

No English in English class: Improving oral production through Project-Based Learning  
in a 7th grade class at the Institución Educativa Presbítero Bernardo Montoya.

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### **Abstract**

This study was designed to explore how oral production can be improved through Project-Based Learning. The participants were 38 students between twelve and thirteen years of age attending the seventh grade at I.E. Presbítero Bernardo Montoya. Data was collected through observations, surveys, recorded oral activities and participation charts. An initial review of the collected data revealed that there was no oral use of the target language during the classes. A five stage implementation, of PBL, was applied with varying results. I found that the main stage where students improved their oral production was during the scaffolding. It was here where they started to participate in the target language and even to make jokes.

*Key words:* Project-Based Learning, Oral Production, English, EFL.

### **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.

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### **Preface**

Being a student in the last semester of the Bachelor Degree in Foreign Languages at Universidad de Antioquia requires the implementation of an action research project. Therefore, a public school in the urban area of Copacabana, Intitución Educativa Presbítero Bernardo Montoya, was chosen to carry out this study. After having observed an English class during the first semester in the practicum, there was a deep reflection regarding some difficulties related to learning. The issue that stood out the most was the absence of oral production in the target language: There was no English in English class. Thus, I wanted to allow students participate in the target language. It required intervention.

### **Description of the Context**

This section of the research presents some important features of the location, school and participants involved in this paper. First, some facts about the institution were considered. For instance, its history and location, its general description and its purpose, some general and specific objectives about English teaching in this school, and a general description of its English classroom. Then, the cooperator teacher, students from 7-4, and the main researcher.

Institución Educativa Presbítero Bernardo Montoya Giraldo is a catholic school located in the north of Copacabana. It was founded by the priest with the same name, Bernardo Montoya Giraldo, in 1960. It was initially called Escuela Normal Piloto Móvil de Alfabetización Para América Latina, but it changed to IDEM COPACABANA in 1976 and later, in 1987, to IDEM Presbítero Bernardo Montoya Giraldo to honor its founder. Currently, this institution has three urban and two rural branches. It offers elementary school in all branches and high school in the central branch. Since it has an ecological approach, it offers some specific studies for students in 10th and 11th grade in organic farming and in computer science. The central branch, which is located in a middle class neighborhood, has open green zones and is crossed by a creek. It also has a fish farm, a poultry farm, an open field, and crops. Its classrooms are spacious and well equipped despite the amount of students per group, approximately 40 students.

The purpose of the institution is to educate people capable of living in a society while being respectful of others' lives, human rights, and nature. It also educates upright human beings with an analytical, critical, investigative, and proactive spirit. In 2020, the institution plans to be a national and international leader in strengthening human principles; in developing cognitive, behavioral, communicative, labor, and cultural abilities; and expanding learning, caring about, and protecting the environment. The school also contributes to students' well-rounded,

intellectual, and social education through different programs. In order to develop students' cultural knowledge, the institution focuses on English teaching as a useful tool to value their own language and culture, and an opportunity to access more information.

As far as English is concerned, it has a syllabus based on grammar, reading comprehension, and communicative functions. However, the school does not have a particular language teaching approach. It allows teachers to use their personalized teaching styles whether they are specific language goals such as the acquisition of grammar structures and vocabulary, enhancement of listening, oral production, reading comprehension or basic writing composition features. Therefore, teachers are allowed to modify the syllabus as they see fit. Additionally, each grade has its own specific goals: for 7th grade, which is the focus group of this research project, the main objectives are: Showing interest for the subject; understanding, producing and writing basic and simple sentences; boosting reading comprehension; applying the grammar structures proposed in the syllabus; describing personal common routines; creating communicational situations; and showing understanding of the vocabulary learned.

The English classroom is located in a third story and it has a video beam, which is projected on the board, a white board, a computer and speakers. However, it does not have any English decoration. There are 41 chairs that are organized in 5 rows, 7 columns, 5 other chairs in the left side facing the rest of the chairs and one chair next to the teacher's desk. 7-4 is made up by 38 students most between twelve and thirteen years of age. There are sixteen girls and twenty-two boys. Some of them live nearby, but some others live in other Copacabana neighborhoods or in rural areas. English is taught on Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays from 12:35 to 1:35 pm. Students' English level is basic, they write and recognize basic vocabulary but they do not use it



inside the classroom. However, they understand simple English instructions used in the development of the class.

Gildardo Betancur Acevedo, who is a Spanish-English teacher graduated from Universidad de Antioquia, is the teacher in charge of 7-4. When teaching, he prioritizes grammar, vocabulary, basic writing structures and reading comprehension over listening and speaking production. As a consequence, explanations and the general development of the class are done in Spanish. Finally, the person in charge of this research project is Johana Echeverri Carvajal. She is a 24-year old student in 9th semester of Education in Foreign Languages, English and French, at Universidad de Antioquia. She also works as an English teacher in a private institute in Bello. When teaching English, she prioritizes vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension and speaking production over reading comprehension and writing. Thus, she tries to use English as much as possible but, if switching to L1 is essential to achieving better understanding she does not hesitate to do it. In summary, it is important to have general knowledge of the context where a research is conducted and its participants, since it gives the research validity and provides the researcher with essential facts to consider when making choices.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This part of the paper presents a description of the language learning setback identified after observing the 7-4 English class, at the IE Presbítero Bernardo Montoya Giraldo, for three months. After the first month, I realized that students hardly ever used English. That happened because they did not have exposure to language as observed in many classes, “T tells Ss to write the instruction of an exercise in their notebooks, in Spanish.” (Taken from observation #3, February 4th); “Then, the T explains in Spanish the next activity: Organize the animals in the

order they arrived in the marathon” (Taken from observation #7, February 15<sup>th</sup>); “He explains that today they are going to present a quiz at the end of the class. For that reason, they are practicing before. Everything is said in Spanish.” (Taken from observation #9, February 19<sup>th</sup>). Moreover, the classes are focused on copying from some slides projected on the board as in the following examples: “The teacher shows an exercise about ordinal numbers in the video beam. He asks students in Spanish to write the instruction on their notebooks.” (Taken from observation #2, February 4<sup>th</sup>); “The teacher shows a short explanation in the video beam. The explanation is in Spanish. The teacher asks them to write it in their notebooks.” (Taken from observation #13, March 3<sup>rd</sup>); “the teacher continues explaining the first activity in Spanish: students should write on their notebooks a list of adjectives that is shown on the board.” (Taken from observation #16, March 7<sup>th</sup>).

However, when giving students exposure to language, students seemed motivated to try to listen and understand. For instance, during the second month, one class a week was to be given by the student-teacher and English was used inside the classroom as much as possible. Here are some excerpts that show the students’ motivation when listening to the target language: “Speaking in English seems a good way to attract students’ attention because they were completely in silence looking at the teacher and somehow they leaned forward in their desks.” (Taken from observation #15, March 4<sup>th</sup>); “The teacher starts greeting in English and making mimics. Students immediately become quiet and pay attention to the teacher.” (Taken from observation #19, March 14<sup>th</sup>). The students’ reaction was satisfactory since the beginning because they tried to understand and participate using the target language after being asked to use as many words in English as they could. “The teacher presents herself in English and then she asks students to say their names. Although the question was in English, students answer

correctly.” (Taken from observation #15. March 4<sup>th</sup>); “Then the teacher begins making a sentence: ‘so, he is not...’ and students complete it ‘he... is... not... ugly’ ” (Taken from observation #19. March 14<sup>th</sup>), “At the end, the teacher asks some students to read what they wrote. They sometimes hesitate saying the complete sentence, and sometimes they mispronounce some adjectives.” (Taken from observation #19. March 14<sup>th</sup>).

However, not all students participate in English: “The teacher asks them to answer “ready” and writes the word on the board. Some students use the new word but some others do not.” (Taken from observation #15. March 4<sup>th</sup>). When students participate, they sometimes use only words such as in observation 19 of March 14<sup>th</sup>: “the teacher asks them to speak in English and she repeats the possible answers. This time students repeat the word they want to use instead of a whole sentence”.

As we have seen, students in 7-4 have some understanding of the target language but they do not get enough exposure to feel confident to participate. Nevertheless, they are motivated when listening to and using it in the classroom. That is why the teacher should give them constant exposure to authentic language, so they can become familiar with some expressions and common language that is constantly used in class. Besides, it is true that students do not communicate in English but it is because the English course is teacher-centered and does not give students opportunities to participate. However, it has been shown that students become motivated and try to use some words or repeat what they think they need to be understood when language input is given. Consequently, the question formulated for this research project is: No English in English class: How can oral production be improved through Project-Based Learning in a 7th grade class at the Institución Educativa Presbítero Bernardo Montoya?

### **Theoretical Background**

In this part of the paper I will state the theoretical background of the project. First, I will present a brief description of oral production, and second I will explain the methodology chosen to improve it: project-based learning. More specifically, I will give a clear definition of project-based learning and I will describe the student and teacher's role, and the stages to develop the action plan.

#### **Oral Production**

For this paper, I will characterize oral production as “the capacity to communicate effectively within a particular speech community that wants to accomplish its purposes” (Hymes, 1972, p. 53-73). Thus, speaking is something students do when they use particular patterns, but the oral skill is much more than this. According to Byrne (1976, p. 8), oral communication is “a two-way process between speaker and listener, involving the productive skill of speaking and the receptive skill of understanding (or listening with understanding)". It means that learners have to be taught to speak and respond as well as to listen and understand. Taking into account the participants' level in this research, the Common European Framework defines the oral production in its first stage as “having very basic range of simple expressions about personal details and needs of a concrete type” (p. 110).

As Brown & Yule address (1983), “the serious consideration of the spoken language as a subject for teaching has a long history, but only made a decisive impact on foreign language teaching in general after the end of the second world war” (p.2). Before, the spoken language was taught as a set of rules of pronunciation where students should learn some sounds in isolation and then integrate them into isolated words and sentences. But during the last twenty-five years, the horizon of teaching spoken language has widened. Many courses have stopped

using written texts read aloud, and have used instead excerpts of real and authentic conversations. As Brown (1983) states, “with the breaking out of the written mode, students are encouraged to use spoken-language forms spontaneously, not simply to utter written-language sentences” (p.2). This expansion of the oral competence has been welcomed and even considered as important as the other competences by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001).

Now, when spontaneously speaking, Brown (2001) found that students sometimes worry more about how to say things rather than what to say. Additionally, although students are exposed to a foreign language in the class, they are not able to express themselves effectively when they are asked to participate orally. According to Nunan (1993), this may happen because learners do not recognize the difference between knowing various grammatical rules and being able to use them effectively and appropriately when communicating. Additionally, as Ran (2001) states, teachers sometimes highlight accuracy rather than fluency, causing students to lose confidence and motivation to speak in the foreign language. Regarding this general issue in oral production, Brown (2001) argues that this is when the teacher should create an environment of confidence to allow students participate without being scared of making mistakes. Consequently, one way to help teachers create this suitable environment is through project-based learning.

### **Project-based Learning**

Initially, I will address what a project method is. Adderley et al. (1975) provided the following thought, which after some time still stands as a good definition:

- (1) [projects] involve the solution of a problem; often, though not necessarily, set by the student himself [or herself];
- (2) they involve initiative by the student or group of students, and necessitate a variety of educational activities;
- (3) they commonly result in an end

product (e.g., thesis, report, design plans, computer programme and model); (4) work often goes on for a considerable length of time; (5) teaching staff are involved in an advisory, rather than authoritarian, role (p.1)

In addition, it is necessary to examine its history. As Krajcik and Blumenfeld mentioned in 2006, the roots of project-based learning extend back over a hundred years, to the work of educator and philosopher John Dewey (1959). Dewey argued that students could develop personal interest in the material if “they engage in real, meaningful tasks and problems that emulate what experts do in real-world situations” (p. 649). It was first applied in teaching sciences but then, Project-Based learning (PBL) was introduced into the field of second language education as a way to give students a more active role and to reflect about the principles of students-centered teaching (Hedge, 1993). Consequently, Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial and Palincsar (1991) agreed that teachers need to

(a) create opportunities for learning by providing access to information; (b) support learning by scaffolding instruction and modeling and guiding students to make tasks more manageable; (c) encourage students to use learning and metacognitive processes; and (d) assess progress, diagnose problems, provide feedback, and evaluate overall results (p. 380 – 381)

Regarding the process of implementing PBL into regular English classes, there are some steps that should be followed as proposed by some authors such as Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Krajcik, et al., 1994; Krajcik, Czerniak, & Berger, 2002; Krajcik and Shin, 2014. Those steps are 1. Identifying a driving question, 2. Making groups, 3. Exploring and finding solutions, 4. Using scaffolds, and 5. Creating a tangible product to be presented. It is important to bear in mind that

steps 3 and 4 can be alternated and repeated until students find a satisfactory solution to the driving question.

Taking a closer look at the previous steps, a driving question is the core of PBL. According to Blumenfeld et al. (1991), it serves to organize and drive activities; and these activities culminate in a final product that addresses the driving question. It is defined by Krajcik and Mamlok-Naaman (2006) as “a well-designed question that students and teachers elaborate, explore, and answer throughout a project” (p. 3) Krajcik and colleagues also provided the following five criteria for high-quality driving questions: 1) feasible, 2) worthwhile, 3) contextualized, 4) meaningful, and 5) ethical.

With respect to working in groups, Blumenfeld et al. (1996) mentioned that the back and forth of sharing, using, and debating of ideas helps to create a community of learners (p.319). Furthermore, PBL is based on Vygotsky’s (1978) view of social natural learning where he posits that the development and understanding of concepts happen when individuals meaningfully interact and discuss with more capable peers or teachers. (As mentioned in Heide Spruck Wrigley, 1998). This kind of community also serves to the implementation of scaffolds, which according to Singer, Marx, Krajcik, & Chambers (2000) are a set of resources that helps a learner to “accomplish more difficult tasks than they otherwise are capable of completing on their own” (p. 170). In that matter, teachers, peers, learning materials, and technology can all serve as scaffolds.

Concerning the development of a tangible product, Krajcik and Shin (2014) indicated that it has to address the driving question so it could offer a ‘physical representation’ of students learning. Besides, Darling-Hammond et al. (2008), Larmer and Mergendoller (2015), and Ravitz (2010) all emphasized the importance of students presenting their work to public audiences

because they noted that this public audience “can be highly motivating for students” (p. 215). Krajcik and Shin (2014) echoed this idea by saying that when those tangible artifacts are made public, they can motivate students and present opportunities for feedback. Finally, after having studied the PBL principles, I can conclude that this action research needs this type of intervention because it provides multiple benefits for students since they can gain deeper and meaningful understanding by actively working with and using ideas within a community. Now, I will continue with the plan we I am going to employ and develop taking into account all the theory presented.

### **Research Question**

No English in English class: How can oral production be improved through Project-Based Learning in a 7th grade class at the I.E. Presbítero Bernardo Montoya?

### **General Objective**

- Improving oral production through Project-Based Learning.

### **Specific Objectives**

- Providing and selecting suitable authentic material according to student interests in a 7th grade class at the Institución Educativa Presbítero Bernardo Montoya.
- Directing student motivation to learn English by switching from a teacher-centered to a student-centered class.
- Creating a tangible product through Project-Based Learning using authentic material integrated in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade English Syllabus.

### **Action Plan**

This action research aimed to improve 7<sup>th</sup> grade student’s oral production through the implementation of a project which allowed students to learn by doing and applying while being



engaged in meaningful and real world activities. Consequently, I performed different actions according to the steps that most researchers and theorists have followed when working with project based learning. The assessment was performed in order to evaluate the impact of my research question on students and, to promote my reflection, modification and implementation of this project-based learning.

The **intervention actions** were based on theory from authors such as Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Krajcik, et al., 1994; Krajcik, Czerniak, & Berger, 2002; Krajcik and Shin, 2014; who state that project-based learning has five key features: 1. Students identify or select a driving question, or an issue to be researched, 2. Students make groups and explore the driving question in authentic situations, 3. Students get engaged in collaborative activities to find solutions to the topic chosen, 4. The teacher uses scaffolds to guide and help students to participate in activities that are beyond their ability, and 5. Students create a tangible product that answers the driving question. The last stage, as one final tangible product, was not possible to carry out due to constant changes in class schedule.

It was also necessary to bear in mind the **assessment actions** during the implementation process to give an objective solution to my research question. That is why the development of the project was constantly assessed with oral class activities and a count of participation in terms of Spanish and English use. The latter was divided into words, simple sentences and complex sentences. There were also three oral production tests that were voice recorded: they were done before, in the middle, and after the implementation of the action plan to get an idea of students' oral production level. During the process, the teacher kept a journal regarding the classes which was written three times a week. In addition, there was a student and cooperator teacher survey before and after the implementation of the action plan. This was done in order to analyze their

expectations and their perspectives on the efficacy of project-based learning at I.E. Presbítero Bernardo Montoya Giraldo.

### Development of Actions

Regarding the initial intervention schedule, it is important to clarify that it had some changes and adjustments due to different circumstances such as school events and student performance. A brief summary on the actions applied is presented below.

Week	Action	Observations
<b>July 11<sup>th</sup> - July 15<sup>th</sup></b>	Consent form	Reading and signing.
	First students and teacher's survey*	Students show interest and motivation to work with project-work and to make the final video.
	Driving question*	Students chose the general and the specific topics of their interest for the project. They decided to work on "How to learn English in a fun way?"  Students selected to make a video as a final product.
<b>July 18<sup>th</sup> - July 28<sup>th</sup></b>	Pre-test** (Voice Recording)	It was made to know students' oral production level before implementing the action plan. Most students use Spanish when answering to basic questions such as "how are you?" Students showed difficulties understanding basic questions in English.
	Team Groups*	Students made groups and selected the specific topics.  After browsing the net, each group chose a specific way to learn English in a fun way such as using songs, using games, using social networking sites, and reading.

		Student roles inside each group were chosen.
<b>July 29<sup>th</sup> - October 21<sup>st</sup></b>	Exploration*	Students explored and gathered information about their specific topics. A failed attempt to share findings was made.
	Scaffolds*	Students worked on short oral activities during each session. Students learned new vocabulary and started using it when possible. Sometimes they made jokes.
	Middle-test** (Voice Recording)	It was made, to find out students' oral production level half way through the implementation of the action plan. Students start using English for common routine topics such as greetings. Some students start using simple sentences in different topics.
<b>7</b>	Draft*	Students were supposed to make a draft to be used in the final product, but it was not possible due to a lot of missing classes and because it was necessary to comply with the school syllabus.
	Feedback**	The teacher was supposed to give students feedback to improve the final product. This was not done because of the previous explanation.
<b>8</b>	Final Product*	Students were supposed to finish the final product but there was not enough time.
<b>9</b>	Final Product Presentation*/**	Students were supposed to present the final product and the teacher was supposed to give feedback to each group

		but there was not enough time.
	Post-test** (Voice Recording)	It was made to find out students' oral production level after implementing the action plan. Some students continue using words and some others simple sentences.
	Second student and teacher's survey**	It was conducted to have students and teacher's perspective about the efficacy of implementing project-based learning. Students manifest to have enjoyed the classes and some of them ask me to continue working in their school.

\*Intervention actions.

\*\* Assessment actions.

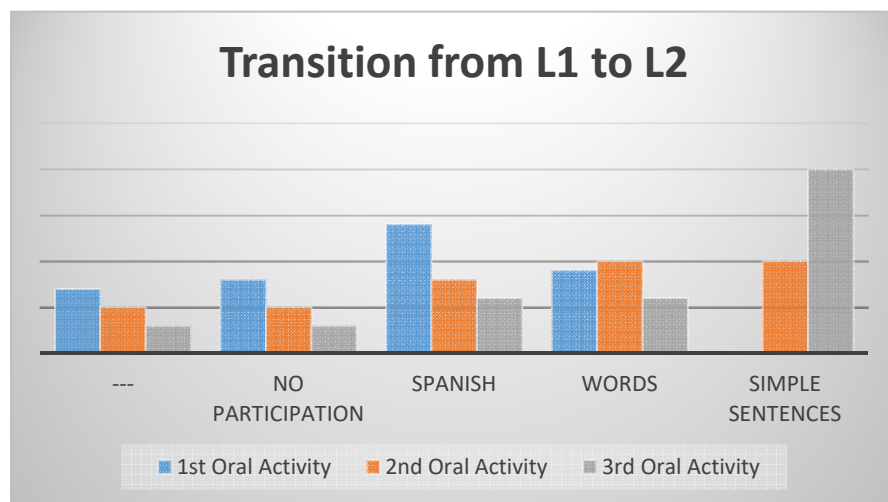
### **Findings and Interpretations**

I have decided to follow the procedure proposed by Burns (1999, pp 156-159.) in order to analyze our data. Firstly, I have assembled the information in order to categorize it into codes to have a preliminary classification. Secondly, the codes have been compared and interpreted through a metamatrix in order to hierarchically organize the findings. In addition, I have selected and taken into consideration the aforementioned instruments to validate my findings and obtain a data triangulation (Burns, 1999, p. 163-164): All participants have shared their points of view regarding the action plan that was implemented, the outcomes acknowledge their context, and the findings are supported by theory and validated in a democratic, catalytic, and dialogical way through the results and the processes (Anderson et al., 1994, cited by Burns, 1999, pp. 161-162).

After all the data from the different sources was collected and the triangulation was done, I used a data analysis program called QDA miner to interpret the information and identify the

most common categories during the whole intervention process. Consequently, all of this could allowed me to analyze the solution to my main question regarding Project-Based Learning and how it could benefit my students’ oral production. This analysis process generated a lot of categories that I then had to place into common groups or macro categories. After thinking thoroughly, the latter categories were 1) the change from Spanish to English and 2) the influence of the project on student learning.

First, I am going to describe the change from Spanish to English through the analysis of their interventions in each language. This means, how they went from no English to a combination of words in both languages and slowly transitioned into simple sentences spoken in English as we can observe in chart 1.



**Chart 1.** This graphic explains the transition from L1 (Spanish) to L2 (English) during three different oral activities performed and graded in the second half of the year.

It is important to understand that this transition was analyzed throughout each stage mentioned in the theoretical background on how to implement PBL into regular classes: a) Identifying a research question b) Making groups c) Exploring and finding solutions d) Using scaffolds e) Creating a tangible product. Second, I am going to address the influence of a project on students’ learning in terms of their attitude, motivation and group work, which allowed a change from a teacher-centered to a student-centered class.

### **Change from Spanish to English**

Throughout all the steps applied in the intervention process, the use of Spanish was observable. For example, in the beginning, students greeted, answered simple questions and participated only using Spanish, as we could see in the identification of the problem. However, after a while and incorporating some routine activities, some students started using L2 in greetings. Nevertheless, others kept using Spanish, as seen in the following journal entry: “The teacher starts saying hello to students. Some of them start answering in English by saying "hello" or "good afternoon", some others in Spanish” (Journal #56 on July 14<sup>th</sup>). During this stage, students identified the target of their project and made groups. It was difficult for them to understand the proposal when presented in English, therefore it was translated to Spanish. Once they understood the proposals, they were able to decide on a topic; as seen in the teacher’s journal #55 on July 11<sup>th</sup>:

The proposal is in English, but students ask the teacher to explain what it is in Spanish. After debating and a lot of chat in their mother tongue about the advantages, disadvantages and possible activities, students decide to choose the “Learning English” topic.

In the exploration and finding solutions stage, students continued using L1 and they refused to read in English because they said they could not understand anything. After I showed them some simple words and pictures they were able to use and understand the rest of the text. They tried to read the information but resorted to translation, as seen in the next excerpt:

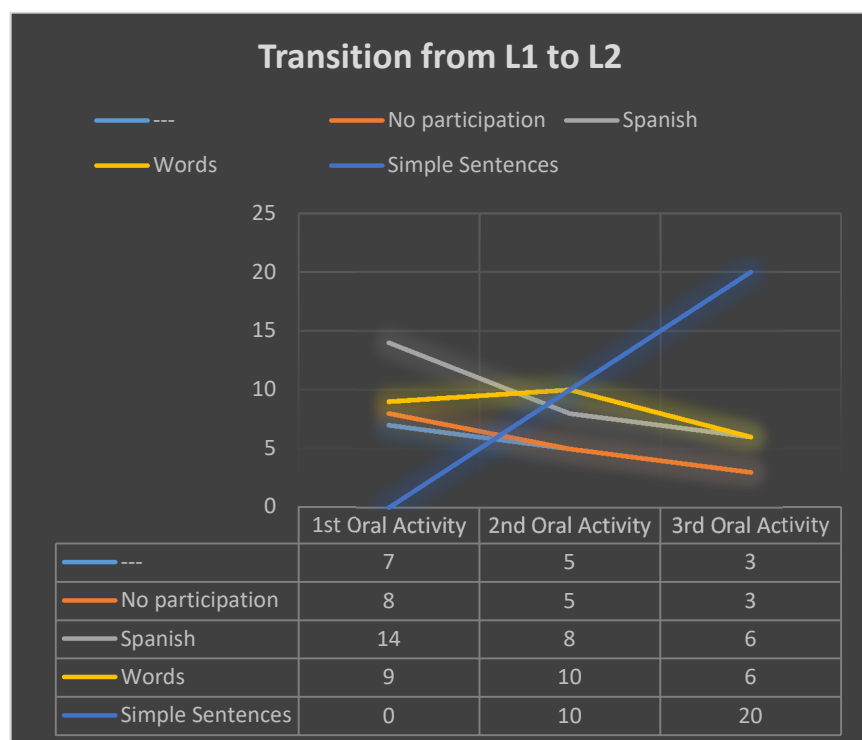
Students were bored about reading in English because they told me they didn’t know anything in English. However, I tell them to look for words they know and to check the

images they see. They do it, and get a general idea of the texts by translating into Spanish. (Teacher's journal #63 on July 29<sup>th</sup>)

During the scaffolding stage, there was a small but significant change on the use of L2. Although students continued using Spanish during most of the class, they started making attempts to use L2 when they recognized the vocabulary, when topics were previously taught and when they had sample sentences to follow during oral and written participation. Some of these changes are visible in the teacher's journals and in the recorded oral activities made during the implementation process. For example:

- Students become familiarized with a sentence: "I want to be...", so every time we remember the name of the profession, I ask them who wants to be a \_\_\_\_ and they participate by answering in English. At first, some students forget to answer in English, but later most students do it. (Teacher's journal #62 on July 28<sup>th</sup>)
- Now, it is time for practicing the -ing rules. After presenting some examples, students continue adding the -ing to some similar verbs. They do it without hesitation. (Teacher's journal #68 on August 11<sup>th</sup>)
- Next, I show them some examples of sentences using those time expressions and, one by one, we make more oral sentences where students tell me about the time they do those activities. Students participate in the target language by following the sample sentence. (Teacher's journal # 82 on September 12<sup>th</sup>)
- At the end, I ask them about the activities Mr. Pig does during the day. They take a little bit to process the question in English, but after I mimic the question, they start naming some activities in the target language. (Teacher's journal #87 on September 23<sup>rd</sup>)

Yet, another evidence of the transition from L1 to L2 is the increase of student participation in the target language. After some classes where the main objective was to apply oral activities, I counted the participation in terms of Spanish or English, and divided the latter into words, simple sentences and complex sentences. As we can observe in chart 2, in the first oral activity, only 23.6%, that is 9 out of 38 students, participated using words in L2. During the second oral activity, 26.3 %, that is 10 out of 38 students, participated using simple sentences in L2, and another 26.3 % used words in L2. The final oral activity showed that 52.6 %, that is 20 out of 38 students, participated with simple sentences and 15.7 %, which is 6 out of 38 students, participated by using words in L2.



**Chart 2.** This chart evidences the transition from L1 to L2 at different stages of the process.

During these oral activities, I detected three different types of student interventions. A group of students that refused to participate from beginning to end of the process. They expressed that they did not feel comfortable speaking in English due to their “lack of words and



the strange pronunciation in L2”. (Taken from the Comments Section of the final survey).

Another group of students, who at first refused to participate using the target language, at end tried to. They stated, that if they did not try, they would never be able to participate. They also felt ok when they made mistakes as long as their classmates did not laugh at them, but rather helped them with corrections. This is evidenced in teacher journal #75 of August 26<sup>th</sup>: “It is important to mention that some students that have never participated before, start raising their hands to do it.” Finally, many students enjoyed participating in L2, even if they did not pronounce or answer well, they were also upset when they did not participate more than once in a session as shown here:

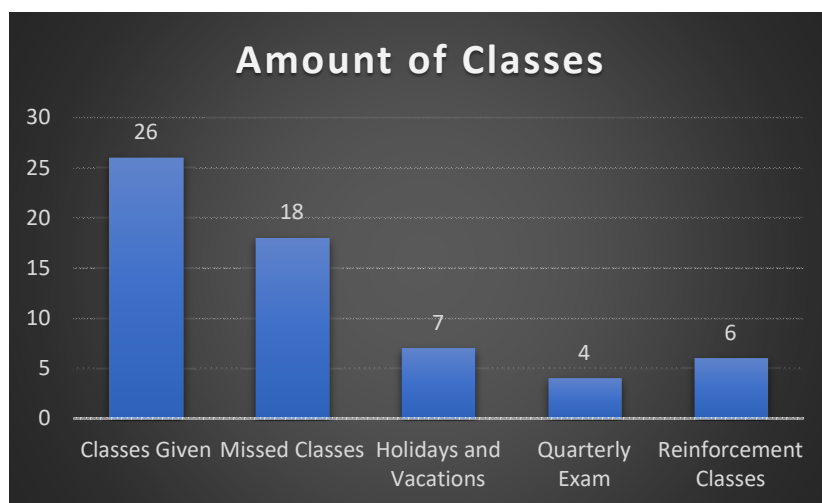
- They start shouting trying to participate at the same time. I ask them to raise their hands and they look desperate to answer. After a few minutes, students start shouting again, so I let the whole group answer at the same time. (Taken from the teacher’s journal #87 on September 23<sup>rd</sup>).
- Every time there is an oral activity, more and more students participate. Some even get mad when there are no more exercises to do. Some students mention things in Spanish such as “ay no, I am not going to participate again”, “teacher, do more exercises”, “teacher, you haven’t allow me participate today”, etc.

Through the scaffolding stage, there were also additional situations in which students used the target language outside the classroom, for instance, when greeting or using single words and even making some jokes, as we can read in the next passages:

- They even make jokes about the things some other people can do and the best thing: they do it using English. For example, there was a boy making jokes about “Godofredo”. He

said “teacher, Godofredo can’t dance because he is a cripple”<sup>1</sup> and the rest of students laughed. There was another situation in which students were explaining why “Anne can’t sit”. They used the sentences in English, and then they proposed some unusual reasons... (Teacher’s journal #56 of July 14<sup>th</sup>)

- While waiting outside the classroom, students say “good morning” and “hello”, there is also a student who asks the teacher “how are you, teacher”... (Teacher’s journal #68 of August 11<sup>th</sup>)



**Chart 3.** This chart shows the amount of classes given and missed for several reasons.

Finally, I will refer to the creation of a tangible product. Throughout the process, I found that in public schools, students miss a lot of classes. There are all sorts of reasons such as masses, teachers’ meetings, holyday celebrations, school acts and report card days. In fact, I missed 57.3 % of the classes that were planned, this implies 35 out of 61, as observed in Chart 3. Although each class lasted an hour, most of the time other activities were carried out instead of the English class. Consequently, all these factors contributed to the lack of a tangible product within the research project deadline. However, students expressed they wanted to finish the project at the end of the year, even if they did not get a grade for it. On the other hand, there was

<sup>1</sup>“teacher, Godofredo can’t dance porque es muy tullido”

the option of reducing the topics proposed in the school syllabus to try to meet the deadline. Nevertheless, the cooperator teacher told me it was impossible because it was necessary to achieve the objectives within the proposed dates from the beginning of the period to objectively assess students based on what they had written in their notebooks.

### **Influence of the Project in Student Learning**

**Attitude and motivation.** Beyond students' language acquisition, there were other visible characteristics that helped develop a suitable environment for learning the target language. One of the specific objectives was to use authentic material which was provided in every class. Different audios, videos, and activity sheets were chosen and presented according to a student survey conducted before the implementation. Students seemed to like the classes when I worked with material related to their interests because their attitude toward participating slowly increased along the stages of implementation. It was also something they expressed in the comments section of the final survey. They said that the best part of the classes were the pictures used to give examples or to learn new vocabulary because they were about things, movies, shows and people they liked or knew (Taken from the comments section in the final survey).

Working with materials and activities related to their interests also made a change in motivation possible. As some students expressed in the final survey, 76.3 %, that is 29 out of 38 students, enjoyed the English course for different reasons, because they could try to speak in another language and that was fun, because the activities were easy and enjoyable, because they could laugh and participate more orally than written, because it was important for their lives and could make them be more "pro" (professional). While, in the first survey, only 44.7 %, that is 17 out of 38 students, expressed they liked English due to its importance in their future. Another important point about motivation was that some students stated they wanted to learn English at

the university. In the first survey, 10.5 %, that is 4 out of 38 students, wanted to study something at the university and only 5.2%, that is 2 out of 38 students, wished to study English; but in the final survey, 31.5%, that is 12 out of 38 students, wanted to study at the university and 23.6 %, that is 9 out of 38 students, wished to study languages.

**Group work.** Project work also made possible to work in groups although it was difficult at first for some students. When I first told them to work in groups, some students reacted by making angry or worried faces and they rejected to do it, as we can see in teacher journal #55 on July 11<sup>th</sup>:

There are some students that don't want to work in groups and make awful faces. They ask me to work individually and tell me that they do not want to appear in the video or work with specific people. I tell them that they could be in charge of different things and at the end, they accept to write their names on a group but they said they hadn't accepted to work with them yet.

After a while in the implementation process, some students continued rejecting to work in groups but most of them divided roles and worked helping each other. Out of 9 groups working on an activity, 2 groups started to do some other things, they expressed they didn't want to work in groups, and that they preferred to do it individually, as we can see in the next passage: "When working in groups, some students really work. They set roles for each person, they help each other with pronunciation and with vocabulary, but some others still resist and start doing some other things. Even if I take their other notebooks away, they continue pouting and not working." (Teacher's journal #63 on July 29<sup>th</sup>).

### Conclusions

As Brown (1983) states, “with the breaking out of the written mode, students are encouraged to use spoken-language forms spontaneously, not simply to utter written-language sentences” (p.2). This was observable during the implementation of this project since the students were forced to speak more English due to the constant exposure to the target language. This phenomenon could be also explained through the fact they were given a participation grade. Thus, students started to use English even outside the classroom; it was not only something they had to study but a part of their school routine.

According to Brown (2001), students sometimes worry more about how to say things instead of spontaneously speaking. That’s why language exposure is not enough, a suitable environment is also needed to allow them to speak fearlessly. This was one of the main goals established at the beginning of the intervention: “Use the vocabulary learned as much as possible without hesitation” and “Help my classmates without bullying them”. Thus, most of students lost their shyness and uneasiness when making mistakes. In consequence, participation growth was observable during the class as shown in Chart 1. Additionally, participation allowed a student centered methodology to be developed instead of continuing with a teacher centered approach. Therefore, learning was fostered by students’ likes and interests, as supported by Hedge (1993) who stated that PBL was introduced into the field of second language education as a way to give students a more active role and to reflect about the principles of students-centered teaching.

Student interaction in L2 was also built through PBL, especially in the scaffolding stage. Some authors such as Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial and Palincsar (1991) found that this method fosters opportunities for learning by accessing information and using scaffoldings, which according to Singer, Marx, Krajcik, & Chambers (2000) help a learner to

“accomplish more difficult tasks than they otherwise are capable of completing on their own” (p. 170). In that matter, teachers, peers, learning materials, and technology can all serve as scaffolds.

Finally, after analyzing the aforementioned, I was able to conclude that the initial stages of project work had positive influences not only on students’ oral production but also on students learning motivation and attitude. They became more active during the classes and gained deeper and more meaningful understanding by actively working with and using ideas within a community, as Blumenfeld et al. (1996) stated. However, this methodology was not really completed in this context since it was impossible to finish the tangible product because of the lack of time in English classes. This kind of processes requires more time in public schools in Colombia due to the standard tests the government imposes at the end of each year.

### **Reflection**

I learned a lot from working at a public school. I believe that the advice and comments from my cooperator teacher and my practicum advisor contributed towards my professional development. However, I also noticed that in this kind of context there are several difficulties that make teaching and the achievement of learning a bit difficult. Some that can be mentioned are effective teaching time and overcrowded classrooms. Regarding the first difficulty I mentioned, I found that it is almost impossible to address every objective posed in the school syllabus. As I experienced through this intervention, the number of missed classes is overwhelming. They are all due to all sort of school changes, this implies that teachers must reduce the content of the syllabus leaving aside many important topics. As a result, neither students nor teachers are able to coherently follow up on their classes. In the end most of the topics seem isolated because there is no sequence timewise. The second difficulty was that, I came to understand that working with large classes requires a lot of preparation and reading. It is

necessary to have many different strategies planned in order to focus students' attention and to solve the everyday situations occurring in a class. One of the most important things I learned was to work with their different learning styles, with their specific interests and their behavior. I believe, the most rewarding aspect about this action research was to motivate and encourage students to learn English, which is something I noticed class in and class out, through their enthusiastic participation and their comments in the final survey.

After all this process, I can conclude that I have a long and enriching path ahead of myself, a path full of new experiences and things to learn, not only to become a better teacher but a more committed individual. On the other hand, I also learned that the education system in Colombia needs to be improved, so that communities such as this can have access to worthy and high quality education.

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