



**UNIVERSIDAD  
DE ANTIOQUIA**

**CONVERSATION CIRCLES TO FOSTER INTERACTIONS**

Author

Romy Dorelly Micanquer Guaitarilla

Universidad de Antioquia

Escuela de Idiomas

Medellín, Colombia

2021



**Romy Dorelly Micanquer Guaitarilla**

Trabajo de investigación presentado como requisito parcial para optar al título de:

**Licenciada en Lenguas Extranjeras**

Asesora:

Astrid Tangarife Sánchez

Magíster en Enseñanza y Aprendizaje de Lenguas Extranjeras

Universidad de Antioquia

Escuela de Idiomas

Medellín, Colombia

2021

**Abstract**

This action research study whose participants were ninth-graders of a public institution was aimed at exploring the usefulness of conversation circles to foster different types of interactions. Data were collected through a research journal, two interviews with the cooperating teacher at two different moments, a focus group, a questionnaire, and video recordings of four conversation circles. Data analysis showed that conversation circles are effective to foster interactions and provide a space to use the target language and construct knowledge. It also showed that the teacher's role is important as a facilitator and promoter of interaction in this process. There were also limitations related to time constraints that could have kept me from achieving better results.

**Keywords:** Conversation circles, talking circles, interaction, group work, full class, open-ended teacher questioning.

**Degree Requirement**

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia.

**Acknowledgments**

First of all, I would like to thank my father and my mother for their unconditional support, for believing in me, and for doing everything in their power to enable me to achieve my dreams.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my teacher and research advisor Astrid Tangarife for her continuous and valuable support. I really appreciate her patience, perseverance, and generosity throughout this process.

I would also like to thank my cooperating teacher Mabel Cortés, for her disposition and cooperation, as well as the students who made possible that this research study concluded positively.

I would like to thank my closest friends who were constantly encouraging me. Finally, thanks to my couple who has been a fundamental support in this process.

**Table of Contents**

Preface..... 6

Description of the Context ..... 7

Theoretical Background..... 11

Interaction ..... 11

    Conversation Circles ..... 15

Research Question ..... 18

Objectives ..... 18

    General Objective..... 18

    Specific Objectives..... 19

Action Plan..... 19

Development of Actions ..... 20

Data Analysis ..... 22

Findings and Interpretations ..... 23

    Effectiveness of Conversation Circles to Foster Interactions ..... 23

    The importance of the teacher’s role when fostering interaction. .... 28

Conclusions..... 30

Reflections ..... 31

References..... 32

Appendix A..... 34

### **Preface**

My interest in interaction arose when I started the research practicum. During the observations, I was able to see that interaction in public schools is set aside, classes tend to be teacher-centered without allowing students to interact among them. This concern was also connected to my own experience as a student, during my learning process, because the classes were mainly focused on grammar and vocabulary activities. For this reason, I consider that beyond teaching English, it is important that students have opportunities to interact.

For this research study, I decided to use *conversation circles* as the main strategy to allow learners to interact by creating a safe environment, where they can learn, use the target language and share their thoughts without the fear of being judged for their performance. In addition, I decided to explore different interaction patterns such as full class, group work, and open-ended teacher questioning.

### **Description of the Context**

Institución Educativa El Playón is a public institution located in the north of Medellín. Its mission is forming respectful, responsible, and creative students who are able to address challenges and transform their social realities. They have an objective to be reached by 2025, which is to contribute to the transformation of the social sector through the development of life projects that promote respect for oneself and for others. El Playón follows a philosophy based on three principles. First, forming respectful, responsible, and creative students capable of applying these values and living within the society. The second, having a positive impact within the society through the transformation of the self and finally, transforming students' and parents' lives so they can improve their life quality. In relation to the facilities, the institution has a teachers' room, a psychology room, some classrooms, a library, a science laboratory, and a computer room. Some of the classrooms are equipped with TV screens. Currently, the institution has internet service for teachers to conduct their classes.

Based on the institutional program, the school population is about 720 students. Male and female are distributed equally and the average age is from 4 to 20 years old, being the population of 14 and 15 the biggest. Regarding the socio-economic condition, the majority of the student population belongs to stratum 2. They come from El Playón de los Comuneros, Pablo Sexto, La Frontera, La Francia, La Isla, and some neighborhoods that belong to Bello municipality, such as la Gabriela and Madera as well as La Paralela and Benalcázar. Many of the students of this institution live in difficult socioeconomic conditions; the incomes of their families come from street grocery sale. Moreover, students do not count with a permanent support or supervision from their families, a situation that has generated some conflicts of coexistence within the institution due to the lack of respect they show towards the authority.



In El Playón, there are 22 teachers divided into primary and secondary grades. In primary, there are 8 teachers, two of them for preschool. In secondary school, there are 14 teachers in charge of the different subjects such as natural sciences, physical education, Spanish, English, arts, physics, chemistry, mathematics, information and communication technologies, social sciences and economy, religion, philosophy and ethics. English is taught in all grades, but in primary they have one teacher who teaches all the subjects including English. On the contrary, there are two English teachers who have a degree in the language field, but they also teach Spanish.

In 2020, when the pandemic started, they worked through guides. Then they moved to the virtual modality, but they found difficulties because many students did not have internet at home and they had to buy mobile data. At the beginning of this year, the government decided to implement a modality called “alternancia”. With this strategy, some students attended face-to-face classes and those who could not go to the school could participate in virtual sessions through Google Meet. For the second semester, the institution restarted face-to-face classes again, but groups were divided into two to avoid physical contact and the spread of the virus.

Regarding English at the institution, most of the students have low performance and they are usually reluctant to do the activities proposed for this subject. This attitude is consistent with their English level based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): 60% of the population are in the A- level, 35% are in A1, and 6% are in A2. Following the guidelines proposed by the Ministry of National Education (MEN), El Playón looks for the integration of the humanities area in such a way that Spanish and English are incorporated in the same area. Regarding English, the institution is aware of the particularities of this context and the students’

interests. For this reason, they want students to use the foreign language as a means to exchange information, express opinions, and identify themselves with the language in case they want it.

The institution has an English syllabus for each grade. There is a general topic to be covered along the year, which is developed through objectives divided into three periods. Every objective is consistent with the guidelines proposed by the MEN such as Derechos Básicos de Aprendizaje (DBA), the general competences proposed by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and related to language, they take into account listening, reading, writing and conversation abilities, and one that they call monologue.

### **Statement of the Problem**

When learning a foreign language, interaction is essential because students have the opportunity to use it with a purpose. In El Playón, while students were taking virtual and face to face classes, I noticed that interaction was missing; students had few opportunities to participate and express ideas in the target language. In order to provide evidence of this lack of interaction, I used the observations registered in my research journal, an informal conversation with the cooperating teacher in this respect, and a survey to students.

In a class observation conducted on April 19<sup>th</sup>, they did an activity about family members to explain relationships. There was a reading section that was just read and translated into Spanish, the students were asked to write the text on their notebooks, and at the end they had to answer some questions about family relationships. The opportunities to interact and participate in this session were minimal. In another class observation on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, they were covering the topic of physical description. The teacher used a set of pictures that described urban tribes such as skaters, metals, skinheads and floggers. She read out loud some descriptions about what these tribes look like, clothes they wear, activities they like to do, while students listened to it. After

reading, students had to match the pictures with the corresponding description but they did not have the opportunity to express their ideas about these tribes.

In relation to the class dynamics, I think that time plays an important role. In online sessions, sometimes the teacher tried to advance with the topics very quickly because she had limited time to cover them, so students did not have enough space to participate. Due to time constraints, the teacher seemed to be rushed; she posed questions but the class time was so limited that students did not have enough time to participate. I felt they had something to say. From my perspective, students need opportunities to interact because they always have something to share, and their opinion should be taken into account.

In addition to my observations, it was important to inquire about the teacher's practices, so I had an informal conversation with her. In this conversation I learned that she does not follow a specific methodology. For virtual classes she used Google Meet in which she usually used a word document to present the exercises, readings, or pictures related to the class topic. When students returned to face-to-face classes, she mainly used the board to explain the topics and sometimes for making games. The most common interaction pattern during class was teacher-student. Students had the opportunity to participate only when the teacher asked them questions. During face-to-face classes, she tried to avoid student-student interaction because of the constant disruptive behaviors.

Finally, I applied a questionnaire intended to inquire about the importance of interaction in class for students, their topics of interest, and their preferences in relation to patterns of interaction. I took into consideration the syllabus content when designing the questions. This information was useful to plan the sessions and to provide students with some input for the conversation circles. In relation to how important interaction is in the English class, half of the

students think it is very important. Regarding the type of interaction, they consider effective when learning a language, almost 60% of the students said student-teacher, 46% prefer group interaction, and 32% chose full-class interaction. In relation to the topics they would like to cover, they chose hobbies, sports, and urban legends. As for past life experiences, they chose special dates, holidays, and childhood activities, being childhood activities the most voted. Finally, in relation to customs they were interested in besides their own, students answered that they would like to know customs from the coast, Amazonas, Valle del Cauca, Chocó and other countries. Bearing this information in mind, I think *conversation circles* would be an appropriate strategy to foster interactions and include the topics the students are interested in.

### **Theoretical Background**

From a social-cultural perspective, interaction plays a fundamental role because as human beings we learn with others and from others. I believe that in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, students need spaces to share their stories and express their opinions. Learning a language goes beyond learning grammar rules and vocabulary. It is important that learners use the language purposefully, in a way they can share their background knowledge, life experiences, perceptions, hopes and feelings; in other words, that they have a voice. Conversation circles and interaction patterns are the main concepts that guide this action research, and in the following lines, I will refer to them. First, I will refer to the concept of interaction and its relevance in the second language acquisition field, to subsequently continue with the strategy chosen for this action research: *conversation circles*.

### **Interaction**

Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, and Conceição-Runlee (2000), (as cited in Romero, 2014) refer to human interaction [in educational contexts] as the type of interaction that includes some

patterns such as student-student, student-teacher, and student-guest interactions. Romero (2014) also cites Moore (1986) who specifically refers to student-teacher interaction whose goal is to encourage students to use language in context (p. 145). From my own perspective, for the development of language skills, learners need opportunities to interact by using the language, in such a way they can socialize, discuss and exchange meaning with others. In a foreign language context, its importance is even higher, since the English class is perhaps the only space where learners can interact using the target language.

According to Robinson (1997) (cited in Tuan and Nhu, 2010), there are two types of interaction, verbal and non-verbal interaction, the former is related to written and oral interaction, which involves students speaking; that is to say, answering and posing questions, making comments, and being active in class discussions. The latter takes place when learners interact by means of their body language; for example, hand raising, eye contact, and head nodding (p. 30). Similarly, Yu (2008) states that interaction plays an important role because it helps to learn a language, and learning opportunities are created. Additionally, it contributes to the learner's development since when students talk, they are not only interacting or practicing the target language, but also constructing their process of language development. (p. 49).

Likewise, Yu (2008) elaborates on different types of interaction such as collaborative dialogue, negotiation, and co-construction. Collaborative dialogue takes place when students talk, and when language is used for learning purposes, e.g. learner-learner and learner-assistant interaction. Negotiation implies students facing communicative problems and having the opportunity to negotiate solutions; what it is important to highlight is that through negotiation, input becomes understandable. Finally, co-construction occurs when students exchange meaning through interaction and build knowledge. (pp. 48-49).

With respect to the patterns of classroom interaction, Ur (1991) elaborates on ten patterns: group work, closed-ended teacher questioning, individual work, choral responses, collaboration, students initiate-teacher answers, full-class interaction, teacher talk, self-access, and open-ended teacher questioning. The author defines some of these patterns as follows: *full class interaction* is a pattern in which students do a language task and the teacher intervenes to monitor or encourage students to participate; in *group work*, students work in small groups on activities that require interaction; the teacher just listens and intervenes as little as possible; and *open-ended-teacher questioning* is defined as a pattern in which the students provide as many answers as possible to a question (p. 228). Although the pattern of interaction I will mainly develop is full class interaction because it is the closest to conversation circles, I will also implement open-ended teacher questioning and group work.

Cote Parra (2015) carried out an action research study aimed at exploring the sorts of interactions that can take place by using a wiki as a supporting tool in a face-to-face foreign language course. The participants of this study were 12 undergraduate students of a public Colombian university who were attending an introductory research course. Data were mainly collected through a series of seven tasks in which students had to post their comments, opinions or requests for clarification about the research course in a wiki. The researcher found that through the wiki, students became familiar with the content of the course, and gained a better understanding of the research concepts. One of the activities that the students had to do was to write concepts, either paraphrased or summarized; interaction occurred when students posed, answered questions, and commented on their partners' posts. At the moment of revising the concepts shared in the wiki, the researcher could identify a higher level of understanding. Another finding was related to collaborative learning, reflected more clearly in the interactions

performed; students were able to negotiate meaning and make agreements, provide clarifications to the concepts, ask deeper questions and apply their language skills in a natural way.

In the same line Mulya (2018) executed a case study aimed at exploring the patterns of interaction when learning and teaching a language. The participants of this study were fifty-two students who were part of two accelerated courses from a high school in Surakarta. Data were collected through non-participant observation, interviews, and video recordings. The author classified the patterns of interaction that took place in this setting as follows: group work, closed-ended teacher questioning, individual work, choral responses, collaboration, student initiate-teacher answers, full class interaction, teacher talk, self-access, and open-ended teacher questioning.

Choral responses occurred when students answered the teacher's questions or when they were watching a video, and the teacher posed a question about it to students. The class was active because the teacher used activities that encourage students to participate actively such as games, exercises, or discussions. Closed-ended teacher questioning happened when the teacher shared some reflections about the movie, posed questions to students, and provided feedback based on the students' answers. Collaboration occurred where students were asked to create a warmer activity in which they could discuss pictures of interesting places with partners. The teacher acted as a monitor in this activity. Finally, student initiates-teacher answers happened when students demanded some information and the teacher answered and provided feedback. The author concluded that there are a variety of interaction patterns that constantly emerge during the class. The right implementation of communicative activities turns the class into a space where students can participate more while the teachers just monitor.

### **Conversation Circles**

Before developing the concept of conversation circles, it is necessary, on one hand, to clarify that in the literature review the concept is named “talking circles” or “círculo de palabra” but for this study we are going to use the direct translation of the concept in Spanish, which is conversation circles. On the other hand, I will start with an explanation of the importance that oral tradition has for indigenous communities. In Latin America, these communities share the concept of “oral tradition”, which is defined by Amú and Pérez (2019) as a sociocultural communication element and the memory and knowledge that is provided by consolidating those identity traits that characterize every region. In this regard, Majin-Melenje (2018) refers to oral tradition as a way to share the wisdom of the elderly, to transmit knowledge, culture, life stories, anecdotes and even the language from generation to generation and consequently, as a way to build memory (p. 155).

Most indigenous communities view the world differently to western people. For them the world is a whole, everything is connected, interrelated and dependent on each other to exist (Gavilán, 2012). Bearing this in mind, thoughts, intentions, words and actions have repercussions on the self, the family, the community, the cosmos and vice versa (Tobón, 2019). In accordance with the spiral and oral tradition concepts, indigenous communities have gathered for years to talk, and these meetings are held in circular ways. For instance, in my community, people gather around a “Tulpa” which is a bonfire; people sit down around it to eat and to talk about their day or to discuss important issues.

Kay Pranis (as cited in Bernal & Echeverri, 2009), defines circles as a way of being and relating as a group; these relations pursue the individual and collective empowerment of the participants and its importance. For this reason, circles are characterized by respect,



transparency, the inclusion of everybody's interests, equal opportunities to participate, and the approach to the differences instead of the imposition of ideas. Bearing this in mind, circles do not have the intention of changing others, but changing the self in relation to the community.

According to Bernal and Echeverri (2009) circles follow some principles to be developed. I will refer to the ones that are closer to the educational field. First, circles do not have corners, which means that nobody can hide, so every member has a voice and can express what they think. Second, mistakes are opportunities for learning; when interacting, learners should take into account that not everything they say should be perfect; in fact, when mistakes are committed is when learning occurs. Third, circles do not have an ending or beginning, they are always in process; we as human beings are always in a constant process of learning, in our everyday life, in school, at work, even when we dialogue with other people, we are learning from them.

Winters (2017), refers to these circles as *talking circles*. They are aimed to create a safe place for dialogue; every participant has the opportunity to make contributions without the fear of being judged. When participating in a talking circle, it is necessary to bear in mind that the purpose is not to persuade others or achieve a specific outcome, but to create a space for conversation. This author states that these spaces can help both teachers and students to have equal opportunities to participate. This is important taking into consideration that most of the time teachers are considered the main source of knowledge. Winters also states that the act of sharing stories, building relationships, or creating the values and rules for participation contributes to creating a safe environment for students to feel encouraged to participate (p. 1)

When carrying out talking circles, it is necessary to use what Winters (2017) calls the "talking piece". This element contributes to facilitating communication and also ensures that

every member of the circle has the opportunity to share ideas or thoughts by taking the time they need to express something without being interrupted. These pieces, whose function is to guarantee respect among participants, are not only objects that ensure participation, but objects that are significant for the circle members, besides having a symbolic meaning and a story behind it. The piece of dialogue is passed from person to person, being the person who has it the one who can talk while the rest of the group remains attentive to what the person is saying.

(Bernal & Echeverry, 2009; Winters, 2017)

Ernst (1994) carried out a qualitative study with two purposes in mind. First, to provide opportunities to practice and interact in the L2 by means of the talking circles. Second, to see “how a sociolinguistic/ethnographic perspective can increase our understanding of talk and interaction in L2 classrooms” (p. 294). The participants of this study were about 74 students from an elementary school in Florida, who attended an ESL pullout program. Data were collected through participant observation, field notes, interviews, audio-video tapes and other records such as schedules, report cards and students’ work and files. Ernst classified the talking circle in five phases according to the participants’ main actions: getting ready, entry, core, teacher’s agenda and moving on. These phases were analyzed taking into account three aspects: topic development, social demands, and communicative function of message units.

For the purpose of the current study, I will focus on the findings related to the communicative function of message units, which was intended to explore the quality and quantity of the language used. The data analyzed in this phase took into consideration three aspects: the amount of the teacher and student talk, students and teacher message unit features, and the opportunities for student-initiated interaction. To explore the type of interactions in more detail, the researcher presented the teacher’s responses and the students’ responses separately.

When Ernst analyzed the teacher's messages, she found that her [the teacher in charge] interventions varied through the different phases; for instance, in the *teacher's agenda* and *moving on* phase, the teacher was the one who talked the most, while in the *core* phase, students had a more active role. The teacher's interventions were aimed to explain, clarify, provide information, encourage students to speak, support students' participation, and pose display questions. However, the author highlights that the teacher's actions mentioned before did not help to promote interaction but to control it.

With respect to the students' messages, the analysis was focused on two phases: *core* and *teacher's agenda*, given that these phases accounted for a higher number of interventions. Nevertheless, there is a contrast between both of them. In the *core* phase, students were more active, and they expressed their ideas with long messages, whereas in the *teacher's agenda* phase, pupils were more passive and their interventions were short and simple. Ernst states that in situations where the teacher has an active role, or the agenda and instructions need to be understood, the chances for students to participate decrease.

### **Research Question**

How can the implementation of conversation circles foster ninth graders' interactions at an EFL context of a Colombian public school?

### **Objectives**

#### **General Objective**

To explore the usefulness of conversation circles to foster ninth graders' interactions at a public school.

### **Specific Objectives**

To implement full class interaction for students to share life stories, feelings and ideas.

To promote student-student interaction using the target language without fear of being judged.

To enhance group work activities for students to construct knowledge.

### **Action Plan**

In order to explore the usefulness of conversation circles to foster ninth graders' interactions, I designed a plan for a 20-week period. First, it was important to socialize the research proposal, so we planned a meeting with the students and the cooperating teacher to let them know the objectives, the actions to be done, and the implications of their participation. Along with this, to comply with ethical issues, I would ask for their consent to participate and their data to be analyzed through a consent form they should sign. This document would contain the most important information about the project.

From the very beginning, I would write a research journal to be analyzed at the end of the semester. This journal would contain descriptive information about the research process: activities proposed, students' responses, difficulties and any other information that could be useful, as well as reflections based on the descriptions and focused on answering the research question. In order to collect information about the students' topics of interest and types of interaction they considered useful for learning English, I planned a short questionnaire in Google forms. This information was important because it would allow me to have a better idea about their interaction preferences and the kind of information they would like to share.

Throughout the semester, I would implement the main action strategies. For this purpose, I planned eight conversation circles with three topics that were included in the school program: life experiences, customs and anecdotes. Students would gather to share information about their

feelings, thoughts, experiences, perceptions and habits by using the target language. Besides conversation circles, I would also promote other types of interaction, such as open-ended teacher questioning and group work, which would be executed as part of class dynamics. To have evidence of these activities and for subsequent analysis, I would video record the classes in which the conversation circles were implemented. For the analysis of these data, I would design a tool that allowed me to have evidence of the effectiveness of the strategy.

In addition to that, I planned two activities that would take place at the end of the semester. First, an interview with my cooperating teacher to inquire about her perception of the effectiveness of conversation circles to foster different types of interaction in the English class. Second, and to provide evidence of the validity of my action research, I planned a focus group with ten students to inquire about their feelings towards the implementation of conversation circles, and whether this strategy helped them to improve interactions with their partners and to use the target language more often in class.

### **Development of Actions**

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of conversation circles to foster interactions in an EFL class, I implemented some action strategies that will be explained in the following lines. First, I socialized the proposal with the students and the cooperating teacher because they had to be informed about the objectives and the teaching-research activities that I would implement throughout the semester. In general, students were very attentive to the information, no questions were asked. To comply with ethical aspects, I asked for their consent to use the data I would collect. Fortunately, most of them agreed to participate and signed the consent form.

In addition to this, I wrote a research journal from August 3<sup>rd</sup> to November 8<sup>th</sup> every Tuesday after class. In this journal, I registered the different dynamics that were carried out

during the class to account for the research process. This journal included descriptive information about the class events and the interactions that took place. It also included reflections about what was happening with the strategy that I was implementing. This data collection tool was useful for teaching and research purposes because through it, I could notice the failure and success of the activities proposed, as well as the changes and improvements that students had.

It was important to take into account the students' interests and perspectives in relation to the language content and the interaction patterns they preferred. For this purpose, I applied a Google Forms questionnaire in which I asked them about themes they were more interested in - sports, urban legends, urban tribes and celebrations- and the type of past life experiences they wanted to talk about - last vacation, special days, childhood activities. I also asked them about the type of interaction they considered the most effective when learning English. This information was important because I took them into consideration when planning the classes and the conversation circles.

In relation to the main strategy of this action research, I planned eight conversation circles but I could only carry out four. Several factors affected the compliance of this plan such as bad planning and time constraints at the institution. However, every circle was planned according to the topics covered during the class. For the first circles, which were based on holidays, I followed the guidelines proposed by Bernal and Echeverri (2009): Welcoming, presentation of the objectives, introduction of the circle members, the definition of rules and values, an ice breaker, the story narration, and the closure. The second conversation circles were based on food habits and preferences. I followed the same guidelines with some changes; for example, I did not do the introduction of the members and the ice breaker because time was

limited. To have more reliable information about the dynamics of the circle, I video recorded them and designed a tool for the subsequent analysis. The main objective of this tool was to analyze the effectiveness of conversation circles to promote interactions and the use of the target language for a purpose.

With the purpose of validating the findings obtained through the other sources, I carried out a focus group with ten students. The questions were intended to know their perceptions about how the conversation circles increased their opportunities to interact with other partners, how this strategy fostered the use of the target language for different purposes and whether there were differences between regular classes and conversation circles in relation to interactions. In addition to this, I conducted two interviews with my cooperating teacher. The first one, before the implementation of the study, was intended to know her perception about the relevance of interaction in her classes and the strategies she used for promoting interaction. The second interview, after the implementation was aimed to know her perceptions about the strategy implemented in this action research. I specifically asked her about the effectiveness of conversation circles to promote interactions and to use the target language.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed following the five stages proposed by Burns (2009). First, I collected the data through a research journal, an interview with the cooperating teacher, a focus group, a questionnaire, and a checklist to examine the dynamics of the conversation circles that were video-recorded when they were developed. Second, to reduce the amount of data collected, I analyzed the data using codes to subsequently create categories. Third, having the information coded and categorized, I looked for common patterns among the data. Fourth, I made interpretations of the data to make sense of the findings by going back to the theory that guided

this research study. Finally, I wrote the findings along with the interpretations based on the evidence that emerged from the data (pp. 137-160).

### **Findings and Interpretations**

The data analysis of this study showed that *conversation circles* represent a potential strategy to foster different types of interaction such as full-class, group work, and open-ended teacher questioning. Some features of the conversation circles such as the piece of dialogue, and rules and values allow interaction among the circle members, and provide space to use the target language and construct knowledge. Additionally, the analysis evinced the important role that the teacher plays when promoting interactions despite the students' linguistic limitations and time constraints. Next, I will elaborate on these findings.

### **Effectiveness of Conversation Circles to Foster Interactions**

Interaction in this research study took place in two moments: regular classes in which *open-ended teacher questioning* was the most common pattern, and the conversation circles, in which *student-student*, *open-ended teacher questioning*, *full class*, and *group work* were the patterns developed. In relation to interaction in general, during conversation circles, it took place among students when for example, Jesús expressed that <sup>1</sup> the dynamics between regular classes and circles were different because in “normal” classes they were used to writing whereas, in conversation circles, they could speak. In the same way, <sup>2</sup>Jorge said, “circles bring people together because in normal classes they did not speak”. Likewise, the cooperating teacher in the interview expressed, “I like conversation circles because this strategy encouraged them to interact with each other. Since they see their classmates participating, they may think they have

---

<sup>1</sup>Most of the information was gathered in Spanish and translated into English by the author or three

<sup>2</sup>Pseudonyms were used instead of students' real name



to make an effort and participate”. She also highlighted a difference between the regular classes and the circles, where all the students had to participate while in regular classes, there were two students who participated more, or the teacher. Finally, Carlos expressed something very interesting he said, “interaction helps us to learn”. The previous statements are connected with Yu’s theory (2008), in which he expresses that interaction helps to practice the language and also contributes to their process of language development.

Regarding the interaction patterns that emerged during the development of the conversation circles, I have the following ones: student-student, group work, full class, and open-ended teacher questioning. With respect to student-student interaction, they helped the student who was immediately next to them; for instance, María was shy, so I asked Juliana to help her, and María could say “watch TV”. As for group work, there were some occasions where students were helping each other to elaborate their interventions; for example, I asked Julián what his favorite was, and he said he liked chicken and I asked him “only chicken?”, after that, his classmates started saying “rice, potato” and Carlos could complement his intervention. Regarding full class interaction, it was accomplished, since it was the whole class speaking in their respective turns, while I was monitoring their interventions and encouraging them to participate by means of questions. For example, José said “swimming pool” and I asked him what he had done and he said, “swim”.

As for regular classes, open-ended teacher questioning was the most common pattern, since it was the only way to make them interact. For instance, when we covered the topic of holidays, as registered in the journal, I showed them some pictures about tourism activities and I asked them about what the activity of every picture was, and they started giving ideas in Spanish such as “ver luciérnagas, ver animales de noche” and when they asked me about the meaning of

wild, they said “observar animales de vida nocturna”. Despite the fact that they did not use English when they answered my questions, interaction was achieved.

A component of classroom interaction proposed by Ellis (1990), emerged during conversation circles, this author states that *collaborative dialogue* takes place when students talk, and when language is used for learning purposes, this dialogue can occur between learner-learner and learner-assistant. In the fourth circle, in which we were talking about food; students had to provide information about their favorite food and explain what the ingredients were. I posed some questions in English to encourage the use of the language and the expansion of the students' ideas. For some of them, these questions were difficult to understand, so some partners showed willingness to help them elaborate the sentences or understand the question. For instance, José said, “my favourite food is pizza”, I asked him what kind of pizza. He seemed to be confused, so Johana helped him understand the question and he was able to mention the ingredients “pineapple, cheese, jamón”. Then, it was Natalia's turn, she said in Spanish, “es que a mi me gusta todo”, so I asked her what she did not like, and she said she did not like mondongo, and I encouraged her to use some expressions that we learned to express dislikes. Since she did not say a word, I asked the whole circle about the expressions, and they said “I hate... I can't stand...” and Manuela told Natalia, “diga, I hate mondongo” and Natalia repeated it. In accordance with the above examples, interaction is achieved by means of collaborative dialogue.

The data collected from different sources demonstrated that conversation circles are suitable spaces to promote the use of English. During the implementation of this strategy, I could observe that some students were able to express structured sentences as Matías when he said, “I went to Cartagena, I visited the beach, fish, my father and my mother”. He did not say the

complete information at once, but I asked him some questions in order to elicit participation. On the contrary, there were others who made an effort to say at least one word in English, that is the case of José's answer, as registered in the journal, he said only "home" to express that he did not visit any place during vacation. The use of the target language is also corroborated by the students in the focus group. For example, Johana expressed "I think it was very useful as well as to pronounce it [...] as to talk about food, our age, our name and so on". Similarly, the opinion of a girl that was registered in the journal: "I like conversation circles because with the teacher [cooperating teacher] we learn but with you [researcher] we speak". Likewise, the cooperating teacher during the interview expressed "I like them because they [students] try to say at least one word in English". These findings are related to the research study conducted by Mulya (2018) where she found that with the implementation of appropriate communicative activities, the class may become a space where students can actively participate while the teacher just monitors.

Winters (2017) states that the piece of dialogue is a key element to facilitate communication and also to ensure that every member of the circle can share their ideas by taking the time they need to do it. Bernal and Echeverri (2009) state they should be significant for the circle members, besides having a symbolic meaning and a story behind it. However, because of time constraints, students could not bring their own pieces of dialogue. I was the only one who brought it. I chose a rock that had a special meaning for me because it was a present from a close friend. When we started the circle, I explained how we would use it and the meaning it had for me. In this respect, Jorge said that the piece of dialogue was useful when they had it because they could express themselves, even if it was not with the best answer. Similarly, the cooperating teacher recognized the usefulness of this piece when she said that "at that moment, they have the

power to speak, so I think it works because they have to keep it and then decide who will be the next to have it”.

As Winters (2017) states, the *talking piece* ensures that every member of the circle interacts. However, the analysis of the piece of dialogue’s role in the first circle was not so successful, as expressed in Figure 1. It might have lacked better planning. In this first circle, I included an ice breaker “Chinese whispers” which consumed a lot of time and it did not accomplish its initial purpose. Moreover, the piece of dialogue was not properly used, for this first implementation, I allowed students to choose whoever they wanted, without following an order. On the contrary, during circles number 2, 3, and 4, the interaction was completely achieved due to the fact that both groups were small, and time was enough to make everyone

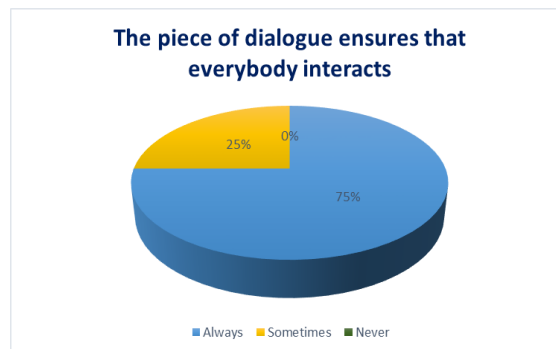


Figure 1

participate. During their development, I did some modifications. First, I devoted more time to the part in which students could share their thoughts and I discarded the ice breaker because we already knew each other. Second, the use of the piece of dialogue, in this time we passed the piece of dialogue clockwise.

Conversation circles, as Kay Pranis states, must be characterized by some values and rules such as respect, transparency, the inclusion of everybody’s interests, and equal opportunities to participate. These values were recognized by the students, as expressed in the

focus group. Most of them felt that conversation circles created a safe environment for them to share their opinions. For instance, Juanita expressed that, “you feel confident when participating in the circle. You have the confidence to speak. It was nice because we could speak and be corrected”. Likewise, Johana stated that “the fact of stating rules such as respect and listening makes it possible that every member of the circle keeps quiet and listens to others”. In relation to the inclusion of everybody’s interests, it was evident that students felt encouraged to raise their voice and express their thoughts even when they believed they did not know enough vocabulary to express them in English. Evidence of this is what Juliana expressed in relation to the conversation circles; she said that they [conversation circles] made them lose fear because they could open their minds, and share what they learned during the classes.

**The importance of the teacher’s role when fostering interaction.** When fostering students’ interaction, taking into account students’ interests is crucial. During the development of my study, the dynamics were changing. In the beginning, we were doing a review and reinforcement of the topics covered so far, so the classes were focused on the content that would be evaluated in the “prueba de periodo”. In this stage, students’ interactions were low in both groups. Then, taking into account the syllabus and the students’ answers collected in a questionnaire, we covered the topics of food habits and holidays. When we started with these topics, interaction increased. I presented some pictures of food to make them use likes and dislikes expressions, and as I registered in the journal, “some of them just said yes or no, but most of the class answered by using the expressions that I taught them”.

When fostering interaction, the teacher needs to adopt the role of a facilitator in order to let students interact. In the case of one class that was registered in the journal entry of November, 2nd, “students had to describe the ingredients of a recipe, but they did not remember the

vocabulary so, while I asked them the vocabulary, I wrote the words on the board in order to provide them with the words to be used. That was why every time they wanted to say something, they looked at the board”. During conversation circles, I had to encourage students to interact by posing questions; for example, when it was Alejandra’s turn to speak, she refused to say anything, so I told her that I would help her, and she said, “I went to Guatapé”, I asked what she had done, she said “Pueblar” and I asked her “who she had gone with and she said “My father and mother”.

However, the analysis showed that there were some circumstances that hindered the opportunities to interact such as institutional factors. In the last periods, there were some events that interrupted the classes such as the week off; the co-existence week, in which the whole week is devoted to work in co-existence activities; and the *reunión de la comuna*, which took part on the day that I had the complete hour. In addition to some events that took place during the class journey. For instance, when students, teachers, and the institution’s administrators took some minutes of the class to share information with the course; or when all grades were called to the “jornada cívica”, in which they had to be lined up in the backyard to receive information, as registered in the journal entry of August 12th, “the class finished because they had to attend the jornada cívica”. As a consequence, as I registered in the journal entry, and many other entries, on August, 24th, “when we finished this exercise we moved to the time review, but we could not continue because the class was over”. Due to the circumstances above, I could not implement the conversation circles that I proposed at the beginning or develop the class in the time stipulated for the English class.

### Conclusions

This study was aimed at fostering interactions between students by means of the implementation of conversation circles. After analyzing the data collected and drawing the findings, I found enough evidence that demonstrates that conversation circles are suitable spaces to foster different interaction patterns in the classroom since students are able to dialogue collaboratively among them and build knowledge together. This finding is very relevant because regardless the interaction pattern that is promoted, the most important event is that students have a voice.

Another significant aspect when fostering interaction was the inclusion of the piece of dialogue and the statement of rules and values. These features created a safe environment for students to talk since when students had this piece on their hands they had the opportunity to speak and to be listened to by their classmates, as well as they felt confident to express their ideas without the fear of making mistakes. What it is important to highlight in this finding is that teachers should change their perception towards mistakes and provide spaces where students feel comfortable and encouraged to interact.

Furthermore, conversation circles offer an opportunity for learners to use the target language. Despite that in the current study some students did not know enough vocabulary or they did not know how to express their ideas in the target language they tried to say at least one word in English which means that these spaces are the perfect opportunity for learners to put into practice what they have learned in class.

Finally, the relevance of the teacher's role during the development of the strategy. It is paramount that teachers take into consideration students' interests when planning the lessons, this gives the learners the opportunity to learn, interact and use the language to talk about content

that is attractive or familiar to them. Moreover, teachers should encourage students to adopt the role of facilitator, proposing activities that promote interaction among them as well as posing theme questions that make them interact.

### **Reflections**

This study represented a challenge for me. First, because of the pandemic, the institution dynamics were changing, I did face-to-face observations and then we moved to a virtual modality, which represented a difficulty for me because my strategy was thought to be implemented on-site classes, in the end, I could develop the conversation circles keeping their face-to-face nature. Another challenge that I faced was the time constraints and bad planning. The former because of the institution's events, I did not have enough time to carry out the conversation circles that I planned at the beginning. The latter is due to the fact that I did not do good planning of the lessons to take advantage of the time available. However, I feel gratified with the outcomes obtained.

I invite student-teacher-researchers to see, as one of the findings of this study, mistakes as opportunities to improve their practice. In this Colombian education field, we will face different challenges that we need to overcome with the support of our beloved ones and people with enough knowledge to guide us. Finally, we often see that teachers who have been teaching for a long time tend to be discouraged and see their students as unwilling to learn. I encouraged them to find strategies that motivate them and to provide students with opportunities to learn.



**References**

- Amú, M. & Pérez, M. (2019). Tradición oral colombiana, su inclusión en el currículo de la educación básica primaria. *Conrado* vol.15. 66. Retrieved from:  
[http://scielo.sld.cu/scielo.php?script=sci\\_abstract&pid=S1990-86442019000100071](http://scielo.sld.cu/scielo.php?script=sci_abstract&pid=S1990-86442019000100071)
- Bernal, F. & Echeverri, A. (2009). Adaptación del Manual para facilitadores de círculos de Key Pranis. Costa Rica.
- Burns, A. (2009). Action research in second language teacher education. In A. Burns & J.C. Richards. (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to second language teacher education*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 156-160.
- Cote Parra, G. E. (2015). Engaging foreign language learners in a web 2.0-mediated collaborative learning process. *Profile Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 17(2), 137-146. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15446/profile.v17n2.47510>.
- Ernst, G. (1994). "Talking Circle": Conversation and Negotiation in the ESL Classroom. *Tesol Quarterly*. 28 (2), 293-317.
- Gavilán, M. (2012). El Pensamiento en Espiral el Paradigma de los Pueblos Indígenas. Santiago, Chile: Ñuke Mapuforlaget.
- Institución Educativa El Playón. (2020). Plan de Área Humanidades Lengua Castellana e Idiomas Extranjeros (Inglés). Medellín, Colombia: Institución Educativa El Playón.
- Mulya, F. (2018). Patterns of Teaching-Learning Interaction in the EFL Classroom. *TEKNOSASTIK*, 16 (2), 41-48.
- Majín-Melenje, O. (2018). El círculo de la palabra, tecnología ancestral e intercultural en la comunidad Yanakuna -Popayán Cauca. *Ciencia E Interculturalidad*, 23 (2), 149 - 163.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5377/rci.v23i2.6574>

- Romero, Y. (2014). Interaction in a Blended Environment for English Language Learning. *GIST Education and Learning Research Journal*, 142-156. Retrieved from:  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1062505.pdf>.
- Tobón, G. (2019). *Círculos de Palabra Ancestral: Una alternativa Dentro de la Educación Para la Convivencia Escolar* (Tesis de Maestría en Educación). Fundación Universitaria Los Libertadores, Bogotá DC, Colombia.
- Tuan, L. & Nhu. N. (2010). Theoretical Review on Oral Interactions in EFL Classroom. *Studies in Literature and Language*. 1 (4), 29-43. Retrieved from:  
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/236302769.pdf>
- Ur, P. (1991). *A Course in Language Teaching*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Yu, R. (2008). Interaction in EFL classes. *Asian Social Science*. 4 (4), 48-50.
- Winters, A. (2017). *Using Talking Circles in the Classroom*. Heartland Community College.  
Retrieved from: <https://www.heartland.edu/documents/idc/talkingcircleclassroom.pdf>

Appendix A

Nº circle: 3

Date: November, 2<sup>nd</sup>

Number of ss: 12

Subject name: Food



Criterion	Always	Sometimes	Never	Comments
The piece of dialogue ensures that everybody interacts	x			This time we had enough time to make that everyone participates
Rules and values encouraged students' interaction		x		I sometimes had to repeat that they should be silent and paying attention, so I were asking them questions about the information the ss with the piece of dialogue was sharing. Use of cellphone
The circles promote the use of the target language to share ideas with partners	x			Alejandra said "I love, bread, salad, meat y otra vez bread" Then, the T asked to ss what Alejandra's favorite food was and they said salad. Manuela said "I am crazy about hot dog, leche, ah! No, sode" Johana said "my favorite food is rice with meat, costillas and tajadas"
The circles promote negotiation among students	x			One ss said my favorite food is pizza, and I asked him what type of pizza, and Johana told him, "diga de que sabor" and the ss continued saying, "pineapple, cheese, jamón" Carlos said "potato and hamburger", so I asked him what the ingredients of a hamburger were, and Johana told him "¿qué cuáles son los ingredientes de la hamburguesa?" and Laura told him "salad" and Johana, said "meat" and she asked "¿cómo se dice carne de cerdo?, meet pork?" One ss said chicken and I asked him "only chicken?", after that his classmates started saying "rice, potato" Natalia said in Spanish "es que a mi me gusta todo" so, I asked her "What don't you like?", she said "mondongo" and I asked the whole group "you can use some expressions that we learned, ¿cuáles eran? And they said "I hate, I can't stand" and Manuela, told Natalia, "diga, I hate mondongo" and Natalia repeated it.