Strategies to Help ESL Students Improve their Communicative Competence and Class Participation: A Study in a Middle School

Estrategias para ayudar a mejorar la competencia comunicativa y la participación en clase de estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua: un estudio en una escuela de educación media

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This article examines a qualitative study carried out at a middle school in North Carolina, the United States of America. The main purpose of the study was to find effective strategies that teachers can use to help ESL students improve their speaking skills and class participation. Results indicated that both communicative and social strategies as well as exposure to independent reading help ESL students improve their communicative skills and class participation.

Key words: Class participation, communicative strategies, information gap exercises, role playing, social strategies and reading strategies, storytelling

Este artículo presenta un estudio cualitativo llevado a cabo en un colegio en Carolina del Norte, Estados Unidos. El objetivo principal del estudio fue encontrar estrategias efectivas que los profesores pudieran utilizar para ayudar a los estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua a mejorar su producción oral y su participación en clase. Los resultados indicaron que tanto las estrategias comunicativas como las estrategias sociales al igual que la exposición de los estudiantes a un trabajo de lectura independiente pueden ayudar a los estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua a mejorar sus habilidades comunicativas y la participación en clase.

Palabras clave: actividades de relleno de información, contar historias, estrategias comunicativas, estrategias sociales y estrategias de lectura, juego de roles, participación en clase

Introduction

My interest in English language teaching not only in Colombia but in
countries motivated me to become an international teacher. In 2004, when I h
opportunity to be part of a recognized middle school in North Carolina
international faculty member in the position of an English as second language t
(ESL teacher), I realized how difficult it is for non-native English speakers
similar to our Colombian students) to learn English in order to interact in the
language with native English speakers. Therefore, I decided to do resear
effective strategies to help ESL students speak English and participate i
mainstream classroom. I decided to work on communicative strategies because
thirteen years of experience as an English teacher, I have learned that lan
students should develop their speaking skills to be able to interact with other pe

As the ESL teacher at this recognized middle school, I identified th
classroom observations and informal conversations with other faculty membe
English-as-a-second-language students (ESL students) sat at the back of the
and avoided contact with native English speaking teachers and students. They
interacted with the school community and often felt excluded from academi
extracurricular activities that took place in the classroom and around the school.
regularly experienced failure and frustration due to their lack of participation
mainstream classroom. All the above-mentioned attitudes are similarly found
behavior of our students in English as a foreign language classes in Colombi
avoid contact with their teacher and other students when do not understand top
the class.

Therefore, after having recognized this need, I asked myself what strategies
teachers at this Middle School in North Carolina use to help their ESL studer
speak English and (b) participate actively in the mainstream classroom? I
question that I had also asked myself in the language classrooms in Colombia.

As methodology to answer my question, I began applying three spe
strategies in my classroom to help ESL students improve their oral skills so tha
would be better able and willing to participate in school-related activities and
enjoy school more fully. Although the in-class implementation of role play
information gap exercises in my ESL I classes and storytelling in the ESL LA (Er
as a Second Language- Language Arts) classes showed positive results, it was ev

hat social strategies would enable and encourage these students to be more active participants when needed. Therefore, I also implemented a social strategy in my ESL I classes: an in-class peer tutor.

The purpose of this paper is to present effective strategies classroom teachers and schools could use to help ESL students speak English with greater confidence and thus improve their participation in the mainstream classroom. If regular classroom teachers implemented strategies that taught English-speaking skills which also helped improve the school climate for ESL students, then learning English and participation in the life of the academic community should follow.

Theoretical Framework

According to Hedge (2000), second language learners interact and solve tasks when they develop their communicative skills; therefore, language students should learn conversational rules, openings and closings; they should know what linking words to use to pass from one situation to another one. They should learn how to pronounce and stress words according to the setting of the conversations. They should even learn when to interrupt because "studies of native speaker conversation have shown that if any of these skills are lacking or poorly performed, then communication can break down" (p. 262).

To help ESL students improve their speaking skills and participation in the classroom, teachers and schools could implement several strategies. Three particular strategies have to do with speaking: role play, storytelling, and information gap exercises. The other strategies deal with affection and social interaction. Some of these social strategies are teachers and students' support, teachers' teamwork, teaching styles, the inclusion of affective factors in the classrooms, and knowledge about the students' cultures. For the purpose of this article, I will examine only the communicative strategies and the in-class peer-tutor social strategy.

Thompson (1978) defines role play as a "process through which we participate in life's experiences by putting ourselves in another's shoes and viewing the world through another's eyes" (p. 7). In addition, Hedge (2000) affirms that "role playing is a fluency activity if it is performed in pairs or in groups rather than one group acting in front of the class" (p. 279). In conclusion, as soon as students are used to working with role playing this activity becomes a dynamic method which involves a

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great number of students at the same time who move, talk, and inter
spontaneously. (Hedge, 2000; Gutiérrez & Reina, 1999; O'Malley & Valdez, 19
Thompson, 1978)

Regarding storytelling, Myers and Hilliard (2001), citing Lesesne (1998), state t
"Read-aloud approaches (teachers reading stories to students) are very appropriat
the middle grades and are one of the most effective techniques available
developing successful readers" (p. 246). They add that storytelling is fun for teach
and students; it is a motivational activity to enhance instruction and it is also
educational activity because "students who find difficulty recalling facts from
textbook easily remember the concepts that are contained within a story"(p. 8).

Speaker, Taylor, and Kamen (2004), quoting Britsch (1992), point out t
"storytelling is a social experience" which fosters language development in you
learners (p. 11). Deacon and Murphey (2001) consider storytelling very useful to st
conversations and to engage in discussions because when students try to converse
the target language, they lack vocabulary and grammar most of the time; howeve
students hear a story and retell it later, they will know the vocabulary with which
converse beforehand (p. 4). Uribe (2010), referring to Davies (2007), agrees t
storytelling is "a form of engagement" and explains that Herendeen (1995) a
considers storytelling a useful strategy "to enhance oral language and vocabul
development" (p.12).

Concerning information gap exercises, which are the speaking activities in wh
some of the students have the information the other students in the class need
order to solve a problem or to fill in the gaps, Liao (1997) states that "Informati
gap is the essence of communication. Classroom activities without the informati
gap are 'mechanical and artificial.' " (p. 10) Liao suggests teachers should ask mo
information questions instead of merely Yes/No questions. For example, teach
should ask, "When do you usually go to the gym?" "How often do you go to t
movies?" instead of "Do you go to the gym?" "Do you go to the movies?"

According to Harper, Maheady, Mallette, and Karnes (1999), classwide p
tutoring programs "permit students to interact with other students whom they mig
otherwise avoid or ignore" (p. 46). They add that students who have been involv
with CWPT programs have shown "greater gains in spelling, reading, and math mo
than what they showed during the teacher-led instruction" (p. 47).

Rogovin (2001), concerned with students' participation, provides teachers with some guidelines they can use to make the classroom a more dynamic place. She explains that these are "classroom rituals for encouraging full and democratic participation." Some of the guidelines are "a) Let children talk in groups of two or three first before they talk in front of the whole class; b) model small group discussions; c) have students raise their hands rather than call out; d) call on children whether or not they raise their hands" (p. 6).

Methodology

For this study, first of all, I reviewed literature about three communicative strategies. Then, I implemented them in my ESL classes. Storytelling was implemented in the ESL LA classes, and role playing and information gap exercises were implemented in the ESL I classes. I also included one peer tutor in my ESL I classes during the second semester of the 2005 – 2006 school year.

With the intention of demonstrating the effectiveness of storytelling, role playing, and information gap exercises as speaking activities, peer tutoring and as a social strategy to help ESL students increase their communicative skills and class participation, I observed classes, interviewed and surveyed teachers, analyzed state-mandated tests scores and data from the school media center. I also interviewed a peer tutor to learn her perception about the ESL students' progress.

Participants

The participants of this study were my thirty-one ESL students during the 2005 – 2006 school year at my assigned middle school as international faculty in North Carolina. The students belonged to different middle school grade levels and were between the ages of eleven and fifteen. Fifteen students were sixth graders; 9 were seventh graders and 7 were eighth graders. All of them were novice speakers and represented ten different nations. In addition, they were identified as Limited English Proficient students (LEP) based on the IDEA Proficiency Test (IPT).

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Findings

Class Observations

The following observations are from the journal I kept during the 2005 – 20[...] school year. I have selected two observation sets of three classes as a pre and p[...] comparison of results.

Table 1. Findings on the application of Storytelling

Fall season, 2005	Spring season, 2006
Most of the students do not know what to do with the books.	Students had already read 17 books in the ESL L[...] class.
Some students look at the pictures in the books.	Students felt comfortable while reading. They were used to reading in the ESL LA class.
A few students tried to read all the words in the book. They showed passion for reading.	Students compared data from the books to real l[...] situations. For example, after reading *Gran and th[...] Little Man*, a book about a gingerbread man and [...] noting that the word 'yummy' was used to denot[...] pleasure while eating, the students commented, "Oh so when I eat eggs, it is yummy."
Some students closed the books because they did not understand anything; they looked worried and frustrated.	Students liked independent reading with the use [...] PVC pipes (real PVC pipes that students can use [...] individually to listen to themselves. Students liste[...] to themselves and do not interrupt others.)
10 students in the classroom did not know what the cover of the book was, what the title of the book was.	19 out of 20 students knew what the front cover [...] was, the title of the book, the name of the autho[...] etc. The student who did not know what to answer was a newcomer.
When I asked for someone to read, only those who were trying to read the books at the beginning volunteered to read.	The classroom dynamic changed. Students participated more and the reading specialist did not have to do most of the talking during the class.

Fall season, 2005	Spring season, 2006
Students were not successful participating in the "leave-a-word-out" activity performed by the reading specialist. (The "leave-a-word-out" activity consists of reading part of a sentence in the book and letting students complete the sentence with a missing word).	Students were successful participating in the "leave-a-word-out" activity.
The reading specialist could not help students with their grammar, pronunciation, and syntax because they felt overwhelmed with all of the readings.	The reading specialist could help students with their reading mistakes as well as their pronunciation, grammar and syntax. The reading specialist used the students' mistakes while they were reading to reinforce pronunciation, grammar, and syntax. For example, the reading specialist encouraged the students to pronounce the *s* at the end of the word *workers*. She asked the students about the parts of speech and types of sentences.
	Information gap exercises and the use of the graphic organizer were also part of the activities of the class.
Students did not know where the library was and where they could find books at their reading levels.	Students visited the library as a class and by themselves. In addition to the books read in the classroom, students had read books from the library.

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Table 2. Findings on the application of role playing

Fall season, 2005	Spring season, 2006
Students enjoyed the role-playing activities.	Students continued enjoying the role plays.
Students were given scripts that I had prepared since they lacked the communication confidence to create their own scripts.	Students were able not only to create stories but also to construct scripts using the future tense when given a template.
They worked with their favorite partners and were willing to work with classmates suggested by the teacher.	All students were engaged in the activity, and my job as a teacher became one to facilitate their group work.
Students were respectful. They tolerated others' mistakes and were patient.	I created a kind of environment of camaraderie among my students. They were very respectful when listening to others. Students enjoy role play especially if the classroom guidelines include respect as part of the classroom procedure.
	Students did most of the talking in the class since they prepared their role plays and performed them in front of the class.
	Students also practiced listening since they had to listen to the role playing on a CD as well as having me model it for them before they practiced it with their partners. Students also practiced reading by following the speakers with the script when they were listening to the CD and to me.

Table 3. Findings on the application of information gap exercises

Fall season, 2005	Spring season, 2006
It was difficult for the students to understand what they had to do with the information gap exercises.	All students got involved in the activity and practiced the questions and answers.
The teacher's instructions were confusing; the seating arrangements were new to the students and the activity itself was different from any other activity the students had previously engaged in.	
The students were tense. I could see that they felt they were alone even when working with a partner.	The students could practice the same types of questions several times with different vocabulary. The students could practice English negotiating information. They also practiced how to ask and to answer questions since they had all learned through the information gap exercises to play the roles of both the interviewers and interviewees.
I planned an information gap exercise which contained three questions for each student because I knew it was a new activity for my students.	We continued using exercises with three questions although the way to perform an information gap exercise was not new for the students; however, the content of the exercises was.
It took the students almost 20 minutes of class time to understand how to perform the information gap exercise. It took me almost 15 minutes to explain to the students how to do the exercise, so at the end of the class, students only had five minutes to practice.	There was enough class time to practice at least three information gap exercises with different vocabulary.
Modeling was the clue to helping students understand how to perform an information gap exercise. I took on the role of a student by asking several students questions.	Modeling was always performed at the beginning of any information gap exercise.
	The information gap exercises can also be used as a writing activity because the students take notes on their partners' responses and then report the information. Information gap exercises are also a good resource to practice listening, speaking, and reading.

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Peer Tutor's Interview

Based upon my interview with the peer tutor, I gained important cultural insights about the perception of the ESL program and ESL students held by the American students at the school. For example, when I asked what the peer tutor had learned, she said:

> Uh! Before I came in… I thought; you know…I really, uh, I just kind of, you know, thought they wouldn't know like anything, but I learned that like they are really smart, and they know just as much as I do; just they speak another language. (Peer Tutor, personal communication, May 30, 2006)

However, with regard to insights I gained about increasing ESL students' participation and communication in the classroom, the peer tutor said,

> Yeah! Because if they (English speaking students and ESL students) are in the classes together, then they can help each other during the class, and the ESL students can just ask them for help when they need help. (Peer Tutor, personal communication, May 30, 2006)

This led me to realize that in addition to instructional strategies, ESL students need to be a part of the entire school community, and that this could happen with peer tutoring programs. In-class peer tutors can be a social strategy used by teachers in order to help ESL students improve their class participation and communicative skills in the mainstream classroom.

Pre-Test and Post-Test Results

Nineteen ESL students out of the thirty-one ESL students who participated in this study took both initial and annual state-mandated tests for origin minority students. Twelve ESL students only took the initial test because they had enrolled in the school during the spring semester.

Of the nineteen students who were eligible to take both initial and annual tests, 7 students improved their level of English proficiency in the speaking domain, and 12 made progress but not enough to change their speaking proficiency level. Of the 7 students whose proficiency level changed, 3 students passed from the novice level to the intermediate low level, and 4 students passed from the novice level to the novice high level.

Of the twelve students who did not made enough progress to change their English proficiency level in the speaking domain, 6 students missed the cut-off score by only one point, which means that they may have only gotten one question incorrect. So, these 6 students were actually very close to increasing their proficiency level. Two of the six remaining students in this group were potential candidates for exceptional children's services, and 4 students obtained basically the same scores for both tests.

The twelve students who were not eligible to take the annual state-mandated test for origin minority students and took only the initial test because they arrived in the spring semester of 2006 were evaluated by their teachers. I e-mailed eight teachers, including the reading specialist. The eight teachers had at least one of these ESL students in their classes. Five teachers replied to my e-mail. Two teachers agreed that their ESL students had improved their class participation and oral skills. These two teachers had the largest number of ESL students in their classrooms. However, one teacher reported that her ESL student improved in oral skills but not in class participation. The two remaining teachers responded that their ESL students did not improve their class participation or speaking skills. In conclusion, the majority of the twelve ESL students who did not take the annual test in 2005 due to testing policies improved their class participation and speaking skills in the ESL classes and in the mainstream classroom during the 2005 – 2006 school year.

One of the twelve students who took the initial and annual tests not only passed from the novice level to the novice high level in the speaking domain, but also passed from the novice level to the intermediate high level of English proficiency in the reading domain. As a result, this student took the reading section of the North Carolina End-of-Grade test (EOG) and passed the test with a level three, the lowest passing score.

So based on my students' performance in the speaking domain during the 2005 – 2006 English state mandated test for minority students, 37% of the ESL students increased their English proficiency level in the speaking domain and 32% of the ESL students came within one question of showing an increase their proficiency level. So, 69% of the ESL students increased their English speaking proficiency level based on the state-mandated test for minority students. This compares to the 2004 – 2005 school year when only 40% of the ESL students increased their proficiency as measured on the state-mandated test.

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Although there is no direct assessment of the storytelling, role playing, and information gap instructional strategies on the state-mandated test to measure origin minority students' English proficiency level, it is clear that the communication skills gained from these strategies had an impact on test results. In 2005-06, the number of ESL students increasing in proficiency as measured by the state tests almost doubled compared to students from previous years.
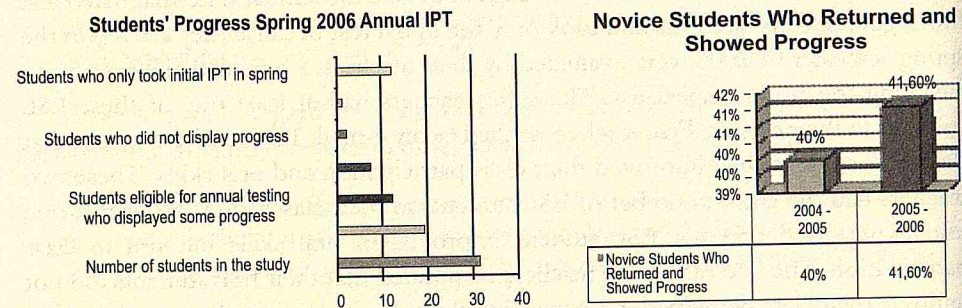

Figure 1. Students' progress

Teachers' Survey

Twenty-five of the seventy teachers given surveys returned them. Storytelling and role playing are the most popular speaking strategies used in the classroom; few teachers have used information gap exercises. The survey showed that seventeen teachers have used storytelling; eighteen teachers have used role playing, and only four teachers have used information gap exercises in the classroom. Therefore, it is not surprising that twenty-one teachers would like to learn more about information gap exercises. Five teachers would like to know more about storytelling, and 2 teachers are not interested in any training related to speaking strategies.

One teacher expressed interest in the training sessions concerning speaking strategies if the training offered reading renewal credits since teachers in the state where the study was developed must obtain three reading credits every five years to renew their teaching licenses.
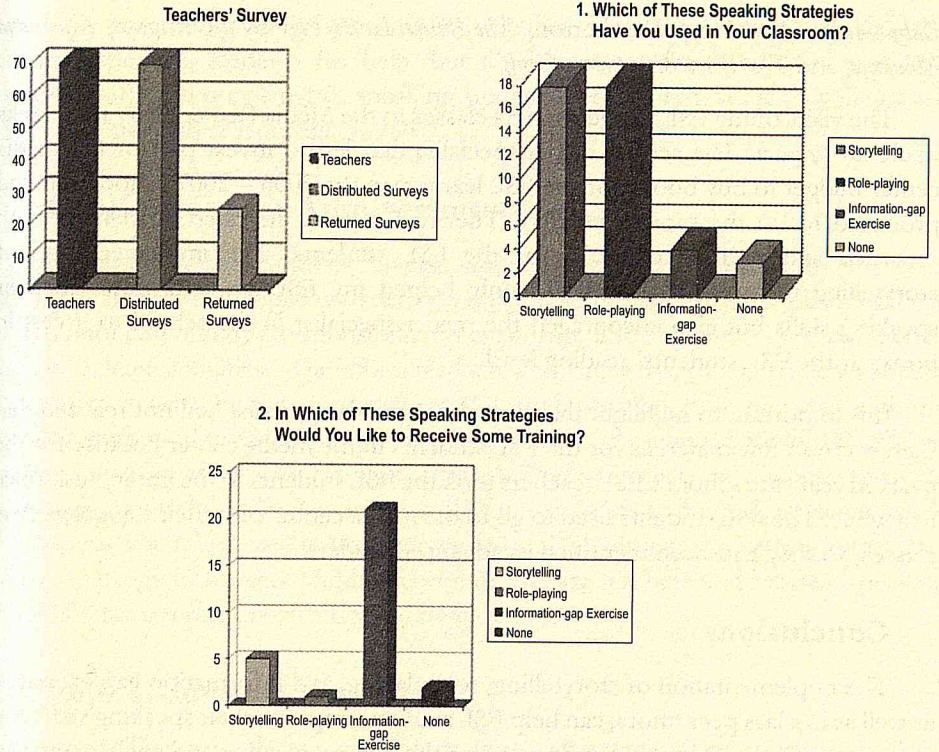
Teachers' Survey

1. Which of These Speaking Strategies Have You Used in Your Classroom?

2. In Which of These Speaking Strategies Would You Like to Receive Some Training?

Figure 2. Teachers' survey

Books from the School Media Center

Prior to 2004 – 2005, ESL students did not visit the Media Center with the ESL classroom. During 2005 - 2006, twenty-nine of my thirty-one ESL students had the opportunity to visit the media center twice a month as part of a requirement for the ESL LA class.

In spite of the fact that the books were old and not in the best condition, my students read them. My ESL students read eighty-four books during the 2005 – 2006 school year. The most popular books were *The Zoo* by Gagg, *Man and His Car* by Webster, and *Islands* by Armstrong; nine students read them. *Dinosaurs* by Douglas was also a popular book; eight students read it. Seven students read *Teeth* by Halford,

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Baby Animals by Leigh-Pemberton, *The Three Little Pigs* by Southgate, *Apes and Monkeys*, and *The Three Billy-Goats Gruff*.

The visits of my ESL Language Arts classes to the Media Center every two weeks made an impact. The school media specialist decided to invest part of the media center budget to buy books for the ESL learners in the 2006 – 2007 school year and promised to do the same thereafter. The media center invested $613.43 in both recorded and traditional books for the ESL students. The implementation of storytelling in my ESL classes not only helped my ESL students improve their speaking skills but also encouraged the media specialist in the school to invest in books at the ESL students' reading level.

It is important to highlight that the school media specialist had not realized that there were so few materials for the ESL students in the media center because for the past ten years the school's ESL teachers took the ESL students to the library only once in a while. The ESL students used to go to the media center with their Language Arts classes, so they had been identified as advanced readers.

Conclusions

The implementation of storytelling, role playing, and information gap exercises, as well as in-class peer tutors, can help ESL students improve their speaking skills and class participation. The implementation of the communicative and social strategies presented in this study can also favorably influence students' attitudes towards reading, change teaching practices, positively impact tests scores, and have an advantageous effect upon school budgets.

Combined with the instructional strategies of storytelling, role playing, and information gap exercises, evidence clearly shows that having an opportunity to read independently is important. During the 2005 – 2006 school year, ESL students utilized the media center to such a point that more books were ordered and ESL needs were included in the budget. It may be that the instructional strategies combined with access to books work together to increase ESL students' reading confidence. This may lead to enjoyment and increased reading which, ultimately, results in greater participation and communication.

A peer tutoring program may be a good resource to help ESL students speak English and to participate in the mainstream classroom. Clearly, English-speaking

students are willing to be peer tutors. English language learners can ask the English-speaking students for help, but it is necessary for teachers to pair ESL students off with only English-speaking students because ESL students will not ask for help due to their language barrier.

Implications for Administrators

Linguistically and culturally diverse students can engage more easily in school activities that are developed with teachers and students' support. This means that it is the school community's responsibility to encourage ESL students to get involved in school-related activities. Therefore, teachers and English-speaking students should be guided to learn how to approach the ESL students who do not interact with the school community due to their language barrier. Teachers should be offered professional development through Teacher Study Groups and English-speaking students should be trained as in-class peer tutors to assist the ESL students in the classroom when they need it. I recommended an ESL teacher study group and a peer tutoring program for this Middle School to prepare teachers and English speaking students for interaction with ESL students.

Implications for Teachers

Storytelling, role playing, and information gap exercises are effective speaking strategies that provide the perfect environment for second language learners to feel more confident when interacting. While reading stories, teachers provide English language learners with vocabulary that students will need to interact and to solve problems. However, teachers need to know that routine and the same classroom procedures throughout the year are important practices for developing a storytelling program. The teacher in charge of the storytelling program should keep a routine and needs to repeat the same vocabulary and questions several times. For example, when the class is going to read a new book, the teacher should say: "Show me the front cover." "What is the title of the book?" Concerning the classroom procedures, it is relevant that the teacher find a different book to read at least every week (depending on how fast students read) because the students will become good readers and will expect to start a new book every time they finish another one. Teachers also need to follow the same reading strategies every time their students read a new book, such as a prediction exercise, or book walk, among others.

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With the use of role playing in the classrooms, ESL students will perform conversations that contain the vocabulary they need to interact in the classroom and to solve problems related to the content area. In addition, ESL students will be able to work in groups with students they do not regularly interact with because of the language barrier. Role playing helps teachers design activities in which all students can be involved no matter what their English proficiency level is.

Information gap exercises also provide the perfect environment for second language learners to speak English and to participate in the classrooms. With these exercises, second language learners will be prompt to find the information other students have while they speak English and interact. To use information gap exercises in the classroom, teachers should pair off second language learners with English speaking students who are willing to assist the English as Second Language learners. Failure to implement this recommendation will cause English speaking students as well as second language learners to get very frustrated; as a result, none of them will achieve the learning objective. It is also important for teachers to know that the literature about information gap exercises is limited, so the exercises need to be created.

Teachers need to know that when they are going to use these speaking activities as part of their communicative strategies in the language classroom, they need to be patient and train the students. For example, if teachers want to use information gap exercises and role plays in their classrooms, they need to teach the students how to perform these activities. Thompson (1978) says that role-playing exercises are high-risk activities because students show their emotions and some behaviors that can be stigmatized. However, he says, "once students become accustomed to role playing, its risks are minimized and they [the students] will eagerly participate in it" (p. 9). Teachers will not find information gap exercises and role playing as useful activities to help ESL students improve their speaking skills and class participation if they do not learn how to use the activities and do not teach their students how to perform them.

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