Group Work to Increase Oral Participation in High School Students

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Proposal

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In a globalized society, proficiency in the English language has become a crucial aspect for the future of young learners worldwide (John, 2020). The results displayed in the English Proficiency Index (Education First, 2020) conclude that Ecuador is the least proficient country in spoken English in the Latin American region. While working at a private institution from this nation during the 2019-2020 school year, one particular issue was identified: students were able to understand English, but they did not want to speak it during class. There is a particular line of thinking which suggests that psychological factors may be at play in this situation (Newkirk, 2017); embarrassment of mispronouncing words and fear of being made fun of by classmates, for example.

Internationally, research conducted by authors such as Harmer (2007) and Hess (2001) suggests that group work (GW) has shown to have positive results when it comes to creating a harmonious learning environment, in which students feel more comfortable when interacting with each other in the L2. In Ecuador, the work of Bustamante (2019) showed promising results when it comes to the benefits of collaborative work amongst students in Writing; could this be applied to Speaking as well? This idea will be tested in the aforementioned local school. A 10-hour lesson plan which relies on GW during English class will be developed. This two-week program will have a strong emphasis on activities that require interaction between the learners, such as: discussions, debates and informal conversations.

This study seeks to obtain conclusive evidence about to what extent developing a GW-based lesson plan is an effective tool to improve the confidence of the learners when speaking in the foreign language. It is worth noting that these results are specific to the particular context and situation of this institution and should not be considered universal.

Literature Review

In this section, various sources about how external factors can influence, both positively and negatively, the learning process of the students will be carefully analyzed. Research from different decades and parts of the world will be taken into consideration with the intention of reaching a conclusion that is as comprehensive as possible.

Fluency is the desired result of this innovation. Richards (2009) defined this term as: "natural language use occurring when a speaker engages in meaningful interaction and maintains comprehensible and ongoing communication despite limitations in his or her communicative competence." It could be said that learners of an L2 have achieved fluency in said language when they are able to hold a conversation with a native speaker with little to no hesitation or nervousness. Fluent L2 speakers are able to get across what they want to communicate, even if the way they pronounce some words or the structure of their ideas is not absolutely correct.

Having stated that, fluency is not everything that someone who wishes to learn how to speak in a foreign tongue must gain. There comes a point in an L2 learner's journey where getting the message across is no longer enough and wants to take the next step: being able to speak the L2 at a native-like level. For this, accuracy must be achieved. The British Council describes this term as: "(accuracy) demonstrates your ability to use the necessary vocabulary and grammar correctly, such as verb forms (past tense, present tense, and so on), articles and prepositions." (n.d.). It becomes apparent that fluency and accuracy complement each other; but which of these two must be emphasized at this stage?

"Fluency is the bedrock of how we are perceived as communicators. And the bottom line for all our students is communication." (Jones, 2020). In L2 learning, fluency is the foundation in which accuracy can be built upon. For younger learners, such as the subjects of

this study, it is imperative that fluency is given an emphasis at this stage. If a language teacher is constantly correcting their students over correct sentence structure or accurate pronunciation of every word, then the student will not start gaining confidence when speaking the L2, and will not start familiarizing themselves with this foreign tongue.

Published authors have shared their views on psychosocial barriers to learning how to speak an L2. Examples of these are making mistakes as a source of embarrassment (Lewis, 2017) and lacking motivation to accomplish a challenging goal (Gardner, 1985). Both of these can cause a particular issue: learners being reluctant or even refusing to speak in the L2 during class, even if they are actually able to understand what is being said to them.

The aforementioned situation could potentially lead to having students who feel "stigmatized" in the classroom (Goffman, 1963); on this particular issue, Crocker et al. asserted that "stigmatized individuals possess some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context." (p. 505). As previously mentioned, some students may develop the feeling that learning to speak in a foreign language is too big of a challenge and that trying to do so is a waste of their time; others may think that their spoken English is not adequate and worry they will be corrected by the teacher, which would then lead to mockery from the rest of the class. Having outlined the issue at hand: what could an educator do to combat this situation?

One promising solution that has emerged in recent years is introducing group work to the curriculum (Alfares, 2017). Developing a plan that puts an emphasis on GW-based work, if implemented correctly, has the potential of creating a more inclusive learning environment, in which students feel like they must collaborate with each other in order to progress. Working together creates a sense within learners that to succeed individually, they need to help the group itself succeed; this mentality is known as positive interdependence (Johnson et

al., 2014). This type of collaboration in the classroom is not only effective when it comes to promoting active learning, but also creates stronger bonds between the students; the goal is to create an environment in which the learners feel like they can make mistakes in front of the teacher and their classmates, as this is an essential aspect to achieve transfer of knowledge. Over the previous decades, many authors have written about the benefits of group work in education based on research conducted; one of these is Harmer (2007), who listed some of these advantages:

*It increases the amount of speaking time of students.

*Promotes learner independence (students learning by interacting among themselves, without the guidance of the teacher).

*Promotes cooperative learning and makes the classroom a more relaxed and friendly environment.

Other authors include Long and Porter (1985) and Hess (2001). The former suggested that: "Motivation is a key factor in group work wherein students perform at a personal level because they feel less inhibited about committing errors, which is a stepping stone to learning." (p. 2). The latter complemented his line of thinking by stating: "students lower their affective domain in small groups and feel more comfortable" (p. 2), which, in turn, leads to practice their spoken fluency by interacting directly with a reduced number of their classmates, rather than in front of the whole class and the teacher. It is important to establish a code of conduct agreed upon by both teachers and students, which sets up rules such as: no one member can dominate interaction within the group, every member should be encouraged to participate and a majority consensus should be reached when working in groups of three or five (2001).

Further research offers useful suggestions when it comes to the effective approach of organizing groups in the classroom. One of these is to form heterogeneous groups. If possible, it is advised that groups feature both male and female members or pairing students that are at different levels of proficiency. This can be explained by the concept of functional diversity (Hong & Page, 2004), which they explained as: "differences in how people encode problems and attempt to solve them." (p. 16385). According to these authors, it is because of functional diversity that "identity-diverse groups can outperform homogeneous groups" (p. 16385), as the former has more diversity of thought and, therefore, more alternative solutions to problems. Finelli et al. (2001) complemented this by stating that other research studies conducted suggest that: "working with others of different abilities offers benefits to students at all levels—the more capable students become more aware of their thinking processes, while the less capable student learns from an advanced peer." (p. 4)

Finally, a good incentive to encourage every member of the group to participate is giving each of them a peer review evaluation form at the end of each activity (Finelli et al., 2001). Each student would have to grade the performance of his/her fellow group members based on criteria that could range from "excellent" to "no participation". This would create a healthy sense of peer pressure that would incentivize every group member to fulfill his/her assigned task, or else be graded poorly by their group mates, which rely on them for the success of the group.

Innovation

The following lesson plan will be implemented during a two-week period of the 2021-2022 academic year. In this institution students have an hour of English class each day of the school week, meaning that this research study will take a total of ten hours. As previously mentioned, the students' age range from 14 to 15-years-old and they have a B1 level

according to the CEFR; the class has twenty learners: twelve females and eight males. The activities have been designed with the specific purpose of encouraging the students to interact and listen to each other while they speak in the L2. The goal of this lesson plan is to make the learners feel more comfortable about using the target language during English class. An added bonus of this approach would be to create stronger bonds between the classmates and foster a feeling of community, which would turn the classroom into a more supportive environment.

The topics selected should be of interest to their demographic, as this would make them feel more engaged in the conversations and excited about sharing their thoughts and opinions. Two broad areas of interest have been chosen for both weeks: technology and the arts/entertainment; this has been done with the purpose of making their learning process both comprehensive and organized.

During the pair/group-based tasks, the teacher should monitor the work of the groups to make sure that every member is participating within the group and speaking in the L2 to each other. Regarding the formation of the groups; task will either be pair-based or in small groups. As a summative assessment task, students will have to work together in groups to develop an oral presentation; every member is expected to contribute to the group in some form and speak for an equal amount of time.

Research Methodology

An action research will be conducted. Clark et al. (2020) defined this term as "an approach to educational research that is commonly used by educational practitioners and professionals to examine, and ultimately improve, their pedagogy and practice." (p. 8).

For this particular study, both qualitative and quantitative data will be collected. The former refers to categorical variables (may be represented by names or symbols), while the latter are about numeric variables (expressed as numbers). The research instruments used will be a pre and post-interview (qualitative) and a pre and post-test (quantitative). The information collected will be a key factor in determining whether or not this lesson plan had the desired results.

Participants

The participants for this study will be twenty high school students from a private institution located in the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador. Their ages range from 14 to 15-years-old, and they have a B1 level (CEFR). These learners come from a high-class background, and they attend an IB institution.

Research Questions

1. Which are the factors that cause a lack of fluency in spoken English in the students?
2. How much did students' speaking improve after a week/two weeks of the study?

Instruments

The instrument that will be used to answer the first research question will be two sets of interviews: one pre-interview and one post-interview; the former will include five questions, while the later six. The purpose of the pre-interview will be to have a better understanding of what the students think about their English class before the study has been implemented; the latter will give the researcher an insight into how they feel about working in pairs/groups, and whether or not they think this dynamic has been useful in order to

improve their fluency. After the data has been collected, each participant will be placed under one of two broad categories: students who lack fluency because of psychological factors (fear of being bullied/made fun of by other classmates, embarrassment caused by getting corrected by the teacher, among others) and students who lack fluency because of linguistic factors (e.g. lack of understanding of the L2).

As for the second question, a pre and post-test will be developed. These tests will have a grade and will serve as a summative assessment and determine the progress made by the participants in a quantifiable way. These spoken tests will be divided into three sections: General Questions, Visual Descriptions and Discussion. CERF standards outlined in the Appendix 3 will be used during the assessment process. Both the interviews and the tests will play a key role in establishing whether or not the GW-based program showed the desired results. All students that have agreed to participate in this research study are expected to take part in both the interviews and the tests (in this case, twenty participants). Students who, for any particular reason, refuse to take either or both, cannot be participants in this research study.

Rubric

A rubric for the pre and post-test, which will be graded over ten points will also be developed. Two broad categories will be considered: fluency and accuracy. As previously mentioned, at this stage of the learning process the former must be emphasized over the later. This is why fluency will be graded over seven points, while accuracy over three for a total of ten points overall.

*Fluency:

- 1-2 points: learner is unable to produce long, continued stretches of speech. Shows hesitation and nervousness when getting across what he/she attempts to communicate. Is mostly unable to maintain an interaction with the teacher.

- 3-5 points: learner is able to produce long, continued stretches of speech with varying degrees of difficulty. Shows some degree of hesitation and nervousness when communicating, but the message is mostly intelligible. Is able to maintain an interaction with the teacher with varying degrees of difficulty.

- 6-7 points: learner is able to produce long, continued stretches of speech with little to no difficulty. Shows little to no hesitation and nervousness when getting across what he/she attempts to communicate. Is mostly able to maintain an interaction with the teacher.

*Accuracy:

-1 point: unintelligible pronunciation, insufficient range of vocabulary used and inadequate control of grammatical forms.

-2 points: mostly intelligible pronunciation, sufficient range of vocabulary used and adequate control of grammatical forms.

-3 points: little to no pro mistakes, wide range of vocabulary and excellent control of grammatical forms.

Ethical Considerations

There are guidelines that need to be taken into account by researchers when conducting a study using children as participants. This section will be focused in two broad areas of ethical consideration: Informed Consent and Privacy and Confidentiality. Regarding

informed consent, the researchers mention that it is imperative that parents/legal guardians consent to the participation of their children in the study, are well-informed about the purpose of the study and The researcher makes sure that the students understand that their participation is optional and they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time (Graham et al., 2013).

When it comes to Privacy and Confidentiality, the researchers mentioned that the privacy of the minors should be protected in different ways. These include:

*Privacy with regard to how much information the child wants to share, and with whom.

*Privacy that allows the exchange of information to be confidential.

*Privacy participants so that they are not identifiable in the publication of findings. (p. 74).

Limitations

The conclusion reached after analyzing the collected data will be limited only to this institution in particular, and should not be assumed that this process would show the same results in other high schools with students within the same age range. Teachers who are facing similar situations in their respective places of work could be encouraged to conduct their own research, as this could be of benefit both to the students and institutions themselves.

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Appendix 1: Pre and Post-Interviews

Available upon request.

Appendix 2: Pre and Post-Tests

Available upon request.

Appendix 3: Lesson Plan

Available upon request.