



**UNIVERSIDAD  
DE ANTIOQUIA**

Trabajo de investigación presentado como requisito parcial  
para optar al título de: **Licenciada en Lenguas Extranjeras**

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Universidad de Antioquia

Escuela de Idiomas

El Carmen de Viboral-Antioquia

2022



Fostering EFL Learners' Oral Production through Task-Based Learning Approach

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports the results of an action-research project focused on fostering students' oral production in English through the Task-Based Learning (TBL) approach. This study was conducted in a rural public school in La Ceja (Colombia) with 26 sixth graders. Actions implemented include the development of a complete task cycle consistent with the syllabus and students' interests and needs, and data was gathered through journal, focus groups, checklist, and oral tests. The results evidenced students' significant improvements in their oral production in English, as well as the use of English spontaneously to communicate with others in the classroom. Additionally, the implementation of the TBL enhanced learners' writing and listening skills, fostered collaborative learning and a learner-centered classroom.

**Keywords:** collaborative learning, English as a foreign language learning, oral production, task-based learning approach.

### **Degree Requirement**

This action research project is submitted as a requirement to obtain a bachelor's degree in foreign language education (English- French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, El Carmen de Viboral, Colombia.

### **Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to thank my parents for raising me to believe that anything is possible and for their constant support in this process.

To the professors who were part of my academic training for guiding me and helping me to become a patient, disciplined, creative and critical teacher.

To the *Semillero de Investigación InterAcción* where I have solved my doubts about the research process and discovered the wide possibilities of research we have in our field.

Finally, from the bottom of my heart I would like to thank my amazing university friends for their teachings, I admire you deeply and I treasure the laughs and adventures we had together. Thank you for all your unconditional support and for reminding me to take breaks and have fun when I have been stressed.

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### **Preface**

I am an undergraduate student of foreign languages at the University of Antioquia, and I am passionate about research since it has helped me to understand several educational issues. The desire to undertake this research arose from my early observations and conversations with students. For the learners the skill they had the hardest time mastering was speaking since the focus in school was mainly on comprehension skills. Therefore, for this academic work, I wanted to explore and implement a methodology, which is not so common in schools, to promote students' oral production. The target group for this research study was 26 sixth graders from a rural public school in La Ceja, Antioquia. This paper is aimed primarily at EFL teachers who are interested in promoting speaking in their classrooms, as well as in fostering a learning process centered on the needs and interests of their students.

Valeria Flórez Patiño.

La Ceja, Antioquia. December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

### **Description of the Context**

This research project was carried out in a public rural institution of La Ceja, Antioquia, Colombia. This institution offered preschool, elementary, and high school education. The institution had also a technical character, which means that in the last two years of school students pursue a technical course at the same time as their high school studies. The institution's mission was to "educate boys, girls and young people from a humanistic perspective, developing a scientific, technological, cultural, ethical and axiological human life project based on coexistence and respect for differences, being competent in society" (Code of Conduct Manual).

Concerning the class, it was a 6<sup>th</sup> grade and lessons were three times a week in 1-hour periods. The English lessons were based on a syllabus provided by the institution, which provided the objectives, competences, and contents for the whole school year. The English syllabus for sixth grade was also divided into four periods, each lasting 10 weeks. Similarly, the units of progression for this class included vocabulary and grammar structures to ensure that students have a good control of high word frequency and grammatical structures.

The methodology had some features of the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), which involved activities such as filling in the blanks, matching words to their meaning and translating vocabulary into the target language.

The target population to conduct this research included 27 students whose ages range from 11 to 15 years old. Most of them lived in strata 2 and 3 and came from the urban area of the municipality and only a few lived in rural areas. According to some students, they used English outside the classroom mainly to listen to music or watch movies and series and others conceived



English as an important subject because it opens opportunities for them to travel and to communicate with people abroad (Informal talk with students, February 24,2022).

Concerning the cooperating teacher (CT), he holds a bachelor's degree in Foreign Languages, a specialization in Pedagogy and Didactics, and a master's degree in Education. He has nine years of experience in the private and public sector. In terms of his beliefs about English teaching and learning, he stated that the ideal way to learn a language is through immersion in the context and culture, and when it is learned as a second language, it should be learned through the integration and development of the four skills in class (Informal talk with CT, February 24, 2022). However, the classes followed a cognitive perspective, which consisted of using repetition and memorization activities to teach the language (Observations, February 17, 21, 2022).

The major problem that I observed in this class was a lack of chances to produce orally in English. Therefore, students were not acquiring and practicing language basic structures to communicate in the target language, and there was little exposure to oral English in class. Likewise, the type of activities and type of materials did not create opportunities for students' oral production.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite policy and curriculum support for the development of English language learners' oral production in English as a foreign language (EFL) context, teaching continues to focus on grammar-based approaches (Nazara, 2011). This problem was evident in the sixth grade English class where this study was developed. I identified that these sixth graders did not have enough opportunities to produce orally in English classes and lacked chances to produce language,

consequently, students were not acquiring and practicing language basic structures to communicate in the target language.

First, the language used within the classroom was mainly Spanish rather than English and the exposure to the target language was minimal. As Harmer (2007) states, learners need to be exposed to language as much as possible and take as many opportunities as possible to produce language. As an illustration, class instructions, students' interaction and participation were in Spanish most of the time (Observations, February 17, 21, 24; March 3, 7, 2022). Also, students said that they were motivated to learn the language to travel abroad and communicate with foreign people (Journal entry excerpt, February 24, 2022). Thus, this issue was problematic because there was not enough input and output in class to enhance their oral skills and to meet the students' linguistic interests.

Second, the type of activities and the assessment system proposed for this sixth grade did not foster the development of speaking skills. In this regard, activities such as drillings, matching exercises and scrambled sentences items were privileged in the classes (Observations, February 17, 21, 24, 28; March 7, 24, 2022). They were used to follow the progression units of the sixth-grade syllabus for students to acquire vocabulary and practice specific grammatical features of the target language (Journal entries, February 24; March 3, 2022). Similarly, students always took written traditional exams, and the dynamics of the exams were very similar: Matching words to their meaning and translating vocabulary to practice spelling and vocabulary sub-skills, but not oral skills (Observations, February 21, 24; March 7, 2022).

Third, the type of materials provided throughout these early observations, such as flashcards and board games, were used to enhance memorization and systematization of vocabulary through repetition (Observations, February 21; March 24, 2022). Moreover, although

there are technological devices available in the institution there is no television or computer in this sixth-grade classroom for teacher or students exclusive use, then videos or songs were not present for developing listening and speaking skills in the class (Journal entry excerpt, February 24, 2022).

As a conclusion, the language used, the type of activities and the materials seemed not to provide enough opportunities for student's oral production in the target language. Given the gaps above, this action research intends to foster students' oral production through the implementation of Task-Based Learning Approach (TBLA), which focuses on tasks to promote communication in the target language. Some theoretical features of these approach are discussed in the next section.

### **Theoretical Background**

This section aims at conceptualizing the terms that support this study. First at all, it presents the definition of oral production, how to assess it and the challenges of teaching oral production. Second, it explores the definition of Task-Based Learning (TBL), followed by a description of its framework, students' role, advantages, and challenges. Third, it presents some findings from studies conducted in EFL contexts related to TBL to guide this research.

First, oral production is considered as the most essential skill to master in a foreign language teaching and learning. In fact, Nazara (2011) argues that speaking has become the most important skill to develop for most students, as it has become a measure of one's mastery in the target language. Therefore, it is important to have a clear definition of oral skill. Gordillo (2011) has also defined oral skill as the capacity of expressing oneself verbally for communicating, based on the linguistic rules of a language. It also involves the productive skill of speaking and the receptive skill of listening. It means that learners must be taught to speak as well as listen.

Generally, speaking is seen as the most difficult of the four language skills to assess as it requires the teacher either to observe a “live” oral performance or to capture the performance by some means for later assessment (Gordillo, 2011). Therefore, it is necessary to define the criteria for assessing oral production in this action research. The criteria for assessing the oral skill are four: coherence, fluency, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation (Common European Framework Reference, 2001). Moreover, the aspect of fluency does not have a high percentage in the assessment system, as the aims of this action research is not on the students’ speaking speed, but on students’ natural communication in the foreign language.

Within the aspects determined in the CEFR for spoken language use, they are defined for the beginner level as follows:

**Coherence.** This aspect refers to the ability to link words or groups of words with very basic linear connectors.

**Fluency.** This aspect refers to managing very short, isolated, mainly pre-packaged utterances, with much pausing to search for expressions, to articulate fewer familiar words, and to repair communication.

**Grammatical range and accuracy.** This aspect refers to the control of some grammatical structures and simple sentence patterns in a memorized repertoire.

**Pronunciation.** This aspect refers to the ability to produce clear and understandable speech. The key indicators include the amount of strain caused to the listener and the amount of unintelligible speech.

Furthermore, as speaking proficiently in a foreign language is not an easy task, it is important for teachers to be aware of the challenges in teaching speaking so that they can seek solutions to them. From Yusuf and Zuraini’s (2016) research, it is found that teachers faced

different problems when teaching speaking, such as students' inhibition because they were worried about making mistakes, low student participation, lack of vocabulary or motivation, and overuse of students' native language.

Another important approach to address the learners' communicative needs is Task-Based Learning (TBL). Nunan (2006) argues that TBL views the learning process as a set of communicative tasks that are directly linked to the curricular goals they serve, meaning that students use the target language as a vehicle to complete the tasks. Likewise, TBL focuses on tasks to promote communication in the target language as it engages students with meaning-focused tasks for effective communication that can transcend outside the classroom (Fuelantala, 2016), thus, TBL allows learners to exchange oral communication for real purposes.

As for the definition of task, Nunan (1989) defines a task as "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form" (p. 10). Therefore, students' prior knowledge is crucial to achieve the goal of the task. Tasks such as sharing information, talking about likes and interests, planning or creating something facilitate oral production in the classroom (Ramírez & Artunduaga, 2018). Also, it can be expected that students will express their thoughts even in an inaccurate way to achieve the outcome of the task. Nunan (1989) also offers two types of tasks: Real-world tasks which are designed for students to practice tasks they are likely to face in everyday situations, and pedagogical tasks, which are theory-based and aimed to facilitate language acquisition, but which are not necessarily like real-world tasks. In this regard, Skehan (1996) adds that tasks mainly focus on meaning and real-life situations (as cited in Rodríguez Bonces & Rodríguez-Bonces, 2010). Moreover, tasks are

meaning-oriented, however, this does not mean that form is not relevant for task completion. In fact, the task model guiding this action research has a stage to focus on language form.

In terms of task implementation, Willis (1996) proposes a three stages lesson cycle: pre-task, task cycle and language focus. During the pre-task stage the teacher explores learners' prior knowledge of the topic and displays a similar task, this helps learners understand the task instruction and prepare for it. Besides, through the development of several activities, the teacher provides the vocabulary that learners need during the whole task cycle. In the task cycle learners can perform real world tasks with the teacher guidance. This stage implies a high use and exposure to the language since learners perform the task in front of the class. In the last stage, language focus, learners can analyze and practice specific linguistic features that arose during the previous two stages, allowing learners to clarify and explore new language notions.

TBL offers various advantages. One has to do with the development of learners' communication skills since in the task completion, students learn how to ask questions, how to negotiate meaning and how to interact and work within groups or pairs (Bhandari, 2020). In the same way, this approach enhances collaborative learning in students, as they learn to complete tasks by helping each other. Similarly, TBL helps learners to interact spontaneously since it gives learners the opportunity to use the language, they already know to complete the task (Ganta, 2015). Likewise, it is a student-centered approach that provides ample exposure to students to use language for expressing their views, feelings, emotions, ideas, and experiences which improve their language skills (Bhandari, 2020).

Another characteristic of TBL to highlight is stated by Richards and Rogers (2004). They assure that the learners' role within the TBL includes performing the tasks alone or in groups, monitoring classmates' works during the task completion, and taking risks and being innovative

when performing tasks in a foreign language. Therefore, learners' role in the English classroom might vary according to the task and the stage they are developing. Besides, TBL allows learners to take control of their own learning and the teacher is no longer the center in the classroom, but a facilitator of a variety of meaningful tasks for learners (Bhandari, 2020).

On the contrary, Ganta (2015) states that some of the challenges of implementing TBL may include some learners' linguistic deficiency to take part in a task and meet every learner's learning needs, as the classes are very heterogeneous in terms of motivation and learning styles. It is also challenging, as it requires individual responsibility and commitment on the part of the students, to which certain learners may not be used to it. Another aspect refers to the outcome of the task, meaning that the outcome must be consistent with the objectives with which the task is designed from the beginning, otherwise the nature of the TBL would be neglected as well as the task evaluation process would be impeded.

Moreover, in EFL contexts, research supporting the use of TBL to foster oral production has been done. The study of Peña and Onatra (2009) aimed at analyzing the students' oral outputs and conducted in a public secondary school in Colombia. They found that the tasks favored students' fluency, vocabulary, strategies to maintain communication, and promoted the use of language purposefully. Likewise, Kasap's research (2005) demonstrated that students' general perceptions of task-based instruction were positive. The results of the study showed that students had neutral or partial positive reactions to the treatment tasks but found them useful for developing their oral skills. Considering these results, this action research advocated the implementation of TBL in my EFL classroom with young learners in a rural context, where traditional teaching methods were applied to foster learners' oral production.

### **Research Question**

How can the implementation of Task-Based Learning foster sixth-grade students' oral production at a public school?

### **Objectives**

#### **General Objective**

To analyze how Task-Based Learning fosters sixth-grade students' oral production at a public school.

#### **Specific Objectives**

1. To analyze students' oral participation in each stage of the task-based cycle.
2. To contrast students' speaking level before and after implementing the task-based cycle.
3. To identify students' feelings and perceptions when speaking in English through a Task-Based Learning.

### **Action Plan**

With the purpose of addressing the question stated for this action research project, three actions were implemented. These actions corresponded to a Task-Based cycle composed of three stages. The first action was to implement the pre-task stage through some pair and group activities such as personal and profession profile, family photo, listening activity and a dialogue were designed to review and provide students with language functions and vocabulary. The second action was to conduct the task cycle stage, in which students proposed to report the task by presenting orally. The third action was the language focus stage, activities were planned to



analyze and practice the specific linguistic patterns detected in the students' oral production during the development of the task.

The following data collection techniques were used: a diagnostic test was implemented to identify students' speaking level before the implementation. Second, a teacher's journals of all the classes taught was written meticulously, focusing on students' oral participation in English and the challenges, difficulties and possible advantages found in applying TBL. Third, a checklist was completed to analyze how often students use English in the classroom in each stage of TBL and for what purpose they do so. After the TBL cycle, a students' post-test was recorded to contrast their oral production after the implementation. Finally, two focus group interviews were held to identify students' feelings and perceptions when speaking in English through a TBL cycle.

### **Development of Actions**

The development of the actions for this project were based on Willis' framework for TBL (1996) that consisted of a pre-task stage, a task cycle (task, planning stage, report stage), and a language focus stage (practice and analysis stage). Besides, during the whole process I paid close attention and registered in a checklist students' oral participation in English.

The first action consisted of implementing the first stage of TBL: pre-task for 4 weeks where students were expected to activate their background knowledge, learn useful vocabulary for the task cycle, pronounce vocabulary or write coherent sentences using part of the vocabulary taught, and be exposed to spoken and written English. I provided students with some English classroom expressions for them to use authentic communication and improve their speaking skills. They reviewed vocabulary they have previously learned during the course through six

different centers activities where students had to write, read, draw and speak about animals, clothing, body parts, classroom objects and colors (see center of alphabet challenge [here](#)). After that students completed a diagnostic test to identify their speaking level before the implementation (see questions of the pre-test [here](#)), and I presented an example of the outcome of this task-cycle which was a poster with descriptions of famous people. Then, students received a personal profile with vocabulary of professions and adjectives for physical and personality descriptions and an activity to be completed and shared with a classmate.

Additionally, students worked in pairs, they created a profile of the profession they would like to pursue in the future, they read it to the whole class to improve their pronunciation, and a listening comprehension activity was proposed to expose students to other voices in English and improve their listening skills. This listening exercise consisted of four different tasks: a general information questions exercise, a jot down exercise (specific information), a reading aloud task, and a multiple-choice exercise (see listening comprehension activity [here](#)), and to finish the class, we shared all the answers and made corrections. In the following session students were asked to brainstorm adjectives to describe people, and then in an oral activity, they had to use these adjectives to describe the physique, the personality, and the profession of each member of the family from a family photo they brought to class. Students also read a short text about someone's description, they completed a table with information from the reading and answered some specific questions (see reading comprehension activity [here](#)). Finally, students practiced a dialogue and performed it to the whole class. During this week, as part of the data collection process, seven students were invited to participate in the first focus group interview to identify their feelings and perceptions when speaking in English through TBL (see questions of the interview [here](#)).

The second action was focused on the while-task (task, planning and reporting) for 2 weeks. In pairs students planned the content of the descriptions of a famous person and how to report it and they agreed to report the task through a presentation supported by the creation of a poster (see some of students' posters [here](#)). During this activity, few students used English orally while planning the task and some of them wrote the content of their descriptions in Spanish and translated them into English, missing the opportunity to use spontaneous language during this stage. After that, they reported the task, they presented the description of a famous person, most of the students read the information from the posters claiming that they felt nervous and afraid of making mistakes in the language. However, there were a few students who took the risk to report the task spontaneously using expressions learned.

The third action consisted of carrying out the language focus stage for 3 weeks. I provided feedback on students' pronunciation and written ideas in their posters when reporting on the task. Students were asked to make a list of words they heard their classmates mispronounce in the presentations and then read them aloud properly. Then, students expanded their vocabulary of countries and nationalities through a song (see song activity [here](#)) and worked on a worksheet where they completed a fill in the gaps exercise with verb to be. They also did a reading comprehension activity (see reading [here](#)). Finally, the post- test was implemented to contrast students' speaking level before and after the implementation. As part of the data collection process, seven students were invited to participate in the second focus group interview to identify their feelings and perceptions when speaking in English through TBL.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Creswell (2013), the following process of 6 stages is suggested to carry out the data analysis: assembling the data, reading the data, coding the data, comparing the data,

building interpretations, and reporting the outcomes. I started the process by assembling the data according to each instrument: my journal entries, students' scores on the pre- and post-test based on a rubric, the transcription of the two focus groups and the recurrences of students' oral participation on my checklist for each stage of the cycle. After doing so, I read and started coding the data inductively.

During this process, I coded and labeled some categories from the data collected. First, I coded my journal entries and the transcriptions of the focus groups. Later, I analyzed the quantitative data collected from the checklists and students' test scores. Then I created an Excel document to group the information in broader categories. Once the data was categorized, I triangulated the different sources, and I found compelling findings concerning the development of my action plan. Finally, I organized the categories in order of importance according to my research objective.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

The purpose of this study was to foster students' oral production through the implementation of the TBL approach. Three main findings emerged from data analysis: improvements on students' oral production, willingness to use English and benefits of implementing TBL with young learners. In the following paragraphs, I provide further explanations of each of these findings.

#### **Improvements on Students' Oral Production**

Data analysis showed some improvements in students' pronunciation. This was evident the several times that students participated in English, since their performance showed gradual improvements in terms of pronunciation, and they were able to construct short but well-

structured sentences in a spontaneous way. In the first focus group carried out, students expressed that they improved their pronunciation thanks to the pre-task activities where they pronounced different words. In the following excerpt from the first focus group, a student expressed which strategy helped him improve his pronunciation: “*A mí lo que más me ha ayudado son los trabalenguas porque me ayuda a pronunciar mejor y a identificar algunas palabras.*” (Students L, Focus group, September 8th, 2022)<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, most of the students scored better in their pronunciation in the post-test recording. This can be read in the following piece of evidence:

These recordings showed that the pronunciation of the students has improved, and they have put aside mistakes they made at the beginning of the cycle. For example, they no longer mispronounce the words: eyes, name, date, favorite, cute, beautiful, hair, soccer, you, are (Journal entry excerpt, October 6th, 2022).

In addition, in the pre-test and pos-test it was clear that students improved in terms of pronunciation and vocabulary, as illustrated in table 1 where the minimum and maximum grades were 1 and 3 respectively and the percentages of students with grades with 1, 2 and 3 points in vocabulary and pronunciation can be appreciated.

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<sup>1</sup> Own translation: What has helped me the most are the tongue twisters because it helps me to pronounce better and to identify some words.

**Table 1**

*Percentage of points scored by students in the two tests*

Scores	Pronunciation		Vocabulary	
	Pre-test (% of students and n° of students)	Post-test (% of students and n° of students)	Pre-test (% of students and n° of students)	Post-test (% of students and n° of students)
Students who got <b>1 point</b> (minimum)	53,3% (8)	6,6% (1)	53,3% (8)	13,3% (2)
<b>Total of students who failed</b>	53,3% (8)	6,6% (1)	53,3% (8)	13,3% (2)
Students who got <b>2 points</b> (medium)	40% (6)	60% (9)	26,6% (4)	46,6% (7)
Students who got <b>3 points</b> (maximum)	6,6% (1)	33,3% (5)	20% (3)	40% (6)
<b>Total of students who passed</b>	46,6% (7)	93,3% (14)	46,6% (7)	86,6% (13)

According to Table 1, in the pre-test 46.6% (7) of the students passed the pronunciation criterion, while in the post-test 93.3% (14) passed it. This means that the process they went through the implementation of the TBL cycle had a positive effect on their oral production. In fact, in the study conducted by Fuelantala (2016), it showed improvements of students' speaking skills using TBL in a small group occurred as a gradual process, which required providing several opportunities to practice the language.

Data analysis also indicated that the TBL approach helped students in learning vocabulary. This is significant for the purposes of the study because vocabulary acquisition is viewed as a key aspect to achieve a high level of proficiency in the target language (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008) and is a useful tool for students to maintain some degree of communication when they do not have sufficient prior knowledge of the structures, as illustrated in the following excerpt from the journal where students described a famous person orally:

With this activity, I noticed that the students used some of the previously learned and reviewed grammatical structures, vocabulary, and verbs in the other stages to communicate meaning orally. Meaning that they used the grammatical structures and

vocabulary for a purpose which was to describe a famous person to their peers.” (Journal entry excerpt, September 29th, 2022).

Furthermore, in the two tests conducted to contrast students’ speaking level before and after the TBL implementation, 46.6% (7) of the students passed the vocabulary criterion in the pre-test, while 86.6% (13) did so in the post-test (table 1). In fact, students used more appropriate and varied vocabulary in their responses in the final recordings, which can be interpreted as a positive impact of this TBL implementation on the students’ acquisition of new vocabulary that helped them achieve the task outcome. This can be read in the following piece of evidence:

“The students used expressions and vocabulary used throughout the cycle of tasks to answer the post-test in English. For instance, many students described their mothers saying she has brown hair, or she is short. In the same way, some students now connected their sentences with the conjunction and” (Journal entry excerpt, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

These findings presented are in accordance with the findings of other researchers who suggest that the task-based approach is effective to improve foreign language learners’ oral production in a foreign language (Fuelantala, 2016).

### **Willingness to Use English**

Data analysis revealed that students increased their use of English to express themselves in class and to achieve the outcome of a task. In the beginning, students were reluctant to use English, as illustrated in the following excerpt: *“Two students did not want to do the activity in English, arguing that they did not know anything in English and that it was easier in Spanish. They did the recording in Spanish”* (Journal entry excerpt, August 22nd, 2022)

This apprehension to communicate in the target language might be caused by their fear of speaking in English in public or of mispronouncing words, along with the lack of vocabulary, shyness, and fear of being humiliated (Urrutia León & Vega Cely, 2010). Nevertheless, as the

project implementation advanced, data indicated that students increased their use of English spontaneously and switched from one language to another to interact with their classmates, as illustrated in the following piece of evidence:

“I heard a few students say some expressions in English. For instance, student A said to her classmates: “tenemos que poner ahí twenty-eight years old para que no se nos olvide cuando presentemos”<sup>2</sup>. Student M said to his classmate: “escribamos musician and producer”. In addition, student S said to her classmate: “pongamos que ella nació en Spain y se mudó a United States”<sup>3</sup> (Journal entry, September 23rd, 2022).

Thus, it can be deduced that students used English spontaneously to express their thoughts during a task, which helped them to learn the foreign language and include new words into their communication. In fact, Willis (1996) states that students used the target language, even in an inaccurate way, for a communicative purpose to achieve the outcome of the task.

In addition, the data showed that students participated orally for different purposes and that the increase in the number of participations was a consequence of the process through the different stages of the TBL approach. For instance, students used English to express ideas, read sentences and texts, greet each other, and share their responses to the activities during the cycle. Besides, the total of participations in each stage (pre-task, while-task, and language focus) increased significantly, as illustrated in the following figure where the level of participation per class is grouped by stage of the cycle.

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<sup>2</sup> we need to write twenty-eight years old, so we don't forget when we present.

<sup>3</sup> Let's write that she was born in Spain and moved to the United States.



**Figure 1**

*Number of students' oral participation in English at each stage of the cycle*

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	Class 6	Total
Pre-task	3	8	6	9	10	12	48
While-task	8	11	11	7	10	20	67
Language focus	7	13	10	11	15	14	70

In Figure 1, each bar represents the number of students' oral participations in each of the six classes per stage of the TBL approach cycle. The final count for each class contains the number of students who participated voluntarily and spontaneously in the classroom using English, either isolated words, expressions, or reading aloud. It is noticeable how in the first two classes of each stage, the number of students' oral participation increased. In the first stage: the pre-task, there were forty-eight students' participation, by the second stage: the while-task, the number of interventions reached sixty-seven and by the final stage: the language focus, the students used the language to communicate in class seventy times. This finding corroborates one of the findings of Ramirez and Artunduaga (2018). They state that during their implementation of authentic tasks to foster learners' oral production, it was seen that little by little students started to increase their participation in the different activities.

### **Benefits of Implementing TBL with Young Learners**

This finding refers to the benefits of implementing TBL with young learners and includes teacher and learner perceptions of the TBL approach. Therefore, it is divided into three subcategories: it enhances both writing and listening, it promotes collaborative learning, and it promotes a student-centered classroom.

**It enhances both writing and listening.** Data analysis displayed that since the activities proposed during the cycle were varied, they helped the students to improve other language skills. The tasks that students were exposed to during the action cycle, involving posters, readings, videos, and pronunciation activities, not only helped the students develop the tasks, but also improved their listening, and promoted their ability to write ideas in English, as three students in the focus group expressed:

Lo que creo que más me ayudó a mí fue el vídeo porque pude escuchar la pronunciación de las personas que ya saben dominar el idioma y mejoré la escucha y la gramática” (Students R, focus group, October 20, 2022)<sup>4</sup>, “Yo pienso que a mí me ha ayudado a mejorar muchas cosas... Pues no sé, yo siento que me ayuda porque yo antes no entendía el inglés y ya entiendo más cosas, por ejemplo, cuando una canción en inglés, para pronunciar la mejor o cuando la voy a escribir, ya sé cómo escribirla” (Student S, focus group, October 20, 2022)<sup>5</sup>, “Pues lo que más me ayudaron estas clases fueron a escribir mejor, mejorar mi escritura en inglés porque por lo general antes de haber aprendido más de esto me tragaba muchas letras, a la hora de escribir palabras. Entonces creo que me ayudaron mucho a mejorar mi escritura. (Students K, focus group, October 20, 2022)<sup>6</sup>.

In fact, it was noticeable that students improved their writing skill when writing ideas in any of the activities proposed as registered in the journals: *“I noticed that the students’ posters were very colorful, and they wrote down key information they were going to share. Some wrote complete sentences and other keywords on their posters in English”* (Journal entry excerpt, September 29th, 2022).

Thus, it can be deduced that the different activities developed in class helped to significantly improve not only the students’ oral production, but also their writing and listening

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<sup>4</sup> What I think helped me the most was the video because I was able to listen to the pronunciation of people who already master the language and I improved my listening and grammar.

<sup>5</sup> I think it has helped me to improve many things.... Well, I don't know, I feel that it helps me because before I didn't understand English and now, I understand more things, for example, when a song in English, to pronounce it better or when I'm going to write it, I know how to write it.

<sup>6</sup> Well, these classes helped me the most with writing better, to improve my writing in English because usually before I learned more of this, I swallowed a lot of letters, when writing words. So, I think they helped me a lot to improve my writing.

skills. In this regard, Willis (1996) states that tasks are characterized by the integration of skills meaning that learners can be taught to speak as well as to listen, write, and read during the implementation of the cycle.

**It promotes collaborative learning.** Data analysis showed that, as most of the proposed activities involved pair or group work, students worked together while they exchanged ideas and negotiated meaning to complete the task. In fact, students expressed that this type of work encouraged them to share their knowledge for the benefit of all, as illustrated in the following evidence from the focus group:

A mí me parece que todos no vamos a tener los mismos conocimientos de saber lo mismo que el otro, entonces sí el otro sabe una cosa y el otro otra, ellos dos se complementan para realizar el trabajo, y así, queda bien hecho, porque los dos se complementaron con la información que más saben. (Student J, focus group, September 8th, 2022)<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, collaborative learning appears as a strategy for learning a foreign language, which helped students learn from each other and benefited those who had difficulty understanding a concept, because they could hear it explained by their peers.

In addition, the data analysis indicated that students took advantage of this type of work and interaction promoted by TBL and created good relationships with their peers, which contributed to creating a more relaxed classroom environment, decreasing the feelings of being exposed and anxiety when speaking in English within the classroom. In fact, student M expressed that after having experienced the whole task-cycle, she felt calm and more confident with her peers when expressing herself in the language:

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<sup>7</sup> It seems to me that we are not all going to know the same thing as the other, so if another person knows one thing and other knows another, the two complement each other to do the task, thus, it is well done because the two complemented each other with the information they know the most.

A mí sí me ha mejorado demasiado la ansiedad, porque primero que todo, ya tengo confianza con el grupo, tengo mucha confianza también con Valeria, entonces si yo me equivoco, yo sé que Valeria me va a apoyar y mis compañeros también, eh y yo digo que si uno entra en confianza con el grupo le va a ir muy bien y la verdad es que sí me ha rebajado mucho los nervios y la pena. (Focus group, October 20th, 2022)<sup>8</sup>.

Moreover, the following excerpt from my journal illustrates that TBL promoted collaborative learning where students spoke spontaneously in English, as they felt more comfortable working in small groups:

I observed students using the vocabulary of professions and personality traits by mixing English and Spanish in their interactions in pairs. For instance, student M said to student F “un chef es funny”, D said to E “pongamos happy en personality de police”. For me, it is very relevant to highlight that some students begin to use the language in a spontaneous and free way. (Journal entry excerpt, August 29th, 2022).

Therefore, the TBL approach provided students with spaces to interact with each other and plan the outcome of the tasks, where students practiced and used what they knew of the language without restrictions.

**It promotes a student-centered classroom.** Data analysis showed that the TBL approach allowed students to be in charge of their own learning, as they assessed their own process and became aware of their language learning needs throughout the task cycle. For instance, in the language focus stage, students reflected on their own and their classmates’ performance in presenting a description of a famous character, as illustrated in the following piece of evidence:

I think that the final stage of the cycle: language focus, it allowed the students to self-assess and reflect on their own process and their classmates, and on their own pronunciation during the presentation, before moving on to the grammatical approach. (Journal entry excerpt, September 29th, 2022).

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<sup>8</sup> Own translation: I have a lot of confidence with Valeria, so if I make a mistake, I know that Valeria will support me and my colleagues will too, and I say that if you feel confident with the group you will do very well, and the truth is that it has really lower my nerves and embarrassment.

In fact, a student-centered classroom involves the active participation of students in monitoring their progress towards the final goals, and in determining how to address any gaps in the last stage of the cycle (Ganta,2015).

Likewise, data analysis indicated that students had the opportunity to decide the content of the main task. As registered in the journals, through the first two stages students' interests were considered for planning the main task:

I asked each pair to tell me the name of the person they wanted to describe while I was listing the people on the board. With the help of the students, we created a list of the aspects they were going to include in their presentations: name, age, date of birth, profession, nationality, family, likes, physical description, personality and extra. (Journal entry excerpt, September 19th, 2022).

Thus, student-centered learning is based on the needs, abilities, interests and learning styles of the students. Therefore, the teacher is no longer the center in the classroom, but a facilitator of a variety of meaningful tasks for learners (Bhandari, 2020).

In summary, the implementation of this cycle of tasks fostered the students' oral production, as they improved their pronunciation and enriched their English vocabulary. It also allowed students to use English spontaneously to communicate with others in the classroom. Finally, the TBL approach enhanced learners' writing and listening skills, fostered collaborative learning and a learner-centered classroom.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

I can conclude that the implementation of the TBL approach proposed by Willis (1996), that is coherent with students' interests and needs, could foster the oral production of my EFL students, which was the main purpose of this study. The exposure to English and the frequent opportunities to use the target language through the different tasks developed in class,

contributed significantly to fostering pronunciation patterns and an increase in vocabulary range. In the same way, this implementation increased students' willingness to use the target language, showing improvements in their writing and listening skills. Finally, the stages proposed in the task cycle allowed students to share their knowledge and interact with each other, fostering collaborative learning and a student-centered classroom.

In addition, this research project entailed some implications for learners and teachers' practice in this context. A first implication related to the use of TBL it is paramount to provide a wide variety of tasks related to learners' learning styles, interests, needs, and the four skills could foster learners' motivation to learn English. In this sense, when students are given a task in which they can talk about something they know or like, they will continue to participate in class.

A second implication is that teachers should keep in mind that with the TBL approach, students will learn and even use more grammatical structures and vocabulary than the teacher asked them to use to achieve the task outcome. Additionally, for summative assessment, teachers should focus on the learning objective that was defined since the beginning of the task cycle. Therefore, content validity should be the main principle to follow when designing the task and the test that will measure all the facets of the given task cycle.

A third implication deals with time allotted to design and apply the cycle of TBL, it takes time for students to adapt as well as for teachers to design, since it challenges the grammar-based methodology followed in most public schools. Therefore, the teacher should create spaces for positive classroom interactions, so that students feel confident using the language and design a scaffolding process prior to implementation.

This project provides a better understanding of the implications of the TBL approach on students' language learning in an EFL classroom. It also contributes to rethinking the way

teachers currently develop their classes in public schools since in most cases, educators limit themselves to teaching the linguistic aspect of the language (grammar and vocabulary), leaving aside the relevance of integrating the four skills in class development. Therefore, teachers can rethink the way they approach grammar within the classroom, as this project demonstrated that teaching grammar inductively had a positive impact on students' language learning and their oral production in English.

Finally, I believe TBL is an approach that can be used to contextualized students' needs and learning styles to their learning process, as well as it can generate a positive environment that provides learners with real communication tasks to use the language. Therefore, further research is needed on the issues in relation to the four skills to explore to what extent the TBL approach can enhance students' writing and reading skills in English in different contexts.

### **Reflection**

This time of teaching practice and research has been meaningful for me as it has finally brought me closer to better understanding what teaching and a research process really are. In fact, I think that theory is very different from reality, books may provide us with strategies, tools, perspectives, and even wonderful materials to teach the language, but each institution and each student is a world that leave to our implementations many factors that can help or hinder the classes that perhaps we did not foresee. I have no doubt that every day brings new opportunities and challenges for teachers at school.

Regarding my teaching practicum, I am grateful to have the opportunity to help students gain meaningful knowledge through lessons that will allow them to question their lives and, as a result, begin to develop their critical awareness of the world around them. Another remarkable aspect of this teaching experience was to witness reciprocal expressions of kindness, respect,

empathy, and patience among the students. As professionals who believe in education as a way of social change, I think we should reinforce these values, especially when working with young learners, since this will help students grow up as good people before anything else. Moreover, my teaching experience was a roller coaster, as every week I have gone from satisfaction to disappointment due to the complex task of designing classes that did not go as I expected due to external or student factors. However, I have also noticed that letting the student be part of the teaching-learning process has benefits for all the agents involved, therefore, it necessary to always keep in mind the linguistic needs, learning styles and interests of the students when designing classes.

In terms of research, it has been difficult to balance the teaching process with designing and implementing data collection tools at school due to lack of time. Although I have developed very good aptitudes as a researcher in the university courses and in the research group of which I have been a member for two years, I think that the time proposed to develop and report the results of the action research is very limited. Ultimately, I believe that as teachers, action research is necessary because it allows us to explore possible solutions to the phenomena that arise in our classrooms to create positive environments that motivate students to learn.



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