Promoting Oral Interaction in Large Groups through Task-Based Learning*

Motivación de la interacción oral en grupos grandes a través del aprendizaje basado en tareas

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This research project attempts to show the way a group of five teachers used task-based learning with a group of 50 seventh graders to improve oral interaction. The students belonged to Isabel II School. They took an active part in the implementation of tasks and were asked to answer two questionnaires. Some English classes were observed and recorded; finally, an evaluation was taken by students to test their improvement.

Key words: Task-based learning, oral interaction, large groups, high school English teaching

Este proyecto de investigación trata de mostrar la forma como un grupo de cinco profesoras usaron el método de aprendizaje basado en tareas con un grupo de 50 estudiantes del grado séptimo, con el fin de mejorar la interacción oral. Los estudiantes pertenecían al Colegio Isabel II y fueron parte activa en la implementación de las tareas. Respondieron dos cuestionarios, se les observó y se grabaron en video algunas clases; finalmente, se hizo una evaluación para poner a prueba el avance de los estudiantes.

Palabras claves: Aprendizaje basado en tareas, interacción oral, grupos numerosos, enseñanza del Inglés en secundaria.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main achievements of foreign language teaching is to encourage students to express and interact effectively, exchanging opinions and ideas with others. Given this fact, students should be frequently exposed to opportunities to use the target language. This situation was presented at Isabel II School, where teachers showed a wide variety of contexts in which language was used but students rejected communication and did not take advantage of the opportunities given in class. They presented some reasons to answer this question such as the great amount of pupils per class (50-52), shyness, students' panic of being in front of others and their pronunciation mistakes.

Taking those problems into account, teachers decided to solve them using task-based learning. This methodology gave them two possibilities, namely, to teach the foreign language in a dynamic and creative way and to help students from large groups interact and become interested in the foreign language.

This article intends to show the way some teachers handled task-based learning to encourage a large group of seventh graders to improve their oral interaction. This study was developed along 2004, based on the following research questions:

• Could task-based learning be used to improve oral interaction? And could it be effective?

• How can teachers handle interaction in large groups?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tasks are defined by Nunan (1989) as activities where the foreign language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal), and, consequently, in order to achieve an outcome. This idea shows the importance of the purpose and makes communication to take place easily; for this reason, we should take into account Ariza's suggestions (2003: 27), "students need opportunities to express their ideas, feelings and experiences".

Task-Based Learning

According to Willis (1996), task-based learning helps learners to improve communication by doing different tasks; they are defined as goal–oriented communicative activities with a specific outcome. The task has the following three phases: The pre-task, the task cycle and the language focus. The first one introduces the class to the topic, activating topic related words and phrases. The task cycle offers learners the chance to use whatever language they already know in order to carry out the task and the language focus allows a closer study of some of the specific features used during the task cycle.

Interaction

Several authors have stated different theories to define and help to promote interaction in the classroom. Ibarra (2002: 44) talks about the relationship between interaction and communication. She says: "We use language with the immediate purpose of communicating the way we perceive, give meaning and understand the world. We also use it to build social relationships that allow us to interact with each other. Furthermore, students should develop their communicative competence interacting with others and creating a real atmosphere in the classroom through the development of tasks. Communicative tasks are supposed to allow students to develop communicative competence in the real day-to-day use of the language."

Large Classes

Most EFL teachers in the world reject teaching in large groups due to the large mixture of students, heterogeneous ages and abilities, learning and individual attention difficulties. Teachers think that they can get better pedagogic results in small school groups, but it is not possible in Colombian state schools. Even though government law says that education should be given to everybody, there are many students, but not too many schools. For this reason, we must study other options, techniques to solve this problem and study methodologies to promote language practice. One of them is to use pair or group work.

According to Nolasco & Arthur (1988: 17), "Grouping is one technique that has been used to reduce the negative effects of large classes…" Then he adds, "Pair work and group work have the advantage that learners are working simultaneously and, therefore, not only is language practice time greatly increased, but children are less likely to become bored or lose interest because they are actively involved". In other words, when pair and group work are used, students are the centre of learning, and the teacher is similar to a monitor who creates an appropriate atmosphere to address educational activities.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted at Isabel II School in Bogotá, from March to November, 2004. Five teachers participated in it, teaching and observing the lessons with 52 seventh graders. The following steps from action research were developed. They were mentioned by Burns (1999: 36-42). Along the process, we decided:

• To analyze the state of the art.

• Identifying: To reflect upon the possible weaknesses found in the state of the art stage and some data collected in the different classes.

• Becoming aware of a problem: The lack of oral interaction and the huge amount of students per class.

• Formulating the problem.

• Choosing a solution: It was to use task-based learning.

• Planning: To make a plan and to consider the methods to get data.

• Analyzing and reflecting on data collection in order to get the findings.

Description of Participants

The participants were students of seventh grade, specifically class 701 at Isabel II School. Their ages were between 11 and 13. There were 21 boys and 30 girls. They were the youngest students of seventh grade and were characterized by their active and enthusiastic attitude. Most of them liked English and enjoyed participating in communicative activities, but they were afraid of speaking or reading aloud. They felt confident when they were answering or asking in written form. They were open minded regarding new activities and always tried to do things well.

Data Collection

When teachers applied the tasks designed beforehand (see one sample in Appendix 1), they had the opportunity to collect data. While one teacher was teaching the class, one or two teachers were observing it, using three different techniques to collect data:

• A proforma instrument, to write about the important aspects observed in class, stages of the task and the observer's reflections.

• Class recordings, to give real evidence of the findings gotten.

• Two questionnaires, one at the beginning of the process and the other at the end. Taking into account the results of the first one, teacher-researchers designed the tasks. With the last one, it was possible to get the students' points of views about the process, the activities they liked the most and the interactive improvement (see Appendix 2). We also did an oral evaluation to see the advances of this last aspect.

PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN

The focus of our project was to promote oral interaction using task-based learning. Therefore, a set of tasks was designed in which students developed the four skills, mainly speaking. These tasks should have specific goals, content, materials, activities, input, teachers' role and students' roles (Nunan, 1989).

Taking into account that teachers and students play an important role in task-based learning, it is relevant to define what each one of them had to do in the classroom. The first ones developed the task, introduced the topic, used the materials, helped students, and made sure that pupils understood the task, while the second ones developed the activities proposed in the task.

FINDINGS

After examining the information gathered through the three different techniques –a proforma, questionnaires and class recordings, three categories were established, namely: task, interaction and large classes.

Task

As was mentioned, the task has the following three different phases: the pre-task, the task cycle and the language focus. These were taken into account to analyze the data.

Pre-task

In this introductory part, it was noticed that the use of creative, colorful or user-friendly material helped students to increase their vocabulary, understanding, and motivation. This practice made students feel confident while speaking, forgetting about shyness or apathy toward language. They liked some material and used it many times. For example, in the audiotape transcription, we noticed that students had to talk about animals shown in a flashcard and they did it actively.

Furthermore, students expressed their interest in topics that were closely related to their lives. These attracted students' attention and made them participate effectively in class. As a result, in a final evaluation the students improved their oral skills. This is a salient aspect if we take into account that before starting the research, the pupils were reluctant to interact.

Task cycle

During the task, it was seen that the instructions given to students individually, were better understood than the ones given to the whole group. It could be seen in one of the questionnaires when the students answered the question: What activity was the most difficult? Most of the learners answered, "*to understand the teacher's instructions*".

The language focus

At the end of the lessons, the students had to practice what was learnt in class. In order to know

if they had understood, they had to create or plan an outcome (see Appendix 3, for samples of some outcomes). Each task, in the language focus phase, had its own outcome such as:

- Photo album
- Weather forecast
- To talk about past events
- To talk about a text
- To make a short presentation about an animal
- To talk about a story told in class

Oral Interaction in Large Groups

Interaction was the central aspect of our study. Bygate (1987) suggests that in particular, "learners need to develop skills in the management of interaction and negotiation of meaning". In our study, the students interacted among themselves or with the teacher in most of the cases. This practice was inferred from the observer's notes. It was seen that most of the times students answered the teacher's questions or participated in class answering in short sentences or they tried to pay attention to what a partner said and answered his/her questions. Unfortunately, the same students always participated during the activity, but there were others who were not good at English and who were rejected by the group as they did not participate too much.

Learners worked best when they were in groups or in pairs. They felt more confident and helped each other. In terms of fluency, we can say that students practiced the language and improved their oral skill, although many of them had several problems with grammar and sentence building.

Nolasco & Arthur (1988) states that large classes demand all kinds of resources. It was possible to work with 52 students, but many changes were made like the class seating arrangement. It was possible to work with groups, pairs and rows; this latter was developed with games or competitions. In addition, many techniques were used to give clear instructions, to change the activities often, to use creative and colorful flashcards and guides, and to make a plan outline.

Changes in Participants' Attitudes

In this study, students had the opportunity to change their attitudes towards English language learning. In the questionnaires, we can see some changes between what learners thought before and after the research. The first change was evidenced in the activities students liked the most. At the beginning they were more interested in doing individual tasks such as writing compositions and reading. After the task-based method application, they preferred to develop group and pair work activities.

The second change was observed in the activities that students considered difficult to develop. In the first questionnaire, they referred to the activities that implied understanding the spoken language and pronunciation. At the end of the study, learners felt more confident with the tasks when they had to read, listen and speak in English.

Finally, it should be pointed out that students became more interested in the foreign language and participated actively in the different stages of the tasks.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of task-based learning in large groups helped students to improve oral interaction, but it was a gradual process. It required providing opportunities to practice the language, providing different visual aids and working with topics related to students' needs and interests. In addition, to teach English in large groups, it was necessary to use different strategies to maintain motivation such as changing the activities very often, using creative and colorful flashcards and guides, and making a dynamic plan outline.

The control of students' discipline was very difficult but necessary. Some of the strategies used were to have different classroom settings (rows, groups, pairs), to promote competition among students (games), and to stimulate.

A third aspect to consider is that when you plan a task-based learning class, it is very important to take into account some aspects such as prior knowledge, developing interdisciplinary topics, using drill repetition in order to acquire grammar structures when necessary and giving clear rules and instructions at the beginning of each class.

Finally, task-based learning was an appropriate method employed to improve oral interaction in large groups. It was an enjoyable way for teachers and students to take advantage of the teaching-learning process. It was a success to take turns and to teach a class. Students had five different teachers who participated in the research, taught lessons and observed the classes. Learners said they learnt more and had the opportunity to practice the English language.

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APPENDIX 1: DESIGNING A TASK

Goal: To express abilities and disabilities of animals.

Input: Teacher explains the use of *can* and *can't,* and gives some examples, also to review some animals, their homes and verbs.

She shows some animal flashcards. Students have to name orally some abilities of the animals seen in the pictures.

ACTIVITIES

1. Listen, cut and place the animals in the corresponding home, and talk with your partner about your answers (see attachment 1, taken from Nuñez, A. (2004). *Teenagers. New Generation.* Bogotá: NORMA, 7, 38.)

• Choose one animal, name one ability and the other students should try to identify it.

2. Read about the domestic animals in Latin America.

LANGUAGE FOCUS: OUTCOME

In groups of four people, choose three animals. Find their characteristics, abilities, home and share it with the class.

Students' role: He/she has to construct his knowledge and work hard to do it.

Teachers' role: He/she is a facilitator, a guide.

APPENDIX 2: QUESTIONNAIRE USED AT THE END OF THE TASKS TO GET STUDENTS' VIEWS ABOUT THE PROCESS

I.E.D. ISABEL II - J.M.- SEDE A

1   El tema que más le gustó fue:
a   Hablar sobre su niñez - La elaboración del álbum   ____
b   Reporte sobre el clima en Colombia – Diseñar el mapa   ____
c   Hablar de acciones del pasado – Escribir una postal   ____
d   Leer sobre lápices y esferos   ____
e   Exponer sobre un animal   ____
f   Narrar un cuento, cantar el cuento en diferentes ritmos   ____
g   Otro ____ ¿Cuál? _____ ¿Por qué?

2   Las actividades con las cuales se siente mejor son:
a   Hablar en inglés   ____
b   Escribir en inglés   ____
c   Leer en inglés   ____
d   Escuchar textos en inglés   ____
e   Hacer preguntar en inglés   ____
f   Ninguna de las anteriores.   ____
g   Otra ____ ¿Cuál? _____

3   Durante las clases de inglés le gusta trabajar:
a   Sólo   ____
b   En grupo   ____
c   Por parejas   ____
d   Cuando el profesor le pregunta   ____
e   Cuando el profesor o el compañero le pregunta a todo el grupo ____
f   Otro ____ ¿Cuál? _____

4   En general cómo se sintió con el trabajo de las profesoras.
a   Nervioso al hablar   ____
b   Seguro al hablar   ____
c   Motivado   ____
d   Aburrido   ____
e   Conforme   ____
f   Otro ____ ¿Cuál?_____¿Por qué?

5   Que varias profesoras dicten clase de inglés en el mismo salón le parece:
a   Que es favorable   ____
b   Que no es bueno   ____
c   Que se aprende más   ____
d   Que me ayuda a mejorar oralmente   ____
e   Que puede prestarse para confusión   ____
¿Por qué?

6   ¿Qué técnica de control de grupo le gusto más?
a. Por filas   _____
 b. Por grupos   _____
 c. Individual   _____
 d. Todo el grupo   _____
¿Por qué? _____

7   Teniendo en cuenta que el horario de las clases de inglés es lunes 3 y 4 hora y viernes 5 y 6 hora.
¿Qué día cree que trabajó mejor?:
 Lunes _____ Viernes _____
 ¿Por qué ?_____

8   ¿En cuál clase se sintió más motivado para participar a nivel oral y por qué?
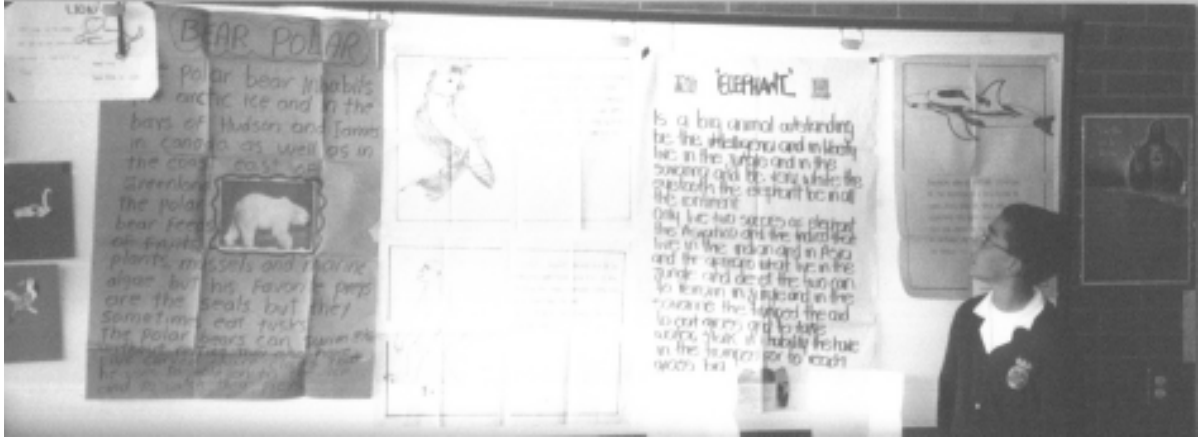9   Lo que más le gustó de las clases dictadas fue: (Señale una opción)
a   El material presentado   _____
b   El trabajo de grupo   _____
c   Los ejercicios por parejas   _____
d   Los ejercicios individuales   _____
e   Las actividades orales   _____
f   Los trabajos escritos   _____
g   Otro _____ Cuál? _____
¿Por qué?: _____

APPENDIX 3: SAMPLES OF SOME OUTCOMES

Reporting about the students' favorite animals.

Weather forecast in Colombia.