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**FOSTERING ORAL INTERACTION THROUGH
VLEs**

Autor

Elizabeth Sosa Goez

Universidad de Antioquia

Escuela de Idiomas

Medellín, Colombia

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Running head: FOSTERING ORAL INTERACTION THROUGH VLEs

FOSTERING ORAL INTERACTION THROUGH VLEs

Elizabeth Sosa Goez

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

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Asesores (a):

Astrid Tangarife Sánchez

Magister en Lenguas Extranjeras

Elizabeth Rodríguez Montoya

M.A. TESOL

Universidad de Antioquia

Escuela de Idiomas

Medellín, Colombia

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Abstract

This action research study conducted at a private school in Medellin was aimed at analyzing how first graders' oral interaction can be fostered in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Data were collected through a research journal, a checklist to measure students' interactions, a questionnaire addressed to students, and an interview with the cooperating teacher. Data analysis showed that oral interaction can actually be fostered in virtual environments. Moreover, a good language performance and positive attitudes can be developed, taking into consideration the importance of the teacher's role in this process. These results were possible with first graders; it would be interesting to explore how these interactions take place with students of other ages.

Key words: Virtual Learning Environments, Interaction, Language Performance.

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

Based on my teaching experience in a private institution, I wanted to improve my classroom practices and give the best to my students into the language classroom; for this reason, I analyzed my classes, my students' learning process, and decided to foster interaction among students. Interaction is important in EFL contexts because it facilitates students' communicative competence, the use of the vocabulary learned and the development of the target language.

Furthermore, I wanted to look for theory, methods and strategies that would help me enhance my practices with children, because it is at this age that students acquire new concepts, vocabulary and communicative abilities. For this reason, during my teaching process, I carefully planned my classes in different moments and developed interactive activities, selected materials according to my students' interests and needs, implemented some patterns of interaction based on Ur (2016), and improved my teaching practices in the classroom; all the students had the opportunity to explore, learn, participate and especially, interact.

Description of the Context

This research study was carried out at Colegio Santa Maria del Rosario, a private coeducational institution located in Poblado-Antioquia, which offers its services in preschool, elementary, and high school education. The institution has approximately three hundred fifty students from four to six socioeconomic strata who reside in close areas. According to the Programa Educativo Institucional (PEI), the staff members work under the “Dominicas de Santa Catalina de Sena’s foundations” and “they live the Christian mysteries in the light of the Gospel” (Cosamaro, 2019). With respect to its philosophy, mission and vision, Santa María del Rosario follows a humanistic education based on values and virtues, in order to form self-sufficient leaders with Christian life projects to serve the country. The institution is inclusive and it implements educational strategies of innovation and competitiveness as a response of current social demands.

Following internal policies and ministerial guidelines, the English syllabus of the institution suggests the implementation of teaching strategies that foster communicative competences. In order to achieve this goal, learners actively participate by being the center of the learning process, in which the “New Basic Standards of Foreign Language” (MEN, 2006) play an important role. This document intends to get students into social and cultural contexts through the development of language skills, and it encourages teachers to implement institutional planning strategies.

Classes take place seven times per week, fifty-five minutes each session. In the English courses I use different learning materials provided by Richmond Solutions such as texts, audios, flashcards, posters, worksheets and different kind of resources that support the

teaching process. In addition, I assist learners to develop diverse listening, writing, reading and speaking activities based on their levels.

In relation to the English department, it is comprised of five teachers, one for preschool, two for elementary and two for high school, some of them with a long trajectory and experience. For example, my cooperating teacher has been working in the institution since 2015; he has a Bachelor Degree in Languages from Universidad de Antioquia and has 20 years of teaching experience. In the current year, he taught a speaking class in first grade, and he was also in charge of sixth and seventh grades; he helped me with my research project one hour per week by supporting my lessons and giving me feedback to improve my classroom practices. I am part of the school teaching staff and I teach English in first, second and fourth grades; that is why I had the possibility to implement my research project in one of the groups where I teach, in this case, first grade.

In first grade, there are twenty-six learners –thirteen girls and thirteen boys- whose ages range from six to seven years old. Due to the pandemic and the number of students for a virtual English class, the institution decided to divide the group into two; consequently, I carried out this action research with thirteen students. They were cheerful, respectful and dynamic; during our English sessions, they followed rules and instructions, enjoyed the topics, participated and developed the activities proposed in class; they were always motivated to work.

It is important to clarify that nowadays, there is a global health situation that is necessary to mention. Due to Covid-19 quarantine, schools changed their classroom to the students' home; this school digital delivery has been the way to interact and communicate with learners; as a consequence, the institution started a “teaching online strategy” with which

teachers established remote work and led students' progress and performance through the use of technological tools, suggesting materials, links, videos, presentations, and assignments, among others. As a consequence, this situation modified the dynamics and therefore, the number of teaching hours. In first grade, class time was reduced from seven to four hours per week, and most of the activities were developed through "Teams", the main digital platform offered by the school. Through "Teams", students could participate in online classes, interact, share ideas, and demonstrate their oral performance with their classmates and teacher in a virtual environment.

Statement of the Problem

The National Ministry of Education (MEN) established the development of Basic Standards according to the Colombian language policies in order to allow an integrated and gradual language improvement through different levels of education. Based on these policies, Santa Maria del Rosario School promotes communicative competences in each grade of education; for example, students from first to third grades are expected to share and use expressions in English, sing, tell stories, ask and describe familiar and everyday situations by using short phrases designed to meet immediate needs in a simple language (MEN, 2006, p. 18-21).

During my teaching sessions in first grade, I identified that students were motivated in class; they participated in different learning games, enjoyed the activities proposed, tried to understand the instructions assigned and developed the tasks demanded by the teacher. However, at some moments, they did not use the vocabulary learned in class or they turned to their mother tongue instead. Additionally, after analyzing the activities planned, I found out that they were according to the students' level, but they were not interactive, there was no

evidence of any pair or group work into the classroom in which students had the possibility to interact with each other, communicate ideas, feelings or emotions; this process of interaction was only carried out with the teacher. Therefore, I concluded that the main problem in my classroom was related to the lack of students' interaction with each other in the target language; there were no tasks to develop patterns of interaction according to their age, grade and language proficiency.

In order to have evidence of the problem I identified, I did the following activities as part of my reflective teaching: in the reflections written in my journal, I recognized that my English classes were focused on the development of some comprehension, completion and skill activities based on the content. However, I did not write about interaction activities developed in class or about the interaction among students. The lesson plans were framed in three moments and each of them was related to the same information. For example, in the first step I implemented motivational activities such as songs, games and dynamics aimed to identify the students' prior knowledge; in the second step, I explained the topic through the use of PowerPoint presentations, explanation exercises and visual materials for students; and during the last step, I developed practice activities proposed in a digital book related to reading, speaking, listening and writing skills; for this class dynamics, I guided my lessons through workshops, worksheets and crafts.

My lesson plans were socialized with my cooperating teacher through conversations from which I got feedback. In this process, I realized that I did not plan activities that fostered interaction, students did not have the opportunity to share ideas, feelings and learnings. As a teacher, I personally believe that students must be the main protagonists in the learning process and this is achieved through interaction.

Taking into consideration that the Covid-19 quarantine led us to develop the classes through virtual learning environments, I intend to implement class activities through which the students participate and interact with each other, in order to highlight the importance of this process, regardless the means used for teaching-learning processes.

Theoretical Background

Interaction plays a crucial role in any learning process, especially in the second language acquisition process, and this is not only possible in face-to-face environments, but also in virtual environments. In the following lines, I will elaborate on the theoretical concepts that guide my action research; namely, classroom interaction, patterns of interaction, and virtual learning environments (VLE's) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Classroom Interaction

Hall (2003) asserts that interaction between teachers and students in classrooms is one of the primary means by which learning is accomplished. In language classrooms, interaction plays a significant role in the learning process because it is both the medium through which learning is realized, and an object of pedagogical attention (p. 171). In addition, in the classroom setting, interaction is a process in which students can communicate and exchange ideas or feelings with others; it is related to spoken participation and active listening in class. Oliver and Philp (2014) refer to oral interaction as “the spoken language that takes place between two or more people and, as the name implies, it is the type of speaking and listening that occurs in real time in communicative exchanges”. For example, in second language acquisition contexts, students spend time speaking and listening to others; they talk with teachers and classmates, share ideas and build relationships as a natural way within their communicative process (p. 5).

Similarly, Ellis (1999) refers to daily interaction as a process in which students employ their mother tongue to share opinions, news and feelings; they have the opportunity to think and express their own ideas into the classroom. This author states that the term interaction is utilized to mention two important factors required in language acquisition: interpersonal and intrapersonal. The first is used in “face-to-face” communication and the second is involved in “mental processing”. These two types of interaction take place within the self and between people; for this reason, the teacher has the responsibility of transforming the classroom into a space where communication is the base of learning and students can process their own ideas to make them known to others (p. 1).

Likewise, Hall and Verplaetse (2000) affirm that teachers plan activities as part of their lessons to establish communicative exchanges among students in language learning. In this respect, the authors assert that “many classroom activities are created through classroom discourse - the oral interaction that occurs between teachers and students and among students - its role is especially consequential to the creation of learning environments”. This process implies that oral interaction activities in language classes is the way teachers and their students use the target language in different situations. Through these activities, the classroom becomes a meaningful learning environment where students can express their own perceptions, emotions and expressions (p. 9).

Patterns of Interaction

Based on Hall and Verplaetse (2000), in a language learning setting teachers are the experts in implementing communicative actions in their interactional activities; through these actions, teachers shape the students’ developmental paths in different ways. These authors elaborate on three steps with which teachers can structure their actions. First, teachers provide models to

acquire communicative actions; second, they mediate opportunities in which students will have to participate and learn from the activities; and third, teachers measure students' performance. When planning activities, teachers design actions that contribute to establish relationships with the students within the classroom; they promote interaction among students and they help the teaching and learning process run fluently (p. 10).

In this respect, Ur (1996) classifies different patterns of interaction which determine active participation between teachers and students into the classroom. Some of these patterns are *closed-ended teacher questioning "IRF" (Initiation-Response-Feedback)*, in which there is only one 'right' answer; *individual work* which refers to the set of activities proposed and monitored by the teacher, and done by students independently; *choral responses* in which the teacher models and the class repeats in chorus; *collaboration* in which students do similar tasks individually and then work in pairs or groups to achieve the best results; in this pattern, the teacher may or may not intervene; *full-class interaction* in which students participate actively and the teacher monitors or stimulates participation; finally, *open-ended teacher questioning* in which there are several 'right' answers and students identify the cues (p. 228).

In addition, Hall (2003) refers to the different implications of these patterns for second and foreign language learning processes. First, teachers must create motivating and challenging interactions, and assist learners' involvement in the interactions from the beginning levels of instruction; therefore, teachers can ask questions and help learners make connections between their questions and their own interests based on their level of proficiency. Second, teachers need to consider the cognitive and affective dimensions in the learning process; that is, in the interaction, regardless of whether the goal is academic or social, teachers must assist learners in appropriating the communicative means they need to

participate and build interpersonal relations. Finally, language teachers must understand the connection between the classroom practices and student development and, in particular, the significant role they play in creating conditions that define their own practices (p. 178).

Virtual Learning Environments in English as a Foreign Language

Peláez (2004) asserts that cognitively the interaction is essential for the learning process; mediated or not by technology, this is the first stage for the appropriation of knowledge because through this the human being receives information in his mind (p. 4).

Additionally, Dayag (2018) states that VLEs are a trend in the 21st century academic context, they facilitate the learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and it provides an avenue for educators to extend a helping hand to their EFL students (p. 20).

Mosquera (2017) conducted a descriptive qualitative research study aimed at identifying the impact of implementing a virtual learning environment in English as a foreign language courses, in which 210 students and 5 teachers participated from a university in Colombia; the data were collected through questionnaires, class observation notes, quick surveys and teachers' narratives. The author found that students felt motivated and enthusiastic with the use of VLEs because they worked with personal devices and received immediate feedback on their performance. They also preferred using ICT resources over the traditional textbooks and suggested that all teachers should include them in their lessons, because through VLEs they can modify the curricula and apply new teaching methods during the L2 process (p. 495). In the same way, students recommended that the capacity of laboratories and computers should be analyzed, as well as internet connection because they were a threat to the implementation of a VLE in EFL courses. They concluded that VLEs provided a useful learning environment, but administrators need to continue working on the

implementation of new educational technologies and training for students and teachers in general. Teachers are called to employ educational technology into the classroom, including VLEs and ICTs in order to promote learning paths that contribute to the needs and interests of digital learners in the current era (p. 496).

Chi (2007) conducted a research study aimed at exploring pedagogical issues and challenges that “Interwise” presented. Interwise was a synchronous e-learning system for online tutorials on an information technology course offered by the Open University of Hong Kong (p. 1). Two hundred students voluntarily participated and they were divided into six tutorial groups, which included 13 sessions, seven sessions for a face-to-face mode and six sessions for an online mode. Eight students and six tutors participated in the interviews, which were used to gather information related to the implementation of the learning system. The findings suggested that students and tutors were positive about the use of Interwise for online tutorials in general. However, some learners indicated dissatisfaction with communication and the teacher’s control using the system; the results also indicate that the tutors were concerned about the workload involved in using Interwise in terms of managing the functionalities of the system and the different learning tasks.

Research Question

How can first graders’ oral interaction be fostered in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) at Santa Maria del Rosario School?

General Objective

To analyze how first graders’ oral interaction can be fostered in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

Specific Objectives

To identify the different patterns of interaction derived from virtual learning activities.

To evaluate students' language performance in virtual environments.

To analyze the students' attitudes and roles in different interactions in virtual activities.

To measure students' oral interaction in virtual activities based on their level.

Action Plan

This research study was thought to be developed in three cycles: planning, implementation and evaluation. During the first cycle, I would develop three actions: to analyze the institution's syllabus concerning first grade, to socialize the research proposal with parents asking for their consent to use the data I would collect, and to prepare the interactive activities in a virtual learning environment based on the contents. According to these actions, I would determine what topics to develop during my intervention in the institution, and I would also evaluate the materials and resources needed to foster oral interaction in class.

For the second cycle, I would conduct three actions: to select online learning materials to enhance interaction among students, to define specific procedures that students would follow to accomplish oral production and to design activities addressed to foster oral communication. These actions would be executed with first graders during September and October when I would plan oral interaction activities such as presentations, show and tell, picture telling, guess the object, feelings corner, turn-talking, audio book interaction, role-playing, among others.

In order to answer the research question, I would design an instrument to measure the students' oral interaction in virtual activities according to their level. This instrument would be a checklist that would allow me to evaluate the progression, attitudes, roles and the quality

of the students' interactions. Simultaneously, I would be writing my research journal from the beginning of the semester. This tool would contain descriptions of the different moments of the process, highlighting the oral interaction activities planned and developed in a virtual environment. Additionally, I would have a record of my own insights of the activities proposed to foster oral communication: the students' motivation and participation, the quality of the interaction, and the relationships among students.

Related to the last cycle, I would administer a virtual semi-structured interview with the cooperating teacher, and a virtual semi-structured questionnaire with the students. This would be the final stage of the data collection process. Afterwards, I would analyze the data obtained through the instruments used; namely, my insights about the process, the cooperating teacher's points of view, and the students' perceptions about their own performance and interaction in English during the activities. Finally, I would report the findings in the final paper.

Development of Actions

As I planned it, this research study was developed in three cycles. In the first cycle, I carefully analyzed the syllabus of the institution, specifically the contents of first grade related to farm animals, demonstrative pronouns, demonstrative adjectives, food, likes and dislikes. Then, I prepared interactive activities in a virtual learning environment such as personal descriptions about students' favorite farm animals, interactions among learners based on food, likes and dislikes, and the participation on a picnic. Subsequently, I thoroughly evaluated the materials and resources needed to foster oral interaction in class; some of them were online kids platforms, videos, songs, PowerPoint presentations, storytelling, workshops, worksheets, crafts, audios and activities proposed in the digital book used in the institution.

Afterwards, due to the ethical issues that must be considered in any research study, I socialized with parents the project to be implemented in order to let them know what I would do during the second semester: the objective of the project, the problem I identified, the actions to be developed and the expected results. On the third week of August, because of the health situation caused by COVID-19, I shared the information with them through a letter using the institutional platform, and a virtual meeting via teams. Afterwards, I received eleven consent forms signed to use the data for academic purposes. Although some parents were not convinced that oral interaction could be fostered through virtual environments, most of them were positive with the proposal and ultimately were interested in helping their children to use the language in interactive activities.

For the second cycle, I conducted three actions in which I selected appropriate online learning materials to enhance interaction among students, defined specific procedures to accomplish oral production and designed oral activities to be implemented in class. During September and October, I planned oral interaction activities and the most implemented were presentations, show and tell, picture telling, guess the object, turn-talking, audio book interaction, and role-playing.

In order to answer my research question, I administered a checklist that allowed me to evaluate the progression, attitudes, roles and the quality of the students' interactions according to their level. Simultaneously, in my journal I wrote some descriptions related to the oral interaction activities planned and developed in a virtual learning environment. In addition, I had a record of my own insights of the activities proposed to foster oral communication such as the students' motivation and participation, the quality of interactions, and the relationships among learners.

Moreover, in the last cycle in November I conducted a virtual semi-structured interview with the cooperating teacher. I mainly asked him about his perception of the students' oral interaction according to their level and their performance in the virtual classes. Furthermore, in order to have another source of information regarding the problem, I carried out a virtual semi-structured questionnaire with the students on the third week of November, in which they had the opportunity to analyze their own attitudes and roles in different English interactions based on the virtual activities I planned. Finally, I reported the findings in the final paper related to the data obtained through the instruments used.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data following the stages proposed by Burns (1999) "to reduce the large amount of data that may be collected to more manageable categories of concepts" (p. 157). First, I assembled the data –my research journal, the students' answers to the questionnaire, the transcription of the cooperating teacher's interview and, the checklist in which I kept a record of the students' interactions in class. Second, I coded the data to finally identify subcategories and categories by using different colors. Third, I compared the data by using a table in which I registered subcategories, categories and some evidence to support my analysis. I did this with each source. Then, I started building interpretations "to make some sense of the meaning of the data" ((p. 159). Finally, I wrote the findings and interpretations as a final report.

Findings and Interpretations

The data analysis showed that first graders' oral interaction can actually be fostered in Virtual Learning Environments. In the following lines, I will refer to the patterns of interaction that were developed during the implementation of this project; subsequently, I will

elaborate on the different students' attitudes and language performance; then, I will report the importance of the teacher's role when fostering oral interaction, to finally present some other factors that can help foster oral interactions through VLEs.

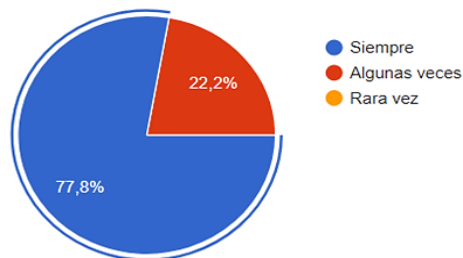
Patterns of Interaction Developed through a VLE

For the implementation of this project, I mainly used "Teams" because this was the digital platform offered by the school, and I was able to develop some of the patterns of interaction proposed by Ur (1996). The one I used the most was *collaboration*, in which students worked individually, and then shared their ideas and experiences with the whole class. In my journal entry of October 28th I referred to this, "I put into practice the pattern of interaction *collaboration* because they presented the food they had for the picnic, and then asked some classmates if they liked the food that they had in their baskets". Similarly, in the interview with the cooperating teacher, he identified collaboration among students in the activities proposed by the teacher. In this respect, he stated that at this age this pattern is difficult to achieve, because in a normal class teachers ask and students answer but dialogues usually do not take place.

In the same way, I applied *Closed/Open-ended teacher questioning*. Evidence of this is the students' answers when they were asked whether they thought that the activities proposed by the teacher fostered interaction in the virtual environment. Most of them answered positively by saying they liked to be asked because they participated and they were allowed to interact with their partners. There is also evidence of this interaction in the activity done on October 14th, in which they had to answer what they liked to eat. I registered this information in a checklist by marking the number of interventions done by each student; they were 26 in total counting questions and answers.

Another pattern developed in this project was *full-class interaction*. In the journal entry of September 7th I wrote a description of the activity I planned; using a poster, students named farm animals, they actively participated and I stimulated participation. I proposed one question to the whole group and if they wanted to talk, they turned on the microphone and said the name of the animal observed. Moreover, this pattern is reported in students' questionnaire in which they demonstrated the frequency of participation into the class. In question two data showed that 77, 8% of the students always participated and 22, 2% sometime spoke in class. As it can be observed in Figure 1, students liked to participate and interact. Additionally, I found interesting opinions that support the effectiveness of this pattern; for example, some of the students said: ¹“I like to answer the teacher's questions”, “I love it and I learn more”, and “We learn a lot”.

Figure 1. Frequency of student's participation in the English class.



Moreover, I developed the use of *choral responses* in which I modeled the pronunciation of food vocabulary and the class repeated in chorus. Evidence of this is the report of my lesson plan on my journal entry of October 19th, in which I encouraged students to sing a song related to food and they had the opportunity to answer if they liked ice cream, broccoli, or broccoli-ice cream. Through this activity, I noticed that students spoke, participated and shared ideas in group. This is connected with what Ellis (1999) stated in relation to the importance of interaction. He states that the teacher has the responsibility of

¹ The questionnaire and the interview were conducted in Spanish. Translations were made by the author.

transforming the classroom into a space where communication is the base of learning and students can process their own ideas to make them known to others.

Finally, I developed *individual work*. Evidence of this is the checklist used to measure students' interaction, in which I registered the individual activities that students developed in class. Furthermore, I registered this pattern of interaction in my journal entry 7 of September 14th; and I referred to this, "students developed some activities proposed in the book, they worked on page 80, identified pictures, named and pointed out that some of the animals were close and others were far away". In general, my first graders worked well individually; however, I observed that they need a guide to carry out the activities proposed in the book because of their complexity.

Students' Attitudes and Language Performance through VLEs

According to Hall and Verplaetse (2000), teachers plan activities to establish communicative exchanges among students. Many activities are created through classroom discourse to develop oral interaction between teachers and students in a learning environment. For this reason, I encouraged students' participation all the time. Evidence of this was registered in my journal of October 13th, in which I wrote a reflection based on the poster designed by students to answer the question: "what do you like to eat?" I referred to how motivated the students were to speak and how confident they were with their answers. I concluded that interaction increased because of the type of the activity I proposed. There is also evidence of this attitude in the answers to question six. They were asked whether they liked the activities developed in class, and most of them agreed that they were practical and funny.

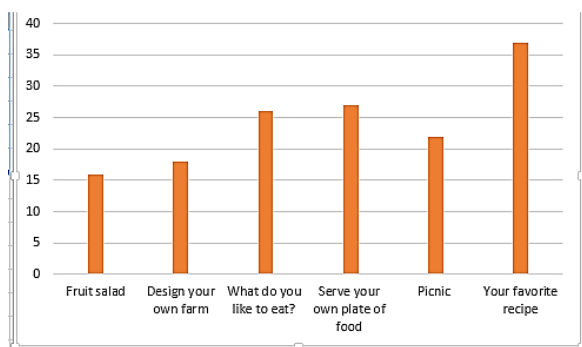
In addition, there is evidence that students' confidence increased. In the interview with the cooperating teacher, he stated that children were already facing the camera and developing their own speech. He added that they were in the first stage, but if we continue with this interactive strategy the confidence may increase. Similarly, in relation to question three about how they felt interacting with their peers in class; some of them said they felt confident because they felt happy to share their ideas in class; one of them said that she was happy because the teacher asked her. I found positive responses from students because they gained confidence to talk with their classmates and teacher in class.

In the same way, students demonstrated responsibility in the implementation of the project. In this respect, in my journal entry 13 of October 28th I referred to this, "students contributed to classroom discussions, they had their baskets and food too, they were very responsible with their materials required for the picnic". Concerning this, I think that students at this age are very responsible with their class materials and they always have their parents' support. This is a positive aspect for the class and the project because thanks to students' responsibility and compliance, the activities planned were successful.

In relation to students' language performance, on November 9th I wrote a description of the activity I planned. I referred to another interactive and participative activity in which students presented a poster with the ingredients of their favorite recipe. Through this activity, learners showed their food preferences and talked with their classmates. There is also evidence of this performance in the interactive activities done during the last four months (August, September, October, November), in which learners demonstrated their active intervention. I registered this information in a checklist by marking the number of interventions in each session. Figure 2 shows the students' progression according to their level

of participation in the activities developed. Regarding the progression, I think that students' intervention considerably increased from the first activity proposed, "A fruit salad" to the last activity reported, "My favorite recipe". The number of interventions grew from 16 to 35; this register was measured based on the total counting questions and answers taken from the students' participation. In the picnic, a lower level of participation is observed, the reason may have been the time constraints because the English class was a 40-minute session. However, in this activity all the students interacted and showed the food they had for the picnic and asked somebody if she or he liked the food that they had in their picnic basket.

Figure 2. Students' progress according to their level of participation.



Regarding the effectiveness previously described, there is another evidence of this process; in the interview with the cooperating teacher he asserts that there is a great advance in first graders because they are creating evidences from the process through the implementation of some materials such as a poster, a recipe or a picnic. They say what they have in their baskets, and interact among them. It is also a good achievement that learners are speaking through their camera because it is not easy for them. Similarly, in the questionnaire students manifested an advance in the level of participation because in question seven they had to respond whether their participation had improved in class. In this respect, they answered "I like to participate in class", "Yes, because the teacher asks me more things",

“Yes, because I feel sure”, “Yes, because the class is more dynamic”, and “Yes, because there are fewer students in class”.

In the final analysis, I observed some performance of the language in context. Evidence of this is my journal entry 12 of October 20th, in which I described an activity planned about the design of a plate of food using some stickers from the textbook. According to this description, I referred to this, “through this activity, I guided learners to communicate with their peers easily in the target language and using the vocabulary learned in class”. Based on this activity, I think that students have the opportunity to talk in class, interact, describe what they like, share their own ideas and ask some friends something related to the topic. In the same way, in the interview, the cooperating teacher stated that language is acquired through the primary skills: listening and speaking. For him, this is the first stage with kids. In addition, he referred to how first graders’ students ask, interact, talk with their classmates and use the vocabulary of food in a conversation; in this respect, the cooperating teacher identifies interaction and participation among students in class.

Importance of the Teacher’s Role when Fostering Oral Interaction through VLEs

Based on Hall and Verplaetse (2000), in a language learning setting there are three steps with which teachers can structure their actions: provide models to acquire communicative actions, mediate opportunities to participate and learn from the activities and measure students’ performance (p. 10). For this reason, I identified in the development of this project the importance of the teacher’s role when fostering oral interaction in a virtual environment. An aspect of this is the teaching strategies implemented by the teacher; in my journal entry 5 of September 2nd, I described an activity developed that referred to, “in order to answer my research question, I planned an interactive activity in which students used the

language according to the vocabulary they know. Learners designed their favorite insect using play dough and, after that, they presented their own production with the whole class, they had the opportunity to speak, share likes and demonstrate their oral skill”. Concerning this, I think that the lesson plan is the most important stage into the learning process, because through it the teacher has the opportunity to establish some strategies and methods for the class.

Currently, my classes are planned focused on my students because they have the possibility to explore, participate, interact and share ideas with others a virtual learning environment.

Likewise, another evidence of this is the questionnaire carried out with students; they answered positively to the question whether they liked the activities proposed by the teacher. Figure 3 shows the positive response by the students; 55,6% of students said “I like all the activities”, 22,2% responded “I like the fruit salad, and 11,1% answered “The picnic”. Based on these results, I think that is difficult to have an interaction in class if the teacher does not provide practical activities and promote participation among students.

Figure 3: list of the activities preferred by students



In the same way, another factor that determines the importance of the teacher’s role is the selection of materials. In order to answer my research question, I registered some evidence of this in my journal entry 13 of October 26th in which I reported this, “I planned different interactive activities in the textbook. In the first exercise, students had to draw a food in the

space provided on page 102; then, they asked the other members of the group whether they liked the food they had drawn. After this question, students completed a chart according to their classmates' responses. They had the possibility to interact and speak in class with their friends". I found that selection of materials is very important for students' process and especially for kids, because through them students can increase their achievement, explore, support their learning and develop language skills. In addition, in the interview with the cooperating teacher, he stated that at this age, students require materials for the class, mainly audios that help them to express and use the language in a context. Also, he stated that kids need concrete and real materials such as a recipe, a picnic basket with food or a plate of food in which they can talk, express ideas and share a thought.

Finally, Hall (2003) refers to the different implications of these patterns for second and foreign language learning processes. Related to this, teachers must create motivating and challenging interactions, and assist learners' involvement in the interactions from the beginning levels of instruction; therefore, teachers can ask questions and help learners make connections between their questions and their own interests based on their level of proficiency (p. 178). Instructions also played an important role in this project, in which students identified the way to develop different activities. In this respect, there is evidence in my journal entry 8 of September 21st in which I referred to this, "Subsequently, I helped students identify the living places city and farm, make connections with the story through questions and stayed focused. Thus, I read the story aloud, I started with the title "A Visit to the Farm". I think that students need clear instructions all the time, because they are in a process and they do not identify the vocabulary related to the topic in some moments; at this age, the teacher is a model for students and the success of the activity depends on the clarity of the instruction.

Some Other Factors that can help Foster Interactions through VLEs

In the classroom setting, interaction is a process in which students can communicate and exchange ideas or feelings with others; it is related to spoken participation and active listening in class. According to Oliver and Philp (2014), in an oral interaction process the spoken language takes place between two or more people using speaking and listening skills in real time in communicative exchanges. Related to the communication process among others, there are some factors that can help foster interactions such as parents' support. Evidence of this is the entry 7 on my journal of September 17th in which I referred to this, "I think parents are an unconditional support in the process, because they practice the vocabulary learned and help their children with the class project at home". I think that the success of the practical activities was possible thanks to the bonding of parents, because they are always aware of the process and help their children in every moment.

In this respect, Peláez (2004) asserts that cognitively, the interaction is essential for the learning process; mediated or not by technology, this is the first stage for the appropriation of knowledge because through this the human being receives information in his mind (p. 4). Based on this, another factor to foster interaction in a virtual learning environment is the use of the digital platform, "Teams". I registered some evidence of this in the questionnaire conducted with students in which they had to answer whether the activities proposed by the teacher promoted the interaction in the virtual classroom. Most of them answered positively by saying interesting opinions that support the effectiveness of the activities in VLEs, some of the students said: "Yes, we can interact with our classmates", "Yes, because we play and learn more", "We are more motivated to participate", "We are more integrated" and "We had fun classes". Through these responses, I found that interaction was fostered in classes, they had

the possibility to interact and participate. Furthermore, students felt motivated with the activities proposed and demonstrated some progress in their language process.

Conclusions

All in all, the study presented here shows that oral interaction can actually be fostered in Virtual Learning Environments with children. As I already mentioned, this is possible thanks to the teacher' role, because she was responsible of the teaching process into the classroom, in which strategies and methodologies must be developed.

Concerning to this, I demonstrated that there are important paths that determine the teachers' role in the learning process. Some of them are the lesson plan, in which teachers plan their classes based on students' needs and interests, and design motivating activities that lead students to think, use the vocabulary learned, participate, interact and share experiences with peers. Selection of materials, in which teachers carefully evaluate sources to support the development of language and increase the learning achievement in students, the clarity of instructions, in which teachers explain, provide examples and guide the activities proposed, in order to assess students' learning process play a crucial role.

Through their methodologies and strategies, teachers contribute to students' attitudes and the development of language performance. Based on this, I found positive responses from students in the study because they felt motivated and gained confidence to talk and interact with their classmates and teacher in class. Regarding the language performance, I think that students' intervention increased during the different interactive activities proposed and they had the opportunity to describe what they liked, share their own ideas and ask some friends something related to the topics taught.

Finally, parents played an important role in this learning process because they were an unconditional support in the different activities developed in class. They also practiced the vocabulary learned and helped their children with the class exercises at home, contributing to the success of the activities.

Reflections

At a personal level, this research study enriched my learning process, because it was an interesting and motivating stage in which I enhanced my practicum as a teacher. First of all, I learned that it is important to be researchers, reflect on our own practices and lead students to foster their abilities into the language classroom. I also learned that it is necessary to give a role to students into the class. Additionally, at a professional level, I feel that my teaching process increased in my workplace because I designed interesting and motivating activities in my lesson plans. Students had the opportunity to interact, participate, explore, learn and enjoy learning; therefore, I would like to continue this process next year. In the same way, as a future teacher I learned that it is important to be clear with instructions and find strategies to verify students' comprehension. In addition, I consider that is possible to teach in a virtual learning environment if teachers design and apply new teaching strategies for their students.

According to my practicum process, I think the most challenging stages of the practicum were the data analysis and the writing of the literature review, because the interpretation of data requires some level of creative writing, and the academic writing is complex and demands a lot of time. Writing is a very laborious process for me, because there are many components to put together in the same sentence and I have little experience with written expressions.

Finally, I would like to give some recommendations for future students-teachers. I think that the most important thing in a research and practicum process is to clearly define the object of study, because through it the procedure will be developed to get some findings. Moreover, future teachers must be prepared for the new challenges that society sets and teach from different scenarios, whether virtual or face-to-face. Our teaching is changing and we must be there to take on the challenge.

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Appendix A

Interview with the cooperating teacher.

1. ¿Desde su perspectiva y experiencia qué tan importante es la interacción para el aprendizaje de un idioma extranjero?
2. ¿Qué tipos de interacción pudo observar a partir de las actividades desarrolladas en la clase de inglés?
3. ¿Cómo evaluaría las interacciones de los estudiantes de primer grado en las actividades propuestas en clase?
4. ¿Cuáles estrategias de enseñanza que faciliten la interacción observó en clase?
5. ¿Cómo se puede fomentar la interacción entre estudiantes de primer grado en un ambiente virtual?
6. ¿Considera usted que en la clase del grado primero se logró fomentar las interacciones en un ambiente virtual? ¿Por qué?

Appendix B**Questionnaire for students**

1 ¿Te gusta participar en la clase de inglés? Justifica tu respuesta.

Si

No

2 ¿Con qué frecuencia participas en la clase de inglés?

Siempre

Algunas veces

Rara vez

3 ¿Cómo te sientes interactuando con tus compañeros en la clase de inglés?

Justifica tu respuesta.

Seguro (a)

Inseguro (a)

4 ¿Cómo te sientes cuando la profesora te pregunta o te pone a participar en clase?

Estimulado (a)

Cómodo (a)

Incómodo (a)

5 ¿Cuál de las actividades interactivas trabajadas en clase te gustó más y por qué? Elige una.

Preparación de ensalada de frutas

Presentación de la granja

Elaboración de plato de alimentos usando los stickers del libro

Picnic

Todas las anteriores

Otra: _____

6 ¿Crees que has mejorado tu participación en la clase de inglés y por qué?

Si

No

7 ¿Consideras que las actividades propuestas por tu profesora promovieron la interacción en el aula virtual?

Justifica tu respuesta.