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Improvement of English Oral Skills Through the Use of Planned, Rehearsed and Interactive Activities.

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Abstract

The following paper presents the development of an action research project carried out in a

public school in Medellín, Colombia, which aimed to help improve the English oral skills of a

group of tenth grade students through the use of planned, rehearsed and interactive activities. To

carry out this research, the data collection instruments were journals, field notes and surveys.

The findings of this study suggest that the implementation of these activities increase students'

interest in the class and their confidence in using English orally, which is a first step towards

improving oral skills.

Keywords: English oral skills, planning, rehearsing, interactive, activities

Título en español: Mejoramiento de las Habilidades Orales en Inglés Mediante el Uso de

Actividades Planificadas, Ensayadas e Interactivas.

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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

In the course of my academic practicum and the requirements for my bachelor's degree, I have had the opportunity to work as an English pre-service teacher with a group of tenth graders in a public school in Medellín, Colombia. During the first period of my academic practicum, I was able to make observations of the English classes taught by the cooperating teacher in charge, so I could identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of this group of students in terms of learning English.

The observations made allowed me to identify that one of the most notable weaknesses in the group was the difficulty to express themselves orally in English, as well as the reliance on written activities and the use of digital translators. In this way and having my future interventions to the class in mind, I knew that the group needed a little more practice and help with their English speaking and oral skills.

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Description of the Context

Institución Educativa Federico Ozanam is a public school located in the Buenos Aires neighborhood in Medellín, Colombia. It was founded in 1946 by the Lasallian Brothers in memory of Federico Ozanam who was a literary scholar, professor, journalist and lawyer (Institución Educativa Federico Ozanam, n.d.). The school is easily accessible as it is surrounded by main roads of the area, it is near to the tramway and it is located in a central area between nearby neighborhoods such as Buenos Aires, El Salvador, La Milagrosa and downtown.

According to its mission, Institución Educativa Federico Ozanam offers educational services fostering comprehensive education developing knowledge, know-how, the being and knowing how to coexist with others and with the environment, engaging human rights, the use of information and communications technology (ICT) and environmental conservation (Institución Educativa Federico Ozanam, n.d.). The school currently offers pre-school, basic primary, secondary and technical secondary education in 3 different school hours. Regarding its vision, by 2025 the institution seeks to be a leading organization in the community whose comprehensive education prepares enterprising and global citizens who develop processes that contribute to their social future forecast and respond to the requirements of a changing world (Institución Educativa Federico Ozanam, n.d.).

This study is conducted in a tenth grade group composed of 42 students between 15 to 18 years old in which there are 7 women and 35 men. The group belongs to the technical secondary modality in programming and must have 2 English classes a week, each class lasting 2 hours for a total of 4 hours of English class per week. The level and proficiency in English is varied in the group, some students demonstrate good language proficiency, others express they do not understand the language at all while some others demonstrate an intermediate performance. Most

students in the group show timidity and distrust of using English, while those who perform better in the language show more confidence. However, most of the group shows interest in learning the language and improving their performance.

The cooperating teacher (CT) is in charge of the English classes for tenth grade and some ninth grade groups. She is Bachelor of Basic Education with emphasis on English and has a master's degree in education. The teacher has 9 years of experience teaching English in various grades in public schools and has been at Institución Educativa Federico Ozanam for 9 months. The CT always tries to carry out each lesson with activities or games as she expresses that it is important to engage students with activities that catch their attention, taking into account real situations of their context, taking advantage of ICTs and promoting exposure to the English language as much as students' proficiency level allows it.

As for the classroom, it is large enough for all students, has individual school desks for each student arranged in lines and it is equipped with a laptop and a television to project different audiovisual material.

Regarding strengths and weaknesses with regard to English teaching in this context, it is helpful the equipment of the classroom and the fact that most of the students have their own phones and mobile devices that can be useful tools. In addition, most of the group shows willingness to attend the class. However, the variety of English performance levels in the group can be challenging, given that some students have great difficulty following the level of the lessons and activities of the course.

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Statement of the Problem

Taking into account the context described above, for four months observations were made of the English classes of a tenth grade group in a public school in Medellín, Colombia. These observations made it possible to identify the characteristics and dynamics of the class, as well as weaknesses and strengths of the course, since they were non-participatory observations allowing the study of the natural development of the classes.

Among the characteristics found in the course there is the large number of students that make up the group, which is one of the most important challenges for the development of the course, since the large number of students requires classes to be planned in a more standardized way and to maximize the use of class time. In addition, the fact that students have great differences in their performance in English adds difficulty to the progress of the course, since in the development of activities is noticeable the difference between students who have a very good proficiency from those who have difficulties with the language. As for the strengths and difficulties of the students, it was found that in general they have good disposition towards the English class. However, they showed preference for written tasks and difficulty in oral production in English, in addition to relying on the use of digital translators and artificial intelligences.

This last aspect has been the most relevant, since it represents a great weakness in the language learning process and a gap in the level of performance in the language, considering that these students are in tenth grade. Additionally, given that the group belongs to the technical modality in programming, students are asked to create a project that seeks to solve a real problem through the use of software and eventually they must present their projects publicly in

both Spanish and English. In this way, the production and oral expression in English is not only notoriously important for the development of their academic activities, but also for an eventual effective communication in English, both inside and outside the school.

Considering this context and the particular characteristics of the group, it becomes evident the need to strengthen the oral expression in English of the students. In this sense, the purpose of improving the group's oral skills in English has emerged, while at the same time favoring interaction in order to move from reliance on written and prepared activities to a more interactive and spontaneous communication.

Theoretical Background

In the context under study, most students tend to rely on written activities in English class, demonstrating dependence on digital tools (such as translators or artificial intelligences) for the resolution of activities and difficulty in expressing themselves orally in English. For this reason, it is important to motivate students to take an active attitude in class so that they can interact and communicate in English meaningfully and productively according to their abilities.

In this regard, given that this study aims to improve oral skills, according to Liu (2006) "oral proficiency means the ability to adequately express oneself in spoken English". In the same vein, Byrne stated that the primary goal in teaching productive speaking skills is oral fluency (expressing oneself intelligibly and reasonably) and that the way to achieve this goal is for students to move from imitating and responding to instructions to using the language to express their own ideas (as cited in Urrutia and Vega, 2010).

Additionally, Gordillo (2011) explained that oral communication can be divided into two supplementary skills that are usually produced during the communication between a speaker and a listener: listening (receptive skill) and speaking (productive skill). When talking about oral communication, it could be difficult for students to communicate orally in English in a natural interaction "since the utterances cannot be prepared in advance in a conversation a rather rapid usage of the language is required of the participants" (Törnqvist, 2008).

To ensure student participation, English classes in this context usually involve activities such as monologues or roleplays in which students can plan and rehearse their presentation before taking it into action. In this respect, Lavolette (2013) expresses that strategic planning improves fluency and complexity in pedagogic speaking tasks according to several studies. As for rehearsing, according to Gill (2013) rehearsals can help language learners to feel less self-conscious, increase their linguistic competence, internalize structures, improve pronunciation and articulation, overcome short-term memory constraints, commit learning to long-term memory and improve their oral output in general. Although Gill's (2013) proposals regarding rehearsals are focused on drama activities, such findings could be extrapolated to role plays, monologues, among other activities that require students' staging and oral production.

However, as mentioned above, in the development of oral skills it is also important that students not only respond to instructions but also use the language to express themselves, this is the reason why it is important to promote interaction in the English classroom. Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of face-to-face interaction in second language learning, especially the Interaction Hypothesis proposed by Michael Long, in which the interaction between a non-native and a native speaker or between non-native speakers favors the negotiation of meaning and fosters an appropriate environment for second language acquisition (as cited in

Macias, 2017). During oral interaction, participants listen, predict and prepare a response and speak simultaneously, this is why interaction involves more than learning to understand and produce oral expressions (Romero and Martin, 2014).

Research Question

How can the implementation of planned, rehearsed and interactive activities help a group of 10th graders at a public institution of Medellin, Colombia improve their oral skills in English?

Objectives

General Objective

To improve the oral language skills in English through the use of planned, rehearsed and interactive activities.

Specific Objectives

- To implement different planned, rehearsed and interactive oral activities.

- To analyze the students' responses towards the implementation of planned, rehearsed and interactive activities.

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Action Plan

For the development of this study, the activities of this research will be carried out during 4 months corresponding to the second semester of 2023 (August to November). To achieve the proposed objectives, the activities to be developed will be planned so that the participating students can gradually move from planned and rehearsed activities to interactive activities that require immediate responses.

Taking into account that the activities of this research should be carried out together with the topics set out in the school curriculum, during the first four weeks an interest survey will be applied to know the preferences of students and a presentation of a monologue will be prepared in which students will be able to develop their oral skills in English through an activity that can be rehearsed. During the second part of the project there will be reading comprehension practice activities and some interactive activities such as Jigsaw and Jeopardy to promote the interaction and participation of students so that they can gain confidence to express themselves in English and prepare for some more complex activities. Finally, during the last four weeks of intervention, an introduction to debates will be made and students will prepare to have a debate on a topic of interest, in which they will have to argue different positions and express their opinions. In addition, there will be a final survey in which students will be able to express their opinions regarding the activities made and their perception about their own learning process throughout the project. (See Appendix A)

To collect the data and outcomes of the activities to be carried out, a journal, surveys and the notes resulting from each class will be used and analyzed.

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Development of Actions

Although the activities of the action plan were initially planned to be carried out during 12 weeks, which would mean a total of 24 class sessions of 2 hours, the development time of the activities was considerably reduced due to different institutional and external situations that prevented the realization of the total number of classes planned. However, it was possible to implement some activities and strategies that respond to the main stages of the action plan, so that it was possible to collect data and outcomes for its analysis. In addition, during the classes that were intended to study the topics established in the school curriculum, exercises that allowed the practice of oral expression in English were also implemented.

The activities that could be done were designed taking into account the interests of the students according to what they expressed in the interest survey (see Appendix B) and with the objective of promoting the interaction and oral production of the students. In this regard, the activities that were carried out and that respond to the objectives of this research were a presentation of a monologue and a discussion about a topic of interest. In addition to these two main activities, practice exercises on different grammatical topics were presented during the course, designed to promote students' oral expression and production, thus favoring their familiarization with the language and their speaking skills.

During the first weeks, the monologue aimed to allow students to talk about a topic of their choice that was meaningful to them, as well as to allow them to practice and rehearse their presentations well before making the official presentation. In this way, it was sought that students strengthen their confidence to express themselves orally in English, this being the first step to later move towards more interactive activities that require immediate responses.

After the first half of the semester and towards the end of the estimated time for this study, efforts were put into developing the ability of students to respond immediately orally in English to make the transition from rehearsed activities to interactive activities. To this extent and due to time constraints, instead of a complete debate, a brief discussion was prepared and carried out on the effects of the widespread use of mobile phones and social media, in which students should give their opinion on the subject in addition to arguing and counterarguing different positions on the topic.

In general, although the several external circumstances did not allow the realization of all the planned activities, it was possible to develop different activities and strategies that allowed collecting enough data for this study. Furthermore, the most important stages of this project could be implemented, achieving a transition from planned and rehearsed activities to interactive activities.

Data Analysis

Considering the triangulation gathers different strategies to study the same phenomenon (Benavides and Gómez-Restrepo, 2005), in order to answer the research question, the information collected through the data collection instruments determined in the action plan will be analyzed and triangulated: journals, surveys and field notes resulting from each class and intervention.

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Findings and Interpretations

The information collected shows that the use of planned, rehearsed and interactive oral activities in English can produce confidence in students of English as a foreign language in the approach to the language and the oral expression in it. In addition, the confidence generated by the planned and rehearsed activities serves as a first step towards spontaneous oral expression, which can be beneficial for the development of interactive activities in which immediate responses are expected from students, so that confidence allows them to express and produce orally more easily.

Below are in detail each of the different categories and findings resulting from the analysis of the data collected:

Students' motivation and confidence

During the first weeks of class, students showed rejection when asked to speak in English (Field notes, February 17th, 2023; Journal entry 2, March 7th, 2023) and instead preferred to respond in Spanish (their native language) or not to respond. Additionally, students used only their native language to communicate with each other during group activities (Field notes, March 4th, April 17th, April 21st, May 5th, 2023). Likewise, learners showed dependence on written activities and their mobile phones, so that they could use translators on their phones and thus write the answers they would later read when asked (Field notes, April 17th, April 21st, May 16th, 2023). In the same vein, during classes, it was common for few students to participate voluntarily and those who used to participate were always the same, in addition to being those learners who demonstrated good performance in the language (Field notes, April 11th, May 2nd, 2023; Journal entry 3, August 18th, 2023; Journal entry 4, September 26th, 2023). However, most students

tended to participate during practical activities if asked, even those students who did not usually participate voluntarily.

Nevertheless, students began to show interest and confidence in language learning and classroom tasks if activities required interaction with their classmates (Field notes, March 14th, May 5th, May 16th, 2023; Journal entry 3, August 18th, 2023). Despite relying on written activities in the beginning, they showed a preference for activities in which they were asked to work with their peers or activities that were entertaining for them in a certain way such as 'Find someone who' (Field notes, Field notes, March 14th, 2023; Journal entry 3, August 18th, 2023). In addition, students were interested when classroom activities were related to topics significant to them or they were familiar with, for example the presentation of a monologue in which they had to talk about a subject of their preference and choice (Field notes, September 29th, 2023; Journal entry 4, September 26th, 2023).

Planned and rehearsed speaking activities

Considering that many of the learners initially refused to speak English spontaneously, it became clear that they preferred to have enough time to think about their answers in English or to use translators on their phones so that they could write them and then read them or say them by heart (Field notes, February 17th, April 21st, May 5th, May 16th, 2023), these conditions showed a path that could be used to build confidence in students and that they could gradually become familiar with speaking in English. For instance, the group seemed to have more confidence during the preparation of a hypothetical conversation, in which they were able to work in small groups and had enough time to write the script for their conversation and practice

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before making their participation in front of the whole group (Field notes, May 5th, May 16th, 2023).

In addition to the confidence and motivation that can be generated by an activity that is related to a meaningful topic of interest to the students, a speaking activity that includes these topics and that can be planned and practiced can be beneficial in the search for a strengthening and approach to oral expression in English, especially for those learners who are apprehensive, shy or embarrassed to express themselves orally in the language. In this sense, the tenth grade group in which this study was carried out was asked to make a monologue in which each student could freely choose according to their preferences the topic they would talk about in their presentation and were given a moderate amount of time (4 hours of class divided into 4 class sessions) to plan, prepare and rehearse their monologue before presenting it. Although during the preparation hours some learners were enthusiastic about the activity, the group seemed shy when it came to making the presentations and it was necessary to encourage them with some insistence to start their monologues, however, the students gained confidence as the presentations were made. In the end this activity brought positive results and progress in the students' ability to express themselves orally in English, since most of the group was able to make their presentation satisfactorily and without relying entirely on their written notes, including the participation of most of the learners who usually did not participate deliberately in class (Field notes, September 29th, 2023; Journal entry 4, September 26th, 2023).

Given these outcomes, it could be said that planned and rehearsed activities along with the need to arouse interest and motivation in students, are some of the first steps that can allow the progress and improvement of oral skills in English. Even so, after this it becomes necessary

to put efforts in activities a little more interactive and that require immediate responses, so that

the learners not only improve their expression but also their oral production.

Interactive speaking activities

As mentioned in the previous categories, following the same line of generating interest

and motivation, group activities or activities that involved interaction between learners were

entertaining for them, which increased their participation. In addition, these types of activities

often require immediate responses, which can also be beneficial for the improvement of their

oral skills. However, one of the major efforts had to be focused on having the students use

English to communicate with each other, as they tended to use their native language in such

situations (Field notes, March 4th, April 17th, April 21st, May 5th, 2023). In spite of this, one

way to get learners to use English and to exercise their oral production was by doing activities

that included surprise factors on which their response would depend. For example, a speaking

activity in which two students were given a different flashcard with random questions and each

had to ask their questions and answer those of their partner, so that students' confidence in

participating with their peers and interest in the element of surprise could be generated (Field

notes, March 7th, March 10th, 2023; Journal entry 2, March 7th, 2023).

A game that helped promote language use and interaction among students was an 'Ability

Bingo', which is a 'Find someone who' type activity in which participants had to move around the

classroom looking for classmates who were able to do some action to complete their bingo card

(Field notes, March 14th, 2023). Like this game, another activity of the same type that was

positive for the interaction in class and to awaken learners' interests served to practice

conditionals and consisted of giving each student a random flashcard in which there could be a

condition clause or a result clause, so that students would have to find the classmate who had the clause to complete the sentence in question and then go out with their respective partner to explain the conditional sentence they formed (Journal entry 3, August 18th, 2023).

Although some students did not show much involvement or interest in participating in these activities, the vast majority of the group did participate successfully. It is difficult to determine the reasons why some students refused to participate; however, some of the aspects to consider are their mood, the large number of students in the group, their fear or distrust of learning the language, among others. Even so, most students showed acceptance and interest in the activities that involved interaction and some of them expressed their liking and preference for this type of activities (Field notes, March 7th, March 10th, March 14th, 2023; Journal entry 2, March 7th, 2023; Journal entry 3, August 18th, 2023).

In general, we could affirm that the implementation of interactive activities that involve communication between students is productive and engage students, generating confidence in them to express themselves orally in English, in addition to allowing the practice and training of oral production. In other words, we could also say that these types of exercises are a means that helps the transition from reliance on written activities to speaking and immediate response activities.

Improvement of oral skills

Despite the fact that during the first weeks of this study the learners showed difficulty and shyness to express themselves orally in English, with the passing of the classes and the different activities and exercises the students developed confidence to have more participation orally. These advances were not only evident in those students who from the beginning showed

good performance in the language and a tendency to participate in class, but also in those who avoided any participation that implied oral expression (Journal entry 4, September 26th, 2023).

After having carried out planned, rehearsed and interactive activities in which the students had good participation, the objective focused on exercising the learners' oral production skills and their ability to speak in English in spontaneous situations. For this reason, it was decided to have a discussion about a relevant topic for the participants (in this case, the use of mobile phones and social media), in which each of them had to give their opinion on the subject, answer random questions about the topic and had the possibility of arguing in favor or against the opinions of their classmates. The students' response to this exercise was positive, as most participants were able to express their opinions orally and spontaneously according to their level of performance in the language (Journal entry 5, November 7th, 2023). Furthermore, some participants were able to have small conversations between them in which they discussed fluently their different positions on the subject (Field notes, November 10th, 2023).

In general terms and considering these findings, we could state that the implementation of planned, rehearsed and interactive activities is a resource that can be useful to promote oral expression and improve the oral skills of learners of English as a foreign language, especially in a context such as the one in which this study has been carried out. In spite of the challenges that this context represents, such as the large number of students in the group, the different levels of performance in the language of the learners, their attitude during the classes and towards the course, among others, we can say that the implementation of the activities carried out during this project allowed progress and improvement in the oral English skills of the participants.

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Conclusions and Suggestions

This research project aimed to help improve the oral English skills of tenth graders at a public school in Medellín through planned, rehearsed and interactive activities. Due to different situations that arose during the school year, several class sessions were not possible and the time for the development of this project was considerably reduced, even so, the data collected suggest an increase in the learners' interest and confidence to participate orally in class, which represents an advance towards the improvement of the students' oral English skills.

Regarding the context in which this project was carried out, it is important to take into account the following aspects: first, time in this context is unpredictable and can cause changes in the development of the actions; second, the large number of students in the classroom, which makes it difficult to control discipline and the possibility of using different strategies for the needs of each learner; finally, the fact that students are not in class of their own free will but by obligation of the curriculum, as this influences the attitude of students and requires putting efforts to attract their attention to the class. All these factors could influence the realization of this project and its results, as well as being challenging for other teachers and other research in this context.

Finally, it could be suggested for future research to look at what other types of activities or strategies may be useful for improving oral skills in English as a foreign language. Likewise, it is necessary to ensure the availability of more time and the maximization of its use for the development of actions, although this aspect depends mostly on external factors.

Reflection

This research project as part of my teaching practicum and my degree requirement work has been very enriching for me, not only because it was the first time I have been able to practice teaching, but also for having been able to do so in a context of public education which I experienced as a student during my childhood and adolescence. Likewise, it has allowed me to break the ice and some fears I had about the responsibility of teaching.

This work has allowed me to experience being in the shoes of a public school teacher and to know some of its challenges, but also many of its charms. During this project I was able to see from another perspective the teaching and the difficulties that this type of context has, but I have also been able to experience the kindness, gratitude and warmth of the students. I think this has been a good first step to put into practice what I have learned and to focus on what I will continue to study and learn.

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Appendix A

Action Plan

Actions	Month 1				Month 2				Month 3				Month 4			
	Week				Week				Week				Week			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Survey 1	✎															
Introduction to monologues		✎														
Activity: show and tell			✎	✎												
Reading comprehension training					✎											
Activity: jigsaw						✎										
Activity: jeopardy							✎									
Introduction to debates								✎								
Activity: round table									✎	✎						
Activity: listen and reflect											✎					
Survey 2												✎				
Journal	✎	✎	✎	✎	✎	✎	✎	✎	✎	✎	✎	✎				
Research report													✎	✎	✎	✎

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Appendix B

Survey : Encuesta de Intereses

1. Escribe 3 nombres de famosos o celebridades que admiras, tanto nacionales como internacionales:

2. Menciona 5 géneros musicales en el orden de tu preferencia:

3. ¿Cuáles de las redes sociales utilizas frecuentemente?

4. ¿Cuáles de las siguientes temáticas te interesan para debatir? Marca con una X las opciones que prefieras:

Actualidad, moda, personas famosas y celebridades	
Política	
Tecnología e inteligencia artificial	
Conflictos nacionales e internacionales	
Comunidad LGBTIQ+	

Otra ¿Cuál?	

5. Describe con 3 palabras tu experiencia con el aprendizaje del inglés:

6. Además de las clases en el colegio, en tu contexto ¿qué opciones tienes para explorar el inglés u otros idiomas?