causes of the problem and describes the relationship between the variables

The subjects for this study were a group of 20 ninth graders selected from three big groups. This population was aged between 13 and 15 years old and belongs mostly to a low-medium socio-economical level. This group of students has been under traditional methodology for a long period of time which has developed in them an indifferent attitude towards the English class. Due to this fact, this group is characterized by a short and unfocused attention span and an increasing demotivation. As a consequence, students present a deficiency in their oral communication skills, which barely allows them to communicate among themselves or any other person using the English language.

The sample was a randomly selected group of 12 students. This last group consisted of six girls and six boys aged 13 to 15 years old. These students were chosen as a sample considering the following aspects: a) Academic register: grades and output (performance), b) attitudinal competences: behavior and attitude towards English language/class, and finally c) oral proficiency: the development of oral communication skills. The students selected were those with remarkable and noticeable difficulties in the aspects mentioned before (a-c) in order to study and understand the problem which concerns this research paper.

For data-collection stage of this study, the following techniques were used in order to gather all the required information: interviews (3 students and 3 teachers were interviewed), observation (three sessions were video-recorded) and a survey about students' opinions on the main difficulties they faced when asked to produce orally in English.

Interviews were applied to three students and three teachers. For the students, there was a set of questions presented with exactly the same order to all of them. They were open ended questions. The interview was useful for obtaining depth information about the participants' experience in their English classes. It permitted to have a direct contact with the respondents. The interview was applied outside the classroom so that they could feel comfortable and be concentrated. When they did not understand the question, it was repeated and explained in other way with some examples. Each interview lasted around 3 to 4 minutes.

The survey was a non-experimental, descriptive research method. Surveys can be useful when a researcher wants to collect data on phenomena that cannot be directly observed (such as opinions). Surveys were used to gather information about students' insights and feelings. This study was particularly concerned about affective state and how the internal variables affect conversational competences in English. So, students' needs, interests, feelings, personality, language attitude, habits and learning style among others, were the focus in this research project

Findings

Students' perceptions of the following categories:

Motivation or interest toward the English Language. Students expressed that English is very important for their future either they decide to study a career or to work. They consider English as essential for life because it helps to get more opportunities. However, they do not consider English is useful in this context.

Difficulties for speaking in English with respect to learning. Students believe that time for speaking is not enough, and that better results could be obtained if more time is devoted to practice. Not enough exposure to the language, just scholar time.

Difficulties for speaking in English with respect to methodology. Listening and understanding seem to be the main problems at the moment of speaking. That is, students consider they need more exposure to real conversations in order to get more experience with the oral language.

Difficulties for speaking in English with respect to style. Writing, Speaking and Reading seem to have the same level of difficulty for students according to their learning style. This is indicating that there is no a clear difference among skills in terms of level of complexity. They see the English process as a whole. However, other responses seem to indicate that Listening is the skill with the lowest level of difficulty.

Difficulties for speaking in English with respect to context. Mentioned contextual factors were: Misbehavior, classroom size, scattered attention. Teacher's different methodologies were also mentioned as relevant factors to affect their oral production.

Facilities for speaking in English with respect to tasks and activities. Students like tasks in which more than one student is involved, much material to work and to receive

scaffolding. Among activities that contribute to language development, students mentioned dialogues, skill practice and listening.

Facilities for speaking in English with respect to disposition. Students believe disposition for speaking is one of the factors that facilitates fluency. They say that “listening to other people very carefully and with much attention can lead to a better comprehension and at the same time an adequate response”.

Facilities for speaking in English with respect to materials. Besides the common material used: board, text book, audios, notebooks, internet, students suggest games, more internet and other technological devices such as tablets, computers, smart boards and cell phones.

Findings from student’s survey.

As it can be appreciated from their responses, students are interested in learning English because they consider that it is necessary for their future (86%) and some others like English (14%). It is a good sign because they have an intrinsic motivation and it could be greatly positive. Nevertheless, the majority of them use English only when they have the chance (73%) and just the 27% looks for opportunities to use it.

On the other hand, it is interesting that students consider speaking as the most important skill, because compared to Reading, Writing or Listening to English, Speaking is almost 50% important to the 60% of Students.

Regarding to the use of English in class, students say that from the time of the class used for “practicing” conversation in English, it is used between 20% and 25% of the class (46%) and sometimes between 25% and 50% of the class (20%) even between 50% and 75% of the class (26%). According to the results, 60% of students consider it is not enough time spent in practicing English during classes. With respect to the sort of activities used in the English class, students say that dialogs and conversations are frequently used (53%) followed by activities on the board and the notebook (40%)

With regard to the students’ attitude to English class, the 66 % admit they like English but they need to practice, just the 20% feel confident. They prefer to speak in English when they work in groups (40%) or in pairs (33%) more than when they have to work individually (27%). It is remarkable that students feel their ability to speak English is good

(73%) and just a few of them feel it is deficient (20%). That explains why when it was asked if they develop their speaking skills outside the classroom, they answer positively (53%) saying that they try to use English during classes, put in practice what they learned with relatives and friends, and also when they sing songs in English. nevertheless, the other 47% answered that they do not try to practice English outside. That confirms; the main reason that hinders their English speaking skill is the lack of practice (53%) even when they consider they have learnt English enough until this moment (73%) just the 27% think they do not have learnt and it is because they have not been willing to learn English, they need practice or find it especially difficult.

Data also shows that to the students, the English classes are interesting (86%) which explains why the 53% participate in class every time they can, although grades are also motivating for them (66%) According to them, the teacher sometimes uses Spanish to explain (93%). They also mention that the materials their teacher regularly uses are the textbook (30%), audio files (32%) and the board (30%). When they make a mistake during the class, they feel nervous (53%) and shy (27%); just the 20% feel calm. Finally, when they were asked about aspects they think might be difficult their English learning process they agreed that were the classroom overpopulation (46%) and the undisciplined behavior of some students (46%)

Outcomes

Limitations of the study.

At first, this study was intended to discover which factors, among a wide range of them, influence the development of oral production in the English Language for EFL learners in an official public school in the Caribbean Colombian coast. But colleagues and tutors recommended a concise (narrowed?) focus so the investigation was centered on the learner. Other factors related to oral production were analyzed throughout literature review and documentary analysis.

The sample of this study limited to a small group of three teachers, forty students in a classroom, a sample of ten students for the survey, and three students for the interviews. All of them representatives from an educational community in an official high school from the Colombian Caribbean coast. Therefore, the results could not be generalized.

Other constrains for the study were administrative problems that affected time devoted to the study. They were mainly the part referred to supervision of the research process that delayed feedback and modified deadline for many scheduled actions.

The comprehension of the factors that affect the oral production that students employ helps teachers understand their strategic competence so that appropriate methodologies could be chosen for pedagogical purposes. However, in helping students to develop speaking competence in English, EFL teachers may need to discover additional effects of other learner variables on the use of oral communication by students. This study investigates, in particular, the effect of four variables—motivation, exposure, authentic and funny material and classroom atmosphere in speaking English, on students' oral production use.

Speaking is problematic for very deep-settled reasons related to self-concept. A positive view of self can affect the progress of a learner. Both the willingness to communicate and perceived competence have an impact on the frequency of communication. However, the oral communication is used and the self-report of oral proficiency did not have a statistical relationship. So it was found that effective communication takes more than the ability to talk. It also implicates the use of one's mental faculties in the choice of words, the ability to make other person understand what one is saying and vice versa

Students who are success full communicators more often turned to functional practice approaches. These included speaking with native speakers, friends, or other students, and thinking or talking to themselves in the target language. So functional practice is shown to be critical to students' language performance. If a foreign language learners lack the opportunity for constant interaction in the FL, they should be less likely to increase their perceived competence, willingness to communicate, and his or her frequency of communication increases if he or she looks for situations in which he or she practices in a given context what he/she have learned.

Language learners who have had more opportunities to practice the target language or have acquired it in natural situations are more flexible and successful in using communication strategies.

Research suggests that students who actively seek opportunities to speak a foreign language—both in and out of classroom—become more proficient in second language oral

communication than students who do not search for them. Speaking opportunities to communicate would greatly increase the chances for intercultural contact, EFL communication practice or habitual exposure to English and interaction with native speakers leads to more successful communication.

Motivation is the pouring energy that starts learning in the correct track and endures learning until the strategic aims are achieved. High motivation may cause learners to interact with native speakers of the target language which in turn increases the amount of input to learners. The study reports that those students who were substantially motivated were more likely to adopt more learning strategies and use them more regularly than those with less excitement. Motivation is typically examined in terms of the intrinsic and extrinsic motives of the learners (Brown, 2000). Intrinsic motivation refers to the willingness to engage in an activity because it is enjoyable and fulfilling. Extrinsic motivation refers to the desire to do it so as to receive an external reward or avoid punishment. It appears that intrinsic orientations are more powerful learning motivations. However, in both cases, the degree of motivation that an individual learner possesses is the crucial factor for successful learning. Some other categories were identified: attracting material, scaffolding, funny activities, disposition, and teacher's methodology were also consider of great importance to impulse the students to maintain a high motivation and wish to use what they have learned in an unstructured conversation out of the classroom atmosphere or in an everyday activity in which he or she has to interact with other speakers of the target language.

Conclusions

In the light of the findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

Among the factors that could have an influence on students' low oral production, four categories were defined: motivation, exposure, authentic and funny material and classroom atmosphere.

With respect to motivation, findings show that students are motivated or consider it necessary, although lack of interest was observed in many classes. So motivation refers more to the process inside the classroom than to students' own interest about the language.

Exposure has to do with English use. More experience with the oral language is considered essential by both students and teachers, especially with listening and speaking.

Authentic and funny material is related to effective oral performance, in the sense that they play games and have fun at the same time they are learning. Survey indicated a general preference for activities according to their age.

Contextual factors such as disruptive behavior, classroom size, scattered attention and different methodologies for teaching were mentioned as causes of low oral production, but they had not a strong influence.

Among the factors that could have a positive effect on students' oral production, several categories were identified: attracting material, scaffolding, funny activities, disposition, and teacher's methodology. Both teachers and students agree on considering adequate methodology as necessary for effective competence development in the oral production.

Attracting material suggested by students was: games, videos, movies, music more internet and other technological devices such as tablets, computers, smart boards and cell phones.

Scaffolding was a request from students as an essential need for feedback, examples and some guide to perform orally in English, were paramount for achieving the goals or just carrying out the tasks proposed by the teacher.

It was clearly stated that most of the activities conducted by the teacher were not attractive for students. Students like tasks in which more than one student is involved, much material to work and activities, such as dialogues and presentations were more related to oral language development.

Students considered disposition as a fluency facilitator, because that they say that "listening to other people very carefully and with much attention can lead to a better comprehension and at the same time an adequate response".

In conclusion, some factors related to the learner that influence the development of oral communication competence in English among ninth grade high school students at an official Institution, were determined and characterized as having a positive and a negative influence on oral production.

Implications for practice.

As it was mentioned before, the development of the oral language competence is very complex and involves many factors. Although speaking has been included in the educational plan for English teaching in schools and universities in the past years, the percentage of time devoted to activities in which students can communicate with each other in English remains small in the whole class.

Probably, one of the most important implications for practice, found after finishing this interesting study, was that I (the teacher) have different perceptions about Speaking that those from my students and a different perspective can affect the way I am teaching. So, to know about students' needs and the context that surrounds classroom implies better planning of school syllabus because it is an excellent way to make students increase their levels of learning.

With this new information, practice will be improved in the sense of maximizing those factors that influence effective and meaningful oral production in the classroom: attracting material, scaffolding, funny activities, disposition, and teacher's methodology, and minimizing the effect of demotivation, lack of exposure, unreal and boring material and classroom atmosphere.

Implications for research.

Speaking is the skill that the students will be judged upon most in real-life situation. Here in Colombia, investigation about oral production seems to be just starting as many similar studies around the world and that were reviewed during literature revision. The results of this study can be relevant for teachers interested in knowing about factors that could be affecting the speaking ability for better or for worse, and who dared to ask.

For the researcher, it would be very interesting to work on doctoral studies to investigate about specific factors such as fluency, students' attitude towards their own learning process, the role of cultural level, how to evaluate oral production, among others. It would be a good opportunity and a challenge for me to examine other variables in depth, in order to help my students become fluent communicators.

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