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Autor

Santiago Zuluaga Franco

Universidad de Antioquia

Escuela de Idiomas

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Task Based Learning Approach to Foster EFL Learners' Listening and Speaking Skills

Santiago Zuluaga Franco

Universidad de Antioquia

Research and Practicum Advisor

Diana Milena Calderon Vargas

Magister in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Thesis Advisor

Natalia Arias Patiño

Magister in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

El Carmen de Viboral

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Abstract

This action research project analyzed how the implementation of Task-Based Learning Approach (TBL) fostered students' listening and speaking skills since students did not have opportunities for practicing these skills in previous years. The participants were 35 eighth-grade students from a public institution in El Carmen de Viboral. Data collection instruments included observations, journals, a survey, students' artifacts, a focus group interview and a questionnaire, whose analysis was done through processes of assembling, coding, and comparing data to building meanings and interpretations (Burns, 2010). As results, the data demonstrated that students improved listening and speaking skills thanks to pre-task activities. Nevertheless, the main task and language focus activities did not contribute to the main objective of the study due to unmanageable changes.

Key words: Task-Based Learning Approach, listening, speaking, pre-task activities, improvement.

Degree Requirement

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of

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Preface

The decision of inquiring listening and speaking skills was a personal choice. In my experience of being a learner of foreign languages, I have experienced fear and anxiety about developing listening and speaking skills. These feelings aroused every time I was asked to do oral and language comprehension exercises. I felt I was not prepared to carry out these exercises since teachers did not foster those skills very frequently in class. They focused mainly on writing and reading skills. In this respect, I had to learn by heart everything I had to say in English. At the end, I felt frustrated because I perceived that I could not be proficient in the four language skills.

Now that I am a language teacher and regarding my personal experience as a student, I decided to inquire about listening and speaking skills with the aim at fostering a different perspective of these skills avoiding students feeling frustrated or anxious when learning and using English. I hope this work will help many teachers that share the same teaching interest in developing the four language skills in a balanced way.

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Context

In this section, I will provide general information about the institution, its pedagogical model, its vision and mission, a detailed description of the physical appearance of the classroom where this project was carried out and their participants. Finally, I will address the cooperator teacher's (CT) background and the syllabus of the institution.

The *Institución Educativa Fray Julio Tobón Betancur* (IEFJTB henceforth) is located in the urban area of El Carmen de Viboral, Antioquia. This institution has three branches located in the municipality: one near the town square (branch A), another one close to the soccer field of the municipality (branch B), and the last one near branch B, which is under construction. Branch B, where this research project was conducted, offers middle and high-school education, excepting sixth grades that are located in branch A. Finally, preschool, primary and night education takes place in the branch A.

Concerning the pedagogical model of the institution, it is framed in the "*Ser Persona*" project composed of three large dimensions that characterize the human being: *Being, Knowing* and *Doing*. Its mission seeks to educate people with high human and academic quality, respectful of their natural and social environment. With respect to the institutional vision, it aims at being recognized in 2020 for educating students according to the "*Ser Persona*" project, to promote students' autonomy, responsibility and respect for themselves (IEFJTB, 2018).

Regarding the physical appearance of the classroom at the time of the study, it was large enough to host the 41 students that composed the group. The classroom contained a big window on the left side of the classroom, a big board, six lamps and a smart TV that

was located in front of the classroom. On the walls, there were some posters with students'

birthdays and their academic expectations for the school year. There was also a desk and a

chair in front of the classroom, and 41 chairs that were distributed in six equal rows.

Concerning the participants of this research project, it was an eighth grade (8°F)

composed of 15 males and 26 females aged between 12 and 15 years old. It is worth

mentioning here that only 35 students accepted to participate in this project. Most of the

students lived in the urban area of the municipality. Additionally, they were exposed to

English class two times a week in 120-minute periods. Regarding their interests in English

class, the majority of them expressed that they would like to learn English to get better job

opportunities, to travel abroad and to improve life quality. Moreover, they stated that they

would like to learn English through movies, games, and group work addressing topics such

as music, sports and Youtubers. Nevertheless, some students did not like the language due

to its complexity. Finally, regarding language experiences, some students said that they had

studied English on their own; without specifying the extra time spent outside of school

(Survey, February 19th, 2020).

By the time of the study, the Cooperating Teacher held a Bachelor's degree in

Spanish-English from *Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana,* Medellín. She had been teaching

for 33 years approximately at Fray Julio Tobón; 18 years teaching Spanish and the last 15

years teaching English. While the study was implemented, she taught English and ethics

and values in this institution. The teacher usually carried out the classes in phases. She

started her classes with an explanation of the subject, followed by the objective of the class,

and finished with a worksheet of the target topic (CT interview, August 20th, 2019). To

finish, the main objective of the teacher was to promote meaningful learning among students.

In relation to the syllabus, the teacher's lessons were based on the school curriculum that was created hand in hand with some teachers from the institution and the University of Antioquia. The curriculum document was divided into the four terms of the school year. Each one contained some goals for the year, the topics and the content of each school term, performance indicators, and the suggested material, activities and evaluation forms. Ultimately, the standards for the English course were focused on the development of communication skills which included linguistics, pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

Statement of the Problem

This research problem emerged after observing 8ºF English class during one and a half months. It caught my attention that only reading and writing skills were fostered in class, leaving completely aside listening and speaking skills. This main problem untied some consequences such as (1) limiting the exposure to the target language in class due to the constant use of Spanish and (2) affecting the development of the four language skills due to the class material and the evaluation system proposed in class. In sum, students did not have the chance to communicate orally and interact in the classroom using the target language. I develop further this problematic situation below.

First, the means of communication inside the class was only Spanish instead of English. This implied a minimum or null exposure to the target language in class. As an illustration, at the beginning of each class, the teacher always greeted students in Spanish. Furthermore, when an activity was assigned, the instructions were given all the time in

Spanish. Every time students asked questions to the teacher, they resorted to Spanish

instead of English (Journal entries, July 25th, 30th, 2019; August 6th, 8th, 13th, 15th, 20th, 27th,

2019; September 3rd, 5th, 10th, 2019). This issue was problematic because there was not

enough input and output by part of students in class to enhance the four language skills.

This lack of students' practice of listening and speaking skills affected their oral

communication since "these two skills are highly interrelated and work simultaneously in

real life situations. So, the integration of the two aims at fostering effective oral

communication" (Sadiku, 2015, p.29).

Second, the proposed class material and evaluation system did not benefit the use of

the four language skills. In this regard, activities such as filling the gaps, crosswords, word

search, etc. were the privileged materials used with the aim of acquiring vocabulary and

practicing specific grammatical features of the target language. Apart from these materials,

the exams were always the same; students had to add the correct verb conjugation to

isolated sentences or short dialogues. Furthermore, learners had to read a text and answer

some reading comprehension questions (Journal entry, October 31st, 2019). Therefore,

audios, videos or short conversations or discussions in English were never proposed to

develop listening and speaking skills. In this sense, the four language skills were not

mastered. Sadiku (2015) claims that it's important to include the four skills in language

classroom since all skills "give learners scaffolded support, opportunities to create, contexts

in which to use the language for exchanges of real information, evidence of their own

ability and, most important, confidence" (p.30).

As a proposal to tackle the problems stated above, I decided to implement Task-

Based Learning Approach (TBLA) in my classes for two reasons. Firstly, TBLA focuses on

important tasks developing English language communication. With this approach, students use the target language as a vehicle to complete the tasks. Tasks such as sharing information, solving problems, dramatizations, etc., are useful to promote the development of oral performance and comprehension skills in the classroom (Rajanikanth, 2016). And secondly, TBLA allows students to construct meaning and use the language to exchange for real purpose (Willis, 1996). In this way, using this approach, I am convinced that students' oral production and comprehension skills will be fostered through interaction among students-teacher and a lot of exposure to the target language.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this section is to present definitions of Task-Based Learning Approach (TBLA) addressed by different authors and its stages to have an extensive background about this approach. Additionally, the definitions of listening and speaking skills adopted in this study are provided.

Task-Based Learning Approach

TBL is an educational approach that comes from the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLTA). It focuses on tasks to promote communication in the target language. Rajanikanth (2016) defines language communication as "an essential tool to become a good communicator since it allows to exchange opinions, perspectives, insights, etc." (2016, p. 3). Additionally, Hobbs (2011) argues the importance of engaging students with communicative tasks focused on meaning to make effective communication that can transcend outside the classroom. Furthermore, Willis (1996) states the importance of basing

every single task on meaning in order to exchange for real purpose. Both scholars share the idea that learning through tasks has to focus on meaning instead of language forms. However, this does not exactly mean that the structural part of the language is not important for task completion. Nunan (2004) claims that meaning and forms are directly linked since grammar exists to allow learners to express communicative meanings.

As for task implementation, Willis (1996) proposes a three-stage lesson cycle: Pre-task, task cycle and language focus. In the pre-task stage, the educator brainstorms learners' previous insights of the topic and displays a similar task for students to have a general idea of it. Besides, through the implementation of several activities, the educator provides the vocabulary that students need during the whole task cycle. In the task stage, learners resort to the language they have acquired so far and get ready to prepare and execute the task in response to an assigned activity. This stage implies a high use and exposure to the language since learners perform the task in front of the class. This phase prioritizes students' spontaneous communication since they have to use the language learned in the pre-task stage to express freely. Finally, in the language focus stage, educators allow students to practice specific language features permitting them to clarify notions of the language and to explore new ones. This final stage emphasizes on students' consciousness of aspects of the language that they were not aware of at the performance stage (Willis, 1996).

In my opinion, by adopting TBLA stages in this action research, listening and speaking skills can improve significantly since students are exposed to the target language and have spaces to practice it. Indeed, Willis (1996) argues that learners, while planning and performing a task, have the opportunity to express themselves freely and interact with their classmates using the target language. Furthermore, thanks to the flexibility of the

approach, students can work in groups or individually depending on their needs and interests. Working together allows students to learn not only from the educator but also from their classmates. In this sense, the most advanced students can help the weaker ones to improve their performance in English. Willis (1996) also mentions the importance of collaborative work to increase confidence. He states that "shy students feel less intimidated and contribute more if asked to work together" (p. 59).

Regarding students' role in class, by using TBLA stages, learners adopt a more active role in class. Thus, TBLA allows learners to be in charge of their own learning processes. Rodríguez and Rodríguez (2010) argue that when students are engaged in TBL, they "take a leading role in their own learning" (p. 167). In other words, the teacher is not the center of the classroom but the facilitator of knowledge. In this respect, Rambe (2015) states that the learning process is carried out by learners through tasks to acquire specific knowledge instead of positioning the teacher as responsible for transferring knowledge to students' minds.

Listening Skill

For a long time, listening has been neglected in language teaching classrooms. Miller (2003) claims that "listening has not received wider attention in the past given that it is the language skill most often used in everyday life" (p. 1). Thus, educators and researchers have considered listening as something that could be "picked-up". Although listening has historically been overlooked in teaching languages, it is now beginning to receive more attention both in teaching and research. Miller (2003) proposes three processes to help students develop listening skills: pre, while, and post-listening.

The pre-listening stage consists in holding a short discussion with learners about the content of the text before listening to it. In this way, students have to guess and activate previous knowledge about the topic. In the second instance, in the while-listening phase, students are focused on the listening part, selecting the most meaningful information for them instead of trying to measure performance through exercises. Finally, the post-listening stage gathers previous information in order to have an extended discussion in class (Miller, 2003).

In terms of evaluation, there are some skills that can be used to measure listening performance. Ayuanita (2013) suggests plenty of micro and macro-skills that teachers can consider when evaluating listening. However, considering the limited time of this study, it was not possible to include all the suggested skills to evaluate listening performance. For this reason, the skills that were taken into account to assess listening comprehension in this research project are the following: the ability to (1) "retain chunks of language", (2) "infer situations, participants, goals using real-world knowledge", (3) "use a variety of vocabulary to understand messages" and (4) "develop and use a battery of listening strategies, such as detecting key words, guessing the meaning of word from context" (Ayuanita, 2013, p. 117-118). These skills are proposed for evaluating conversational discourse. Although these skills assess a vague understanding of the language since two of them are focused only on understanding fragments of the language and retaining key words; this project also fostered understanding general ideas. In this light, Ayuanita (2013) mentions a useful skill that applies for this project to assess language overview. It consists in "developing means of retaining the content of a lecture" (p.118). This could be done in this study through a note

taking activity in which students were able to retain as much information as possible from an audiovisual document.

Speaking Skill

Unlike listening, speaking is considered one of the most essential skills to be mastered in foreign language teaching and learning for some reasons. First, many materials to develop speaking skills are continuously published. Second, as Nazara (2011) states, speaking has become one of the most important skills to develop for most students, since it has become like the test to demonstrate the knowledge of the target language. Hobbs (2011) claims that teaching speaking skill implies to address real-life situations in the classroom to make learning more meaningful. Regarding TBLA for teaching speaking, Yegani and Jodaei (2017) highlight the importance of addressing "a natural authentic context in the classroom" (p. 86). For Thanghun (2012), activities to promote speaking skill should be matched to learners' age and their levels of knowledge. Indeed, this author proposes some important activities that could be implemented to develop speaking skill such as role-playing, brainstorming, and picture describing to develop speaking skill because they give an active role to learners.

In terms of assessing speaking skill, O'Malley and Pierce (1996) mention some implications for assessing oral language. They claim that oral language assessment should be given in an interactive context where learners can interpret and transmit meaning. Therefore, authentic cooperative activities should be considered where students can interact with their classmates using the target language to convey the message (O'Malley & Pierce,

1996, p. 61). Additionally, these two scholars mention two terms that should be taken into account when assessing speaking: **fluency** and **accuracy**.

On the one hand, **fluency** is defined as a "continuity, smoothness, or evenness of speech without extreme breaks or hesitations" (Diyyab, Abdel-Haq & Aly, 2013, p. 6). Nevertheless, this term is still challenging for educators since it is difficult to assess oral fluency skills. In this vein, Diyyab, et al. (2006) claim that it is important to provide tasks that resemble real-life situations to make students feel confident using the language since this gives them extra motivation to speak naturally (as cited in Widiati & Cahyono, 2006, p. 271). In this way, the chances of promoting fluency in speaking can be increased as students are motivated to talk using the target language. On the other hand, the term **accuracy** is considered as important as fluency to developing speaking skills. This refers to students' ability to engage in a discourse without grammatical and lexical errors (Leonard & Shea, 2017, p. 2). Consequently, the term refers to the correct use of grammar and vocabulary when speaking.

Research Question

How may Task-Based Learning Approach (TBLA) foster 8th graders' speaking and listening skills at a public institution in El Carmen de Viboral?

Objectives

General Objective

To analyze how Task-Based Learning Approach fosters 8th graders' speaking and listening skills.

Specific Objectives

1) To explore how the implementation of TBL stages benefit students' listening and speaking skills.

2) To evaluate how the main task activity demonstrates students' ability to speak fluently and accurately.

3) To analyze how through the implementation of the listening steps students improve language comprehension.

Action Plan

This action plan was designed in the frame of Task-based Learning Approach (TBLA) with a length of 10 weeks. In this project, the three stages discussed by Willis (1996) were considered: (1) pre-task, (2) task cycle and (3) language focus. Moreover, the three stages proposed by Miller (2003) were also taken into account to develop listening skills: (1) pre-listening, (2) while-listening and (3) post-listening.

For the project implementation, I planned to develop some activities during the three stages of TBLA in which listening and speaking skills were the main focus. First, in

the pre-task stage, some activities were planned to provide students with enough vocabulary and useful expressions to start familiarizing them with the target language. Then, in the task stage, role-play presentations were proposed for students to tell their own daily routine. Finally, in the language focus stage, some activities were planned to practice grammatical features of the language.

The following data collection methods were needed to gather information. First, in the first week, a survey would be implemented to gather information about students' background and interests in relation to the English class. Second, the teacher's journals of all the classes observed and taught would be written meticulously focusing on specific activities that helped learners foster listening and speaking skills. Third, in the sixth week, students' artifacts would be collected in the pre-task stage to assess the students' understanding of spoken English. In the eighth week, during the task stage, students' performances would be recorded to evidence their oral production. Finally, one focus group interview would be held in the tenth week in order to know students' perception of their performance in listening and speaking skills.

Development of Actions

The actions implemented in this project were conducted during the first semester of 2020. During that time, the entire world faced a health emergency, coronavirus (COVID-19), that affected the whole educational system not only in Colombia but worldwide. The fact that education switched from face-to-face to remote classes in all public and private institutions brought drastic changes to the implementation of some actions of this project. Furthermore, some data collection methods had to be adapted to the situation too. In this

respect, the following paragraphs will explain the actions that could be conducted to foster students' listening and speaking skills.

First, a survey was implemented during the first week with the aim of knowing students' background and interests in the English class (see survey here). Then, between the second week and the sixth week, the following actions were implemented as part of the pre-task activities. The first pre-task activity was named "*two truths and a lie*" and its goal was to know students' likes and dislikes about food, sports, hobbies, etc. During the second week, students presented orally some classroom commands explaining the meaning of each one. That activity was thought to provide students with resources they could start using in class as a means of authentic communication in order to improve the speaking skill. In the third week of the project, students were asked to brainstorm ideas about common things they did during the day. Then, some questions were made to inquire about some students' daily routines to nourish the conversation. With this activity, the daily routine vocabulary was introduced. After reviewing that topic, a role-play activity was proposed to practice the spelling and the pronunciation of each routine. Later, for the fourth week, students had to write their Saturday's routine. With these routines, one student read a classmate' daily routine in front of the class and then another learner acted it out based on what they understood. During the same week, students read a short text about someone's daily routine. Finally, in the fifth week, a transcription activity was proposed to allow learners to practice writing and pronunciation.

In the sixth week, a listening comprehension activity was proposed to gather data about students' listening skill. That activity followed the three steps that Miller (2003) suggests to develop listening skill: (1) pre-listening, (2) while-listening and (3) post-

listening. In the pre-listening step, a picture of a man was displayed. Learners had to guess the possible daily routine of that man according to his appearance. Then, all together constructed on the board an ideal routine for this character. Later, as part of the while-listening step, a video about that character's routine was displayed on the TV for the first time (see link of the video here). In that first play, students had to write in their notebooks as many activities as they understood from the video. Afterward, students read aloud what they understood from the video. For the second video play, each student received a piece of paper with some written statements related to the video (see activity here). Students had to listen to the video and retain chucks of the language in order to state whether the statements were correct or incorrect. Moreover, the incorrect statements had to be corrected.

In that precise moment, the implementation of the project changed drastically given that remote teaching had to be implemented. Accordingly, during the seventh week, the main task of the project was changed and students had to write and record a routine of a day in quarantine. Unfortunately, this activity did not contribute to show students' improvement in speaking skill as it was thought in the initial proposal because they read the routine instead of performing the task spontaneously. In the eighth week, as part of the data collection process, all the students were invited to participate in a focus group interview to know their relationship with listening and speaking skills (see questions of the interview here). However, only four students decided to participate voluntarily in the interview. Then, during the ninth week of the project implementation, the language focus stage was conducted. For that stage, a worksheet, or also called a "study guide", was uploaded to a blog that the institution created to face the pandemic and to continue with the classes through remote teaching methodology. This worksheet was about the use of the auxiliaries

do and does. This topic emerged from the pre-task and main-task activities since learners

had difficulties to correctly use these auxiliaries. Learners had to read an explanation of

how to use the auxiliaries do and does in interrogative and negative sentences. Then, some

activities such as filling the gaps and constructing sentences were proposed to allow them

to practice this topic. After finishing the worksheet, students could send their work by email

or by images through WhatsApp. Finally, the feedback of this worksheet was given through

the WhatsApp group explaining the most common mistakes. After the worksheet

implementation, a questionnaire was proposed to collect more data from the students'

perspective of their listening and speaking skills bearing in mind that only four students

participated in the focus group interview (see questionnaire [here](#)). Unfortunately, only

eleven students participated in that questionnaire. In this sense, the results of the

questionnaire and the focus group did not represent all the participants since, due to the

pandemic (COVID-19), that information was obtained only from 15 participants through

emails and WhatsApp. Thus, the majority of students did not participate due to a lack of

interest or due to time constraints. Finally, from the first week until the sixth week of

project implementation, journals were written to have a rapport of face-to-face classes

focusing on specific activities that helped learners foster listening and speaking skills.

Findings and Interpretations

This study aimed at analyzing how the implementation of TBL fostered students'

speaking and listening skills. The data analyzed for this project were collected through

surveys, journals, students' artifacts, a focus group and a questionnaire. To analyze the

data, I followed the five steps proposed by Burns (2010) that consist in assembling, coding,

and comparing the data, then building meanings and interpretations and reporting the outcomes (as cited in Edwards, 2018, p. 31). Finally, all data were triangulated using an Excel file to find recurrences and some categories.

Two big categories emerged from data analysis. These categories are: a) Pre-task activities helped students improve listening comprehension skill, and b) Pre-task activities helped students improve their ability to construct well-organized sentences when speaking. In the following paragraphs, I will provide a further explanation of each category.

Pre-Task Activities Helped Students Improve Listening Comprehension Skill

Data analysis demonstrated improvements of listening skill since students were capable of retaining chunks of the language. The first time I met these students, most of them were not able to understand simple words or sentences in English. That was evident in the first pre-task activity, "*two truths and a lie*", where students had to recognize key words from the classmates when they were reading aloud words about their hobbies, interests, likes, dislikes, etc. In that case, they had to ask me repeatedly about the meaning of the words that their classmates said since they were not able to understand them. The following excerpt from my journal shows these difficulties:

> Some students were lost when their classmates read the words aloud because they did not know the meaning of some words such as "carrot", "onion", "vegetables, "listen to music", "swimming", among others. So, they asked me in Spanish the meaning of those words..." (Journal, February 12th, 2020).

Nevertheless, thanks to the pre-task activities named "*brainstorming ideas*" and "*role-play*", students acquired lexical knowledge which later helped them easily understand spoken language. In these activities, the vocabulary of the topic (daily routines) was introduced and practiced. The following is an excerpt from the activity of my journal "*role-play*" in where the topic was reviewed:

> This activity [role-play activity] was about allowing students to work in groups and act and write some daily routines on the board. In this activity, students reviewed the vocabulary of daily routines such as "have breakfast", "take a shower", "brush your teeth", "have lunch", etc. (Journal, February 19, 2020)

This role play activity guided students to achieve the goal of fostering listening comprehension since it provided them with vocabulary that would permit them to start understanding the language. In this light, Vandergrift (1999) claims that recognition knowledge is required to process and decode information.

Thus, after students were familiarized with the lexicon of the topic in the pre-task activities, most of the students demonstrated an improvement of listening skill since they were able to recognize key words from classmates' dramatization. That was evident during the pre-task activity named "*acting out*". In that activity, a student read a classmate's daily routine in front of the group and then another learner acted it out based on what they understood. Although some students again had shortcomings trying to understand what their classmates were saying, some others demonstrated an improvement of listening comprehension. Thus, the students who understood the dramatization helped other classmates to understand it using Spanish as a vehicle to communicate. The following

segment illustrates that situation: "Only few students did not understand what the classmate was reading (their daily routine), so the rest of the classroom helped them say things like "que coma", "que se cepille", "que vaya al colegio", "que se vista" etc." (Journal, February 26th, 2020).

After this activity, students demonstrated an improvement of listening comprehension skill since they were able to process and to decipher chunks of the language to understand spoken language. Thus, during the listening activity (pre-task), almost all students were capable of retaining chunks of the language from a video. In this exercise, learners had to retain information from a video and decide whether some statements were correct or incorrect. For example, in the first statement of the listening activity *"he wakes up at seven o'clock"*, Lucía explained that it was incorrect since he wakes up at seven o'clock *"except on Saturday"*. Furthermore, Julian explained it was incorrect too because he wakes up at that time *"except some days"*. Then, in the fourth statement "*he doesn't do exercise*", Felipe and Johana wrote that it was incorrect because *"he does exercise"* and "*he goes to the gym"* respectively. Finally, in the third statement "*from two to six he works in the office*", José was the only one who understood the correct explanation to that statement. He wrote that it was incorrect because "*from nine to five he works in the office*" (Students' Artifacts, March 10th, 2020).

To conclude, in the focus group, the students also claimed that they had improved listening skill during the project implementation. Some of them stated that they were able to easily understand English thanks to the activities they did in class. The following excerpt illustrates that situation:

… una clase en la… en la que sentí que me ayudó mucho fue cuando vimos el video

de las rutinas diarias, ese día, pues ese video lo entendí muy bien y me pareció que,

pues estaba fácil, pues no me fue tan mal como anteriormente sí. (Focus group

Interview, April 23rd, 2020)[1]

Briefly, students were able to recognize previous knowledge of the pre-task

activities in the listening activity to decode and process information to easily understand the

video. Besides, the fact that they were focused on meaning rather than forms of the

language gave learners certain freedom to understand the video and be confident as they

stated in the last excerpts. In this sense, "researchers believe that in TBL, learning is more

meaningful, natural and reduces students' anxiety if language form per se is not the

priority" (Rodríguez & Rodríguez, 2010, p. 166).

Pre-Task Activities Helped Students Improve Their Ability to Construct Well-Organized Sentences When Speaking

Data analysis showed improvements in speaking skill as learners made appropriate

decisions handling the syntax in their speeches. At the beginning of the project

implementation, learners showed problems to transmit messages orally using the target

language. Those students' shortcomings were evident during the pre-task activity "*two

truths and a lie*". In that activity, they showed problems communicating orally with their

peers since they were not able to produce any utterance in English. In that case, some of

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[1] Translation: A class in which… I felt that it helped me a lot when we watched the video of the daily
routines, that day, because I understood that video very well and it seemed to me that it was easy, because it
did not go as badly as it did before.

them resorted to the teacher's help for doing the activity. The following segment from my journal illustrates this situation: "Some students were not able to say what they wanted to communicate since they felt unprepared to speak English. Thus, I helped them to construct the sentences and then they repeated them after me" (Journal, February 12th, 2020).

As the project implementation advanced, a certain improvement in speaking skill was noticeable. Most of them started to reproduce certain commands that were introduced during the pre-task activities to communicate orally in English. The following excerpt was taken from a pre-task activity where learners used some classroom commands to communicate orally using correct linguistic patterns of the language: "During the development of the class, students used some classroom commands such as "silent, please", "may I go to the bathroom?" and "very good" to communicate in English with the teacher and with their classmates" (Journal, February 17th, 2020).

Then, during the post-listening activity where students shared orally their insights about the video, they showed more ability to speak in English. In fact, they were capable of constructing more elaborated sentences respecting the word order of simple present tense. Moreover, they used an appropriate lexicon to talk about their own daily routines. The following segments are some examples of students' dialogues in class:

> Students formulated aloud sentences such as "I wake up at 6:00 o'clock", "I do not walk to the subway station", "I do not do exercise" among others… Learners again formulated more elaborated answers saying things like "I eat fruits and do exercise", "I listen to music to relax", "I do not work", etc. (Journal, March 10th, 2020)

In these excerpts, students' improvement of syntax was evident since they articulated more elaborated sentences when speaking with the teacher and with the classmates in order to communicate orally. In this vein, Kidd, Mason and Best (2014) claim that syntax is one of the fundamental linguistic aspects of speech since it governs the order of the words in sentences. Briefly, after some pre-task activities, students mastered the basic structures of the language when they had to communicate orally with the classmates or with the teacher.

Lastly, the finding about students' improvement of speaking was confirmed by them since they claimed that oral production was developed. Indeed, some of them considered that the skill they have fostered the most through this project implementation was speaking. The following excerpt from the focus group interview demonstrated students´ opinion toward speaking skill: "Eh pues, a mí sí me parece que he desarrollado mucho el oído porque al desarrollar el oído también me ayudó mucho a desarrollar el habla que es en la que me siento pues yo mejor" (Focus group interview, April 23rd, 2020)[2]. Furthermore, in the questionnaire, learners also stated that they had advanced in the speaking skill to the point of being capable of having a short conversation in English. The following segment illustrates this situation: "Sí, ya que el profesor nos enseña una manera muy fácil de aprender y ya sé llevar una pequeña conversación en inglés" (Questionnaire, Question #7, May 12th, 2020)[3].

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[2] Translation: Eh, well, it seems to me that I have developed a lot of the ear because by developing the ear, it also helped me a lot to develop the oral skill that is the skill that I feel better.

[3] Translation: Yes, since the teacher teaches us in a very easy way to learn and I already know how to carry on a small conversation in English

To sum up, as it was stated above, the aforementioned activities fostered students' ability to speak in English using the knowledge they acquired during the pre-task activities. In this respect, Rodríguez and Rodríguez (2010) claim that during pre-task activities, the educator introduces the topic and highlights useful words and phrases which might be needed by learners in subsequent processes to practice the language. Thus, pre-task activities allowed learners to speak in English using appropriate syntax and lexicon in their speeches.

Conclusions and Implications

This research project had the purpose of analyzing how the implementation of TBL could foster students' listening and speaking skills. From the data analysis, I could conclude that the objectives were partially reached through the implementation of pre-task activities since students' opportunities for developing listening and speaking skills were fostered. Nevertheless, the stages such as the main task and the language focus were not taken into account for data collection since, due to the changes that this project had, these two tasks were not developed focused on listening and speaking skills. In other words, pre-task activities helped learners improve listening comprehension and reinforce their ability to construct well-organized sentences when speaking. However, fluency in speaking skill could not be achieved due to time constraints. Additionally, apart from fostering listening and speaking skills, data revealed that language focus activity reinforced specific grammatical features of the language such as correct verb conjugation and sentence word order of simple present tense.

This research project entails some implications for teachers who work in similar contexts. The first implication is that teachers should take into account students' interests and needs when defining the activities for the class because these have a great influence on their motivation to learn the language. Moreover, the proposed activities should be contextualized to students' real-life contexts to allow them to feel comfortable and engaged with the class activities. Otherwise, they will perceive the language as a tool that will never transcend out of the classroom.

Another implication to bear in mind when teaching a foreign language is the importance of including the four language skills in all class activities. In this respect, teachers should avoid focusing too much only on reading and writing skills but allow students to be proficient in the four language skills since these skills make learners "good listeners, speakers, readers and writers so as to be able to communicate effectively" (Sadiku, 2015). Additionally, the teacher should implement different types of activities to foster language skills and adapt them to students' learning styles. Students really value when activities are varied because they can learn in a more dynamic way. On the contrary, if different types of activities had not been implemented in this research project to each language skill, the results might have been different.

Additional to the implications stated above, this project also provides ideas of TBL implementation and its impact on students' listening and speaking skills in an EFL classroom. This study contributes to rethink the way teachers are currently developing their classes in public institutions since in most of the cases, educators are limited to teaching grammar and vocabulary leaving aside the importance of the inclusion of the four language skills. Finally, as a teacher researcher, I would like to implement the same project but

having enough time to evaluate how the main task and language focus activities may benefit students' listening and speaking skills.

Reflection

After finishing the implementation of this project, there were some positive and negative aspects that I would like to highlight in the following paragraphs. First, I want to describe how I experienced the teaching practicum as an English teacher in a public institution. Furthermore, I want to dedicate a paragraph talking about how the COVID-19 affected my practicum. Finally, I will provide a general conclusion about the teaching practicum and my expectations with this project.

Regarding my teaching practicum, I can say that from the beginning until the end it was a big challenge for me. Although I have had experience teaching English before the practicum, I had never taught in a public school. In this scenario, I had to face more than 40 students, and different learning styles that pushed me to implement different teaching strategies. In this respect, it was challenging to propose activities that suited most students' interests and needs. For this reason, I had to adapt different activities to students' level and preferences to motivate most of them to learn English. Moreover, the teaching practicum also allowed me to grow professionally. For instance, thanks to the CT, I learned different ways of addressing classroom management that had a positive impact on students' behavior. Furthermore, thanks to the research process, I learned new ways of teaching a language and the impact that real-life activities have on motivating students to learn. In general terms, I perceived this practicum process as an opportunity to learn new ways of

teaching bearing in mind that I had to deal with a serious situation, COVID-19, that modified everything I had learned at the university about how to teach.

As a matter of fact, COVID-19 affected my teaching practicum drastically. First, I had to adjust to new methodologies to teach English to give continuity to the practicum. Thus, I had to adapt the activities to remote teaching. During this process, the main difficulty I had was grading students individually. This process was very stressful knowing that I had to keep teaching, doing research, and grading a considerable amount of pieces of paper each week. Secondly, I consider that the global situation did not allow me to develop my teaching practicum as I wanted. In this regard, I was apart from the classroom and I could not receive feedback from my advisor or the CT in terms of teaching performance. Furthermore, I lost the synchronic interaction with most of the students that was crucial for the development of this project. In the end, I was not satisfied with what I could do in my teaching practicum since I had higher expectations with that group of students.

To sum up, the teaching practicum had its pros and cons. Although I could carry out all TBL phases of this project implementation, I think that the learning process could have been a more rewarding experience if the global pandemic had not intervened in the teaching process. Nevertheless, I consider that I did my best to overcome the situation. The pandemic was a learning process in which teachers, parents, and students had to rethink their roles. Finally, I expect this project will inspire pre-service teachers who are developing their practicum to do their best to overcome any situation that may arise during the teaching and research project and to be open to innovative teaching methodologies that motivate students to learn foreign languages.

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