



Developing Speaking Skills by Means of Interaction Strategy Training

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Author's Note

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In online courses, in which learner isolation and dropout is more likely to be an issue, interaction is a key component of fostering learning (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). This new virtual modality of teaching makes students need to interact and to be motivated during the entire class time. Although content may have been the main focus on online courses in the past, interaction is now recognized as playing a crucial role in stimulating learning (Bernard et al. 2009)

In the Ecuadorian system, learners do not reach the level expected because of the lack of connection with their background experiences that deters them from interacting accordingly. Making connections with students' background experiences is one of the lowest parameters considered in classes (Naula, 2016). Thus, transfer, the application of prior knowledge to new learning situations (McKeough, 1995), is often seen as a learning goal, and so the extent to which transfer occurs is a measure of learning success.

Interaction ought to be taken into consideration in EFL classes. Walsh (2011) stated that learners access new knowledge, acquire and develop new skills, identify problems, and establish and maintain relationships through language interaction. As a result, teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) requires educators to plan and design activities bearing in mind that students do not have enough opportunities to interact in the target language outside the classroom (Nunan, 2011).

Learners face limitations in communication such as misunderstandings, unsustained interaction, and low vocabulary (Richards, 2008). For this reason, this paper focuses on the interaction strategy. Most of the time learners are reluctant in classes when speaking, so it is impossible for educators to make them develop their oral production. Nunan (1999) suggested that this reluctance may be due to prior learning experiences, lack of motivation, and task difficulty.

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According to a previous research: *Small-group interaction strategy interaction strategy training in college English classroom*, interaction strategies can encourage learners to take an active part in group work activities (Xu & Kou, 2011). Another study conducted in Algeria for the speaking skills improvement determined that interaction is an effective strategy. Kouicem (2009) demonstrated that during regular interactions in the classroom, learners can reduce their speaking mistakes, produce new grammatical forms and words, thus strengthening their language ability. This was confirmed by the results obtained from the analysis of data gathered from the third LMD students of the new system in the Algerian university.

To sum up, students in general, as Nunan mentioned, present speaking skills pitfalls regarding the lack of prior knowledge, lack of motivation, and owing to task difficulty. For this reason, this study was focused on interaction strategy to finely hone their speaking skills in group discussion.

Literature Review

The concepts and theory found in this section are related to how to manage the issue of group discussion with the lack of strategies such as interaction. Additionally, this section provides the reason for including terms such as comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency.

Group communication implies interaction of three or more individuals to accomplish a certain task (Rothwell, 2013). Group discussion means to work together as a team to settle or achieve a particular goal. Small group interaction has a facilitative effect on second language (L2) acquisition, which is supported theoretically and empirically by research findings in both cognitive (Ellis, 2008) and sociocultural traditions (Lantolf, 2000). Hence, classrooms should be a space where participants should not only collaborate but also cooperate. Johnson and Johnson (1999) asserted that cooperative learning involves students

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working together to accomplish shared goals, and it is this sense of interdependence that motivates group members to help and support each other.

Educators evidence that students are in need of participation and activation during group discussion. Bejarano et al. (1997), in their study on the effectiveness of strategy training, contend that the negotiation process in a group discussion can be facilitated by training students in the use of interaction strategies. When using suitable strategies there is a quality of participation and students are more active.

A real interaction is about combining comments, standpoints, agreements or disagreements performed without giving the rest of the participants the chance to speak when they see the opportunity. To reach this aim, it is needed an environment of motivation first. Willis (1996) stated that creating a low stress atmosphere and using the language for real purposes are strategies to get meaningful communication. Classrooms should not be a stressful place for students, it should be a place of motivation instead.

A primary pedagogical objective of a language course should be to maximize opportunities for students to interact in the target language in their classes (Van Lier, 1996). It is known, however, in many cases that this opportunity is not given in classrooms. Most of the time students neglect this practice or they deem interaction is just to work mechanical activities in groups.

Comprehension

According to Hamouda (2013), listening comprehension refers to the understanding of what the listener has heard and it is her/his ability to repeat the text in spite of the fact that the listener may repeat the sounds without real comprehension. Comprehension is the construction of meaning through cues from contextual information and existing knowledge. When the listener misunderstands the information is not comprehension.

Vocabulary

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To be able to communicate effectively as well as to accomplish their potential, learners call for extensive vocabulary. Provided that pupils have sufficient vocabulary, they will be able to express their ideas, feelings and thoughts. Vocabulary is a set of lexemes including single words, compound words and idioms (Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

Grammar

Grammar is essential to reach the accurate meaning of the sentences both in writing or speaking. The communicator will mean according to the arrangement of the sentences when communicating. Greenbaum and Nelson (2002) argued that Grammar refers to the set of rules that allow us to combine words into larger units. When producing a correct grammatical structure, the communicator avoids being misunderstood by the receiver.

Pronunciation

Pronunciation is the way students produce the words when they speak (Kline, 2001). Pronunciation is the clear language that the speaker has during the conversation. It does not only rely on giving off the sounds of words impeccably but also how to manage intonation, gestures, and articulation.

Fluency

Bailey (2003) defined fluency as using language quickly and confidently, with limited hesitation, and natural pauses. Fluency is the ability to speak easily without interruption. When a speaker is fluent in speaking, he knows what to say next and how to say, avoiding pauses to think. Fluency and accuracy allow learners to express themselves freely without any particular problem.

Taking into consideration the struggles that learners tackle when speaking, this section describes the benefits of implementing interaction strategy training in speaking skills. Therefore, enhancing the performance of the learners in group discussion by means of interaction strategy, the following research questions are proposed:

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-To what extent does interaction strategy enhance the fluency of the students in their oral production?

-What are students' perspectives when using interaction strategy so as to develop speaking skills?

Innovation

Regarding the management for the study objectives, the development of group discussion follows a structure. This structure is based on interaction to boost motivation and collaboration as the foremost components for speaking skills in group discussion in eighth graders. This innovation will start at the end of the school year. There will be eight students as participants for this study. Based on Bejarano's et al.(1997) list of interaction strategies, the researchers came up with two basic interaction strategies which they felt the students needed most in group discussions. The selected strategies were:

- 1 Expressing agreement and disagreement
- 2 Directing interaction within the group

The researcher built up a lesson plan of 4 hours in 6 weeks under the method of backward design (Appendix A) for the implementation of the study. This innovation includes a pre-test (Appendix B) and post-test (Appendix C). The process starts with the pretest to collect data about their current knowledge. At the end of this process, the posttest was taken to verify whether the students improve or not. Additionally, a pre-survey and post-survey (Appendix D) will be applied to determine if this innovation meets the goals according to students' perspectives.

Two research questions will be answered:

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Methods

Design

The present study is based on an action research using qualitative and quantitative instruments to explore students' interaction during class group discussion activities. This section comprises information about the participants and instruments. Action research is an approach for investigating questions and finding solutions to problems that people confront in their everyday lives (Moen & Solvberg, 2012).

Participants

A sample of seven participants will be recruited to participate in this study. The participants were six boys and one girl of the eighth grade. Their ages ranged from 11 - 12 years old, and according to results, B1 English Proficiency level conforming to the Common European Framework (CEFR). In order to carry out this study it was necessary to send a letter to the students' parents asking for permission. Only those without special needs will be included in the sample. Participants with curricular adaptations will be excluded.

Instruments

Before starting with the process, the students had to take a Diagnostic Test. This test was adapted from the Education First Test online to check their real English level. The results indicated that the students had a B1 English level.

For the first question: To what extent does interaction strategy enhance the fluency of the students in their oral production? the instrument that the researcher utilized was a pre-test (Appendix B). This instrument measured the elements of: interaction, collaboration and vocabulary. The learners, in pairs, took a pretest about explaining, supporting, organizing,

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and refuting a standpoint in which they had to discuss the impact of current influencers in the society.

The pre-test comprised three sections. In the first section, the pupils had to introduce themselves, in addition, they were inquired about the topic to pinpoint awareness of it. In the second section, the students prepared their arguments by fitting them into the interaction strategy. In the third section, the students had to discuss with their peers about the advantages and disadvantages or agreements or disagreements to settle as a group.

The students had to take the post-test (Appendix C). The patterns for the post-test were the same as the pre-test with a different topic. The students had to discuss the virtual classes which learners had to go through due to the coronavirus pandemic. This last test was to determine improvements on student performance. Both tests were graded under the function of a rubric which measures comprehension, vocabulary, interaction, fluency, and achievements of the participants. Being contingent on participants' performance, they could achieve the scales from the *exceptional* (2 points) to *unacceptable* (0 points).

For the second question: What are students' perspective when using interaction strategy so as to develop speaking skills? the instrument that the teacher employed was a survey (Appendix D) which included thirteen statements with five distinct ranges as options. They measured students' behavior, development, interest, and achievements in the time of discussion while interacting. There were 5 items.

The researcher utilized a Likert survey (Appendix D). The scales were: Totally Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Totally Disagree. The participants had to answer by marking an X conforming to their perspectives. Some of the statements were: I feel motivated while applying interaction strategy, I see motivation in my classmates while applying interaction strategy, I feel my performance was successful during group discussion, I see fluidity in my speech, I achieve: explaining, supporting, organizing, and refuting without any problem.

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Data Analysis

Data from the tests and surveys were used for analysis. First, the data was entered in a Google Spreadsheet. Then it was processed in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to obtain descriptive statistics such as minimum, maximum, and mean. This information was used to determine if the interaction strategy had a positive impact to enhance the speaking skills. Also, the researcher examined the surveys to meet the students' perspectives about how effective the interaction strategy is.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher received a letter (Appendix E) from the parents of the students for approval and authorization to begin and carry this study through. Also, there was the necessity that this study was approved by the Director of the school through a document. In both cases, the researcher acknowledges it to be a judicious study of all confidence.

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Appendix (A)

Available upon request.

Appendix (B)

Pre-test

Available upon request.

Post-test

Available upon request.

Appendix (C)

Pretest and Posttest Rubric

Available upon request.

Appendix (D)

Pre and Post Survey

Available upon request.