Improving Speaking Fluency through Authentic Content with the Aid of Video Blogs.

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Presented as Partial Fulfillment for the Degree of Magíster en Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros con Mención en la Enseñanza de Inglés. CES: RPC-SE-19-N˚.140-2020. Cohort 2018 – 2020. Guayaquil, August 24th, 2021.

Improving Speaking Fluency Through Real Content with Aid of Video Blogs.

English has become the international language in a globalized world. People have different motivations to learn it. Its importance in communication, commerce and media is increasing. The growing interest for English learning around the world is then reasonable and because of this, quality language teaching, strategies and resources are in high demand (Richards, 2002).

Since successful language acquisition is usually measured by how well an individual carries a conversation in the target language (Brown, 2002), learners are interested in improving their English to reach a high level of both fluency and accuracy (Richards, 2006). Nevertheless, according to Zhang, of the four skills, it is speaking that students find the most difficult to master (as cited in Al Hosni, 2014).

English language instruction has become compulsory in Ecuador since 2016, and the curriculum design itself is based on the levels and standards of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR; Ministerio de Educación, 2016). The expectation is that students will achieve a B1 level at the end of their Baccalaureate, which means that to start university they should be able to "enter unprepared into conversations on familiar topics" in English. Nevertheless, the result of a proficiency test taken at a public university revealed that 80 % of the participants were A2 or less (Neira, 2020). Although this is just an example, it shows why in a report from an English proficient index, Ecuador was placed 93 out of 100 countries and in the last position among Latin American countries analyzed according to the level of competence in the language. If we take into consideration that the two previous years the country ended up 81 and 65 respectively (Education First, 2020), the necessity of finding and applying new strategies that can better guide instruction becomes evident.

Even though language learning institutions see the development of communicative skills as essential, in practice their teachers focus mostly on receptive tasks (Acosta & Cajas, 2018). This and the fact that interaction is constricted to classrooms alone and limited to teacher and classmates, it is clear why Acosta and Cajas (2018) believed that the "functionality of language use" is useless and designing a variety of learning environments becomes necessary. Nevertheless, it is classroom-based learning that most curriculum designs are focused on, when looking for opportunities for authentic communication due to practical and logistical purposes. But, according to Richards, out-of-class activities provide students with opportunities to extend their contact with L2, improve accuracy and fluency, and develop skills to become autonomous learners. They also offer flexibility and convenience, so students can choose where, how and when they learn; a pleasurable and positive experience and an opportunity to reflect on their own needs and interests, among other benefits (2015).

Affective factors such as: emotion, self-esteem, attitude and motivation, have a great influence in the success or failure of the language learning process as well. EFL learners often experience extreme anxiety when speaking in public, finding it difficult to come up with the words they need in any specific situation. This makes them feel discouraged and with a "general sense of failure"(Shumin, 2002). This is especially true in those who are in the lower levels of proficiency.

In Ecuador, a research conducted with 138 participants in the province of Los Rios, indicates that students' oral interactions are also hindered by negative emotions such as: shyness, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence and anxiety (Santos et al., 2020). On top of that, due to the fact that real communication happens "spontaneously and in real time," the pressure added by the little time allotted to organize and deliver

their message makes it more difficult for students to practice speaking (Thornbury, 2006 as cited in Santos et al., 2020).

It is noticing what "lays out the problem" and enables students to apply different strategies so they can find a solution to it (Guichon & Cohen, 2012). Noticing can occur during the performance of a task when a learner becomes aware of the gap between what they need or want to produce and what they can actually do (Schmidt, 2001, as cited in Guichon & Cohen, 2012). Guichon and Cohen suggested that recording videos of L2 learners oral production offer them a way and enough time to perform noticing operations.

The present work is a proposal of an innovation, aimed to develop EFL learners' speaking fluency through real content created by students with the aid of an information and communication technology tool, in this case video blogs or Vlogs. The study will take place in a private language academy in Guayaquil. Even though this institution is well known for its high standards in grammatical competence, students still struggle with oral production even at the point of graduation. The innovation is directed to students of A2 level whom, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), "can give a short, rehearsed presentation on a topic pertinent to his/her everyday life, briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions, plans and actions" (Council of Europe, 2018, p.74). The sample size will be 10 young adult students of medium socio-economic class.

Using vlogs increases students' motivation and confidence, lowers their affective filter and gives them more time to plan and organize their ideas without the pressure of a live audience (Anil, 2016; Sari, 2017). The same conclusion was reached in a study conducted at an Ecuadorian university, where they found other benefits such

as: an increase in vocabulary, development of self-regulated strategies and students' awareness of the progress in their speaking fluency (Soto et al., 2017).

Sun (2012) pointed out that, even though learners perceive an improvement in their oral performance when working with vlogs, in reality no significant gain was achieved in relation to pronunciation, fluency or accuracy. He admitted the possibility that the short duration of the innovation could have influenced the results in the research. These findings differ with Abkary (2018) which showed that there are actual benefits in the learners' oral performance in general after using vlogs to create their own material and students' speaking fluency in particular tends to improve also.

Although numerous studies have analyzed the benefits of digital video recording in relation to oral production in language learning, most of them are focused on students' perceptions rather than the actual improvement of the speaking skill (Göktürk, 2016). In general, most research of this kind has been conducted on intermediate and advanced levels. In Ecuador no data was found on similar studies that were directed to students with A2 level of proficiency.

Literature Review

Communicative Language Teaching

The way people learn languages has faced many changes. In the early stages the focus was on the development of grammatical competence in students, but with the appearance of the communicative language teaching (CLT), its goal changed to students being able to participate in meaningful communication (Richards, 2006). According to Brown, this can be achieved by paying more attention to language use; focusing on both fluency and accuracy; using authentic language and context; and students being able to apply what they have learned inside the classroom in the real world (2002).

Opportunities for students to connect class content and activities to their own lives and interests is one aspect of CLT that can lead to producing non-predictable language (Richards, 2006). This kind of output will require students to notice the gap between what they can say and what they want to say in the target language. Swain calls this pushed output and it allows learners to "test out hypothesis" about the new language, internalizing and automatizing linguistics aspects of that language (as cited in Gunduz, 2004)

Authenticity in Language Learning

The concept of authenticity is closely related to the communicative language teaching approach where focusing on meaning is more important than focusing on form. Authentic materials contain real speech designed to deliver a real message to a real audience (Castillo et al., 2017). By encouraging students to create their own videos and share their own ideas and preferences with their classmates, they have the opportunity to work with real content. This is important because according to Belaid and Murray (2015), authenticity is what allows students to use the target language in the real world which is vital in language learning.

Speaking Fluency

It is widely accepted that when learning a new language, what most people have in mind is being able to speak that language fluently and accurately. This is, of course, a complex task. According to Leong and Ahmadi (2017), what often occurs in foreign language learning is a situation where students do well in the other skills, but refuse to speak either in classrooms or outside of it. This is what Wolf described as "mute learners learning mute English" (Wolff, 2010, as cited in Dincer at al., 2012). But fluency is not easy to define, actually Wood (2001) affirmed that this is usually done in a vague way and it is mostly related to speed, pauses and hesitations in speech. Lack of

fluency in speech can make conversation tiring and annoying, and as a result people might want to avoid communication with L2 learners. This is problematic, since input is necessary for the improvement of the overall speaking skill (Varonis & Gass, 1982, as cited in Derwing, 2017). Hedge offered a clearer idea of what fluency is when she described it as: "the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or inappropriate slowness or undue hesitation" (2000, p.7)

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is vital in language learning, and even though having an extensive vocabulary repertoire does not assure a high level of fluency, a limited one would hinder communication (Solano, 2014). Research has shown that the size of learners' vocabulary knowledge can predict language proficiency and that the larger it is the more fluent and accurate the oral performance will be (Koizumi & In'nami, 2013).

Schmitt explained that vocabulary acquisition is a cyclical process by which students recognize the gap in their vocabulary knowledge. This would prompt them to look for some learning strategies to solve the problem (2010, as cited in Solano, 2014). Nation and Waring(1997, p.6) described it this way: "Vocabulary knowledge enables language use, language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge"

Information and Communication Technology and Video blogs

Nowadays, the use and availability of Internet and ICT offer many opportunities for students to be exposed to meaningful and authentic language outside the classroom (Richards, 2015). According to Srivastava, "many countries now regard understanding ICT and mastering the basic skills and concepts of ICT as part of the core of education, alongside reading, writing and numeracy" (2016, p. 40). Among other ICT tools, blogs used in education offer students the occasion to create their own content,

increase higher-order thinking skills, promote active learning and present opportunities for scaffolding and feedback (Ferdig & Trammel, 2004).

Blogs are online journals and bloggers have complete control over their content. Most blogs are password protected, offer different levels of privacy and allow comments on each post. People create these blogs for different reasons, among them, to document their lives, to express their feelings and to comment or give their opinions about a specific topic (Nardi et al., 2004). Video blogging or Vlogging is a combination web-based journalism of blogging with videos to which text and images can be added. These are later uploaded and posted on the web (Kurniawan & Susanti, 2019).

Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to understand if A2 English learners can improve their speaking fluency by creating their own content and having a real audience through vlogging. For this reason two questions need to be answered:

a) To what extent authentic student-created content facilitated by vlogs can help improve speaking fluency in A2 English learners?

b) What are students' perspectives of using vlogs as a way to perform an authentic speaking task?

Innovation

This innovation aims to help students improve their speaking fluency through video blogging. It will offer 10 young adult A2 level English students from a private language academy, the opportunity to practice their speaking skill outside their classroom walls, and in that way extend the time they are in contact with the English language. By having more time to organize their ideas and presentation and without the pressure of the teacher's presence, their level of anxiety would be lower. This is

especially important for beginners and low intermediate learners, as A2 level students are, because as we have seen, affective factors can demotivate them.

The participants of the study will be given the task of playing the role of well-known influencers that attract many followers. Video blogging presentation would be done in a private setting to be only shared with classmates and the teacher for security reasons. They will open an account on YouTube and with the guidance of the instructor create a private channel where only the teacher and classmates can have access through a link sent to them.

Students will be given a topic and review related vocabulary in class. They will plan and create a video giving their opinions about it and later upload their recorded videos on the Youtube channel. Study participants will send a link to share their presentations with their classmates and teacher, so they can comment on each other's videos with short posts, becoming a real audience offering real opinions about real content. There will be four videos working alone and one in pairs, in which they will be talking about common events in their lives and exchanging opinions. After watching them in the classroom, students will be able to comment and give feedback to their classmates according to a rubric. This will offer them further authentic in-class speaking participation.

By having the opportunity to talk about their own lives and interests, students will be able to produce non-predictable information, not only making the communication meaningful, but an experience they can later use in the real world. In the process of trying to improve their fluency to make a good online presentation, students will be able to reflect on what aspects of the language they need to work on by noticing the gap between what they can say and what they want to say, making them more responsible of their own learning and in that way become also more autonomous.

The idea of using video blogging as a way for students to improve their speaking skills is based on a program studied by Wai King Tsang and Matilda Wong in Hong Kong were they used conversation starters to trigger realistic communication and videotaped students' conversations in the absence of a teacher to maximize learner participation (2002). Though the innovation is not exactly the same, it incorporates important elements like the use of video, teacher absence and learner autonomy.

Methodology

This study will be an action research, which Bradbury affirmed connects practice and theory while looking for "practical solutions to issues of pressing concern" (as cited in Bradbury et al., 2019, p. 11), making it appropriate for this investigation. Information will be gathered from both quantitative and qualitative data, which will help improve reliability.

Participants

The participants will be 10 young adult students from a private English academy who take classes in the evening in Guayaquil. Their English proficiency will be A2 according to the CEFR. The institution will choose the students that will participate in the study. Classes last two hours of 55 min on Tuesdays and Thursdays for 14 weeks.

A convenience sampling method will be used to gather information. This kind of data collection is used when the participants are easily accessible (Etikan et al., 2016), and in this case it is the language academy that will choose the classes.

Instruments

In order to determine to what extent authentic student-created content mediated by blogs can help improve speaking fluency in A2 English learners, students will take a pre and post-test from the oral part of the A2 IELTS life skills. After that, a Paired t-test will be applied to the results and their means compared at the end. Paired t –tests are

used when, like in this case, there is a need to examine the means of a single group at two different moments in time (Ross & Willson, 2017). In other words, it helps to test the same sample (person or thing) before and after a specific action is taken, which in this case will be the application of the innovation. The test takers will use a rubric to ensure attention is paid to what needs to be assessed.

To answer the second question: What are students' perspectives of using vlogs as a way to perform an authentic speaking task? A survey will be conducted among the participants of the study. It will include 10 close-ended questions adapted from a study made about explaining content through videos in Ecuador (Soto et al., 2017). To evaluate the results, a descriptive statistical analysis of the Likert scale questions will be applied. The survey will be carried out at the end of the study.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity of the research and to avoid bias an international exam will be used to test students' speaking fluency. Other instructors will evaluate the participants with the help of a rubric, which will be reviewed by a teacher with no relation to the researcher.

Ethical Considerations.

Students will be informed of the whole process in the application of the innovation and any questions will be answered before requesting their written consent. Personal information will be kept private, and to ensure anonymity, research participants will be given a code number. Instructors, who do not take part in the study, will be in charge of the testing and grading in order to avoid bias.

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Appendix 1

Design from Your Goals

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

Pretest

Available upon request

Appendix 3

Speaking Fluency Rubric

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

Survey: Students' Perspectives on using vlogs to post their own created content to improve speaking fluency

Available upon request.