**HELPING STUDENTS BUILD COMMUNICATIVE SPEAKING SKILLS IN ENGLISH**

**AT CENTRO COLOMBO AMERICANO IN CARTAGENA**

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**ESPECIALIZACIÓN EN LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS**

**AUGUST 2014**

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**ABSTRACT**

This small-scale research intends to shed light on an issue that students of English often face in their learning process: achieving effective oral communication skills. The setting of our research is the Centro Colombo Americano in Cartagena, downtown site, where we have conducted a series of surveys, made some video clips, and motivational workshops to collect data. We have formulated the problem as: Colombo students seem to experience some difficulty using English to communicate. As a consequence, we have stated this research question: What strategies can be used to cause students to improve their communication skills in English? Since the ultimate goal is to get students to use their speaking skills to communicate, then they should be encouraged to use communicative interaction strategies for such purpose, which we have stated as our pedagogical intervention. Luk & Lin argue that *"Interactions in language classrooms are important social activities for students through which they not only construct knowledge, but also build confidence and identity as competent language users." (Luk & Lin, 2007).* A strategy that can help students achieve high levels of speaking competence is peer interaction. To serve this purpose, we have included a series of information exchange tasks, which promotes peer interaction and helps learners build a strong sense of confidence.

**Keywords:** group work, pair work, interaction, speaking skills, communication

## INTRODUCTION

This small-scale research examines the institution Centro Cultural Colombo Americano Cartagena, which was founded in 1961, as the initiative of a group of distinguished American and Colombian citizens, with the sponsorship of the American Embassy, in order to foster the cultural bonds between the United States and Colombia, through the teaching of the English Language. Today The Centro Cultural Colombo Americano is one of the nine legally recognized *Binational Centers* in Colombia. The Colombo offers the community of Cartagena an English program for adults, young adults, teenagers and children. Moreover, the institution has two other programs: Translation of written documents and Bilingual administration and accounting, which prepare students for the challenges of the new globalized world.

The community where we have done this research is located in a privileged neighborhood in Cartagena: The walled city. This is a must-see touristic, commercial and bilingual area which attracts thousands of tourists, where national and international events are held, and where a large number of tour guides, businessmen, teachers, and professionals work. There is an atmosphere full of cultural and educational components.  As a consequence, the use of spoken English for communication is required.

Our students come from different areas in the city, social and academic backgrounds, and with distinct needs and interests. The English Program serves the needs of a large number of people in the city. We have worked along with high school, university students, and professionals between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five years old, with elementary and intermediate levels of English.

A Critical Needs Analysis, in the form of a survey (See annex 1), was conducted to determine the different reasons why our learners decided to study English, how they felt while using English to communicate, how often and how well they used their English in class, whether our students were experiencing any difficulty regarding the development of their speaking skills for communication, and if so, what situations were affecting such process.

The survey was answered by forty (40) students, within the age groups of $15 - 20$ (16, 40%), $21 - 30$ (16, 40%), over 30 (6, 15%) and no information (2, 5%).  The English language levels of the students are as follows: five (5) in the elementary level, thirty (30) in the intermediate level, and five (5) in the upper intermediate level. The students are studying English as a foreign language in the two-hour program at Centro Colombo Americano. They were in five classes being taught at different times of the day and one on Saturdays.

The results of the survey demonstrated that Colombo students experience, up to some extent, some difficulty communicating their ideas in the target language by means of their speaking skills.  We believe that there are a few key aspects which may be affecting our learners' ability to interact orally in English so as to keep them from negotiating meaning, expressing their feelings, identities and ideologies. Among the different possible factors, the survey shows that lack of motivation, fear of making mistakes, not enough practice outside the English classroom, and not enough interaction with their peers are the most influential. (See Annex 2)

To start working on a solution to the problem, we have considered the fact that languages play a social role in society, which means that for communication to actually occur, there should be at least someone who speaks and someone who listens and responds: a social interaction.

Therefore, the interactional component is crucial to designing a strategy that promotes student-student exchange and participation, that is, real communication.

Based on the information collected and studied, we have decided to work on significant communicative strategies that will elicit students' oral production, as the research question suggests: *What strategies can be used to cause students to improve their communicative speaking skills?*

It is vital that collaborative learning and group work be present permanently in the English class so that the environment is filled with social interaction and motivation. Consequently, we have to identify and describe what strategies can serve this purpose.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As social beings, humans have a natural tendency to get into groups, communicate among themselves and interact in social and cultural contexts. *Speaking* presents itself as the main vehicle for such a purpose. Chaney (1998) defines speaking as "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts." Therefore, speaking is a crucial part of second language learning and teaching. The goal of teaching speaking should improve students' *communicative skills* so that students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules appropriate in each communicative circumstance.

The English classroom is the simulated scenario for life-like socio-cultural interaction for the students to construct their own knowledge, and build confidence and identity in their use of the English language. The learner´s *motivation* also plays an important role in second language acquisition. Crookes & Schmidt (1991) identified integrative motivation as "the learner's orientation with regard to the goal of learning a second language. It means that learner's positive attitudes towards the target language group and the desire to integrate into the target language community." There has to be a reason for studying English, and the fact that students become aware of the importance of this foreign language is relevant in getting them to feel they need to be immersed in this English-speaking world. A motivated student will learn fast and interact with their peers by means of all the skills; however, oral production should occur more frequently.

All of the concepts mentioned above rely on the construct of collaborative learning, which requires "students working together toward a common goal." According to proponents of collaborative learning, the fact that students are actively exchanging, debating and negotiating ideas within their groups increases students' interest in learning. Many researchers have reported that students working in small groups tend to learn more of what is being taught. Moreover, they retain the information longer and also appear more satisfied with their classes (Beckman, 1990; Chickering & Gamson, 1991; Goodsell, *et al*, 1992).

For most people, the main goal of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate. Communication in the context of language learning, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, refers to "the imparting, conveying or exchange of ideas, knowledge, information, etc., whether by speech, writing or signs." What concerns us in our small-scale research project is mainly verbal communication or speaking skills, which will allow students to express their ideas, and interact with others through English.

Once we have identified that Colombo students experience some difficulty when using their speaking skills to communicate, we have considered helping them build a sense of confidence and improve their speaking skills by means of some communicative strategies, which require a great deal of motivation, collaborative work, and peer interaction on the students' part.

Getting students to speak in class might be a difficult thing to do; students in the end try to do their best, though. Along with struggling with the language, by interacting, learners and teachers have the chance to interact as well. The teacher plays the role of a moderator in the intervention. Our mission as teachers is to be aware of the learner's performance and come out with feedback at the end of their presentations.

In this research, we have worked with a group of students, many of whom felt afraid of speaking. We started working on ideas that helped us find solutions to this problem. This is not new, we know that this is a very common situation English teachers have to face. Many researchers have supported the idea that communicating in the foreign language class may be a traumatic experience causing feelings of fear (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Aida (1994) claim that speaking in the target language seems the most threatening aspect of foreign language learning and that the lack of oral skills constitutes serious problems to language learners. In our case, we made use of different strategies that led us to see some progress in the process of speaking a foreign language.

Pair work and group discussions are some of the most effective methods used to encourage the learner's interaction. "Speaking is a productive skill that can be directly observed." (Brown, 1994, p. 140) – The teacher who has the power to assess the accuracy and effectiveness of the observed task directly observes this productive skill.

Since grouping activities are kind of the solution to avoid learners' quietness in class and make them an active part of the speaking class, we decided to implement those activities in our research. Thus learners were assigned to talk about a specific dilemma, which in this case was talking about wishes, and then in pairs they were supposed to share their wishes with their partners. After that, they had to tell the class some of the most unusual wishes their classmates made. In a different class the same activity with a different question, was implemented finding good results on the objective, which is causing them to interact in English and losing the fear of speaking in public.

Our main objective is to make learners build social communication skills in English, and we believe that these types of activities are essential to achieve this goal. Our role was to focus on giving them the opportunity to express themselves, obviously based on the pre-arranged questions taken out of the textbook they are following, and they had to apply them to their real life. Talking about personal activities may be challenging for students, but we tried to encourage them to participate by telling either the truth or make up situations with the mere purpose of having something to talk about.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

Our small-scale research deals with one of the most complex topics to investigate: persuading second language learners to communicate using spoken English. There has been some hard work on our part since last year when we were told to work on a piece of research and decided to choose this interesting and hard work. The pedagogical intervention implemented in our research is based on the following reflection: To encourage students to use interactional strategies for oral communication. We strongly believe that *interaction* is the key to success regarding second language acquisition.

In order to support this matter, this paragraph seems appropriate (Cited by Ellis, R. 1999): "When interacting with a native speaker we produce incidental acquisition, that is to say, we learn unconsciously. How is this possible? According to Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996), when we speak or write to a native speaker, or even with a nonnative speaker, we **negotiate meaning**, and it is precisely because of this negotiation that the process of learning is facilitated. The adjustments we make during a conversation, as well as the provision of negative evidence by our interlocutor (through corrections and feedback), all contribute to this process. In short, conversation or simple chatting gives us a lot of opportunities for producing modified output."

We distributed a survey among the learners to have them tell us how they felt about using their English to communicate and we found that, even though a large number of students were motivated to speak in class, only 55% of them felt they had *good communicative competence*, and that 30% of then used English for communication *sometimes* (See Annexes 1 and 2).

The results confirmed what we thought was happening and then we understood that there was work to do if we wanted to contribute to our learners' speaking skills.

It is well known that speaking a foreign language is a very personal thing. Only the learner can reach this objective by overcoming the fear to speak and being aware that mistakes are an opportunity for improvement. We as teachers have to look for strategies that help learners to cope with embarrassing situations; and that is the reason why we decided to have our learners work in activities in which they had to share, exchange information, present, discuss and defend their views, report their partners' opinions, etc. All of these activities required them to work in groups and interact actively. After all, speaking is a social action and this is what simulates most what they do in real-life situations. The patterns of interaction used were: student-student, student-class, class-student, student-teacher, and teacher-student.

These are the most common patterns of interaction in an ESL/EFL classroom (from Harmer (1998) *How to Teach English)*:

**1. T - Ss:** Teacher talking to the whole class, such as in presenting a text, explaining grammar, giving instructions for an activity.

**2. T - S:** Questions and answers (dialogues) between the teacher and a student, such as in demonstration, checking comprehension.

**3. T - S - S:** Teacher initiated dialogues with more than one student, such as in role-playing demonstration and warm-up activities.

**4. S - T:** Student initiated conversation between a student and the teacher, such as in asking questions about a rule or an assignment.

**5. S - Ss:** One individual student talking to the whole class, such as in telling a story, reciting a poem.

**6. Ss/Ss:** Students working in small groups, such as practicing conversation, role-playing.

**7. S - S:** Two students work in pairs such as practicing a dialogue, carrying out an information gap activity.

**8. SS:** Students doing their work individually such as reading, completing an exercise.

The group that we selected for our pedagogical intervention was a course 10, at 6:30 pm, in Room 206, at the Colombo Downtown, the cycle that ran from April 30 to May 28, 2014. There were seventeen students, and their level of linguistic competence was CEFR B1. The central topic for oral communication was Expressing Opinions and Agreeing and Disagreeing. The final results for their oral interview are expressed in Annex 7, and it shows a good level of speaking skills with an average of 86.8% out of 100%.

In this lesson plan we had our learners come up with an opinion regarding a topic that was written on the board (See Annex 3). Next, there was a section where they were supposed to check the situations that applied to them. Then, they had to exchange information with their partners around the classroom and report on their partners' responses (student- student, student-class, and student-teacher interactions). It is important to mention that the students not only expressed their responses but also supported what they stated, and went beyond what they were expected to produce.  Later, since there were students from two foreign countries (Mexico and Spain), they discussed answers from a cultural perspective, which made the activity a lot more interesting and exciting to the participants. Finally, some students commented on the benefits of the oral elicitation activities, stating that it was a great opportunity for them and that they enjoyed talking to different partners and exchanging views and information. (See Annex 4. Scripts)

One of the activities that we assigned was talking about their wishes and the things they would like to change about their real lives, other activities were talking about the things they used to do and giving opinions and other conversational tasks. The tasks they participated in were selected in order to verify what we found out in a group of surveys done last year and in

which they manifested some kinds of discomfort regarding using spoken English for communication.

As we mentioned before, surveys were designed in order to know about some issues students had to practice their English, most of the problems they have to face is that they do not have people to talk and practice the language with. We suggest that it is convenient to encourage them to speak in class and after class, and even outside the classroom. In our society, we can find people on the street who are willing to speak, due to our status of a tourist city, we have the opportunity to find people that can help students to speak, and here is the fact of making English more social. Our main branch is located in a very popular touristic place, Cartagena's downtown area, the big multinational companies that we have in our city are very important social and commercial factors, and main motivation for our learners to feel the need to speak English to communicate with foreigners and/ or visitors.

We are aware that pictures do not represent by themselves any convincing or valid evidence of a research project and that is why we have some video clips from which we extracted some of the most relevant information for the success of our investigation.

We are providing some scripts which report what our students did and achieved, and how they perceived the activities conducted in one of the classes (See Annex 4)

It is relevant to mention that the students who have been subject to this research were requested to volunteer and participate in all the activities described, all of whom agreed unconditionally to the purpose of this investigation. Their consent was total and based on that, we proceeded to conduct the activities.

# 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

## 4.1. Data Analysis

### 4.1.1 Survey 1

The first research instrument that we used to collect data was a student survey, which we conducted for four classes, thirty-five students all together, different levels of English, in the Downtown Site of the Centro Colombo Americano in Cartagena. The survey has spaces for the learners to fill out, such as name, level, schedule, age, etc., and six questions regarding their reasons for studying English, their feeling about using English in class to communicate, how often they practice English in class, their feeling about participating in speaking activities in class, whether or not they practice English in class and reasons, and their communicative skills according to their level.

**The results were the following:**

A. Regarding *age*, these students were young learners, or young adults, between the ages of 15 and 30 years old, which was the 80% of them.

B. As far as *reasons* for studying English, half of the surveyed students (50%) mentioned that they wanted to *study* abroad, 20% stated that they did it for *pleasure*, and another 20% did it for *work*.

C. When asked how they felt about using their English in class to communicate, a large number (87%) of the learners felt *motivated,* while 13% of them were *nervous*.

D. A large number of the students (70%) commented that they used English in *every class*, while some of them (30%) mentioned that they did *sometimes*.

E. When asked whether they used English to communicate outside the classroom, 30% of them said they did, but the *majority* (70%) said that they did *sometimes*.

F. The last question revealed the most interesting fact: 45% of the students mentioned that they felt they did not have good speaking skills according to their level, while the other 55% said that they did.

**Table 1.**
**Student Survey.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| A. Learners' Age | 80% between the ages of 15 and 30 |
| B. Learners' Reasons for Studying English | 50% study abroad; 40% for pleasure and work |
| C. Learners' Feeling of English in Class | 87% were motivated; 13% were nervous. |
| D. Learners' Use of English in Class | 70% every class; 30% sometimes |
| E. Learners' Use of English outside the Classroom | 30% Yes; 70% Sometimes |
| F. Learners' Speaking Skills according to their Level | 55% good skills; 45% not good skills |

Based on these results, the topic that appeared to us as the most suitable for a research project was how to provide our learners with strategies which help them build good speaking skills, communicative abilities to produce oral interaction with peers, friends, family, neighbors, etc.

**4.1. 2. Survey 2**

This second instrument was meant to be answered by teachers since we believed that they could give us interesting and useful information regarding our topic of research. We surveyed eighteen (18) teachers at the Colombo Downtown Site asking them whether their students spoke English in class on a regular basis, how they described their students' speaking skills (excellent, good, average, poor), what strategies they used to promote speaking, which of the strategies really worked and what patterns of interaction often happened in their classes. The results were the following:

A. Of the teachers surveyed, thirteen, 72.2%, stated that their students used English in class on a regular basis, while five of them, 27.2%, mentioned that their students did not do so.

B. Asked to describe their students' speaking skills, *none of them* thought their students' speaking were *excellent, 0%*; five of them, 27.7%, believed they were *good*; nine of them, 50%, stated that they were *average*; and three of them, 16.6%, mentioned they were *poor*.

C. As far as the strategies to promote speaking in class (four spaces to fill out), the most common were: thirteen teachers (72.2%) use *group work*; twelve (66.6%) use *role plays*; seven (38.8%) use *pair work*; four (22.2%) use *debates*; three (16.6%) use *games*, and two (11.1%) use *dialogs*.

D. The teachers also reported the speaking strategies that worked in their classes: nine teachers (50%) mentioned *group work* and *role plays*; four of them (22.2%) indicated *pair work*; and two of them (11.1%) thought *dialogs* and *games* helped.

E. Regarding the patterns of interaction (five options provided) that teachers generated in their classes, the results are as follows: fifteen teachers (83.3%) mentioned *student-student* and *teacher-class*; fourteen of them (77.8%) referred to *teacher-student* and *student-teacher*; and eleven (61.1%) mentioned *class-teacher*.

**Table 2.**
**Speaking-Skills-In-Class Teacher Survey.**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A. Use of English In Class on a Regular Basis | Yes  72.2% | No  27.2% |
| B. Students' Speaking Skills | Excellent   0% <br> Average    50% | Good     27.7% <br> Poor      16.6% |
| C. Strategies Used to Promote Speaking | Group Work   72.2% <br> Pair Work       38.8% <br> Games          16.6% | Role Plays   66.6% <br> Debates      22.2% |
| D. Strategies that Work | Group Work   50% <br> Pair Work      22.2% <br> Games          11.1% | Role Plays   50% <br> Dialogs       11.1% |
| E. Patterns of Interaction | Teacher-Student    77.8% <br> Student-Student  83.3% <br> Class-Teacher     61.1% | Student-Teacher   77.8% <br> Teacher-Class        83.3% |

The results from the data collected in the surveys confirmed the following facts:

1. The students at Centro Colombo Americano, Downtown Site, speak English in class on a regular basis: Teachers' opinion (72.2%) and students' opinion (70%).

This information means that most students use English in class, but that there is a small group of learners that do not usually speak English in class.

2. The students' speaking skills at Centro Colombo Americano, Downtown Site, are between *average* (50%) and *good* (27.7%), according to their teachers. On the other hand, 45% of the students surveyed believed they did not have good speaking English.

From the facts, we can conclude that there is a tendency for students to have an average level of speaking skills, and only a small group (27.7%) seems to have good skills. What is critical is that

none of the learners felt they had excellent speaking skills!! In other words, based on the survey results, the majority of the learners surveyed did not have good speaking skills!!

3. The teachers at Centro Colombo Americano, Downtown Site, believe that the most common strategies to be used in order to promote their learners' oral practice in the classroom are: Group Work & Pair Work (72.2 % and 38.8%), Role Plays (66.6%), Debates (22.2%), and Games (16.6%).

This information seems to confirm the fact that learners need to work together and interact with their peers so they can negotiate meaning and communicate in the target language. This way, learners' confidence and cooperative work should be generated.

4. This data is of paramount importance in our research project: the strategies that have been very useful in encouraging learners to speak English in class for communication.

The teachers suggest that the strategies that have been successful in motivating their learners to use spoken English for communication in the classroom are: Group Work & Pair Work (50 % and 22.2%), Role Plays (50%), Dialogs (11.1%), and Games (11.1%).

Definitely English is, like any other language, a social means for communication, and this is why for communication to take place, there should be at least two people interacting. Having students work in groups/pairs, do role plays, have a conversation, or play a game, really generates a suitable environment for learner-learner interaction, which will undoubtedly produce interesting learning outcomes in terms of communication.

5. The survey also dealt with the different patterns of interaction that take place in a classroom.

The development and success of a class depends on to a greater extent the interactions between the teacher and students (Tsui, 1995). Long (1996) argues that interaction facilitates

acquisition because of the conversational and linguistic modifications that occur in such discourse and that provide learners with the input they need. Through the interaction, learners have opportunities to understand and use the language that was incomprehensible. Additionally, they could get more input and more opportunities for output. The information that these teachers provided helped us to determine the most common patterns of interaction present in their classes: Student-Student (83.3%), Teacher-Class (83.3%), Teacher-Student (77.8%), Student-Teacher (77.8%), and Class-Teacher (61.1%).

According to these findings, Student-Student & Teacher-Class occur the most often in their classes, and Teacher-Student & Student-Teacher take place almost as often. The interaction happening the least common is Class-Teacher.

This information appears interesting because, as Lemke suggests, "*In language classroom settings, the teacher-learner interactive pattern in language classes is the most traditional pattern. In this pattern of interaction, the teacher plays the role of an expert, providing learners with direction and doing most of the talking and commenting (Lemke, 1990).*

Nevertheless, the ideal scenario would be to have learners speak more than the teacher. And now there is a tendency to reduce teacher talk time. The teacher should act as a facilitator and monitor of the students' work.

**4.1.3. Video Clips**

In our pedagogical intervention, we used a lesson plan with group activities that describe the different patterns of interaction, and allow learners to use their speaking skills in English. The following scripts show very interesting findings:

**SCRIPT 1**

STUDENTS EXPRESSING AN OPINION ABOUT LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

STUDENT 1

I am agree….with the first love …because if you are rich or you have a lot of money…and you have your *Fortuner* (SUV)… can see your partner person or other beautiful person… and say "Hi, I am rich!"

STUDENT 2

I think that love on a first sight doesn't work because you need to know... you need to know the other person, you need to know her family her .. I don't know .. attitude .. if he's .. I don't know .. crazy ..  I don't know .. but you need to know the other person .. anything!  I don't know, .. for example .. Hernán. I don't know.  It's impossible! For me is impossible .. doesn´t work.

STUDENT 3

 In my opinion .. the first sight .. only could be .. for a physical attraction. Or .. when you are in a place and you see a man .. that is dancing and .. it's OK… handsome .. at first sight .. but the love for me is .. is a question more important .. and you need to know the person, the family, the friends .. where he live.

STUDENT 4

        Actually, I'm not agree with him. I think money is .. is not the most important. I think you have to know the person .. the personality about the other person .. you have to know the other person!

        After the students practiced exchanging opinions with their neighbors (Pair / Group Work) about a particular topic written down on the board (Student-Student Interaction), some of

them expressed how they felt about the topic in front of the class and teacher (Student-Class & Student-Teacher Interactions).

These activities allowed them to interact with their peers, students and teacher, exchanging feelings, ideas, ideologies, etc. The interesting result is that the learners felt motivated and all of them participated actively in the activities.

**SCRIPT 2**

EXPRESSING AN OPINION ABOUT THE INTERACTIONAL ACTIVITIES THEY PERFORMED IN CLASS

STUDENT 1

It was a good activity because .. we can (How do you say "interactuar?) with other classmates, and I don't know .. maybe I .. I think .. my English .. in my opinion .. I could talk with... everybody and .. I don't have scared! I wasn't scared!

STUDENT 2

In my opinion, it's an important activity because .. perhaps it's the only place that you can speak English .. perhaps you have your friends .. don't speak English, and you .. neither.

STUDENT 3

I think it was a good exercise with .. conversation skills!!

STUDENT 4

I think it is a good .. eh .. it is an important to work activity .. because you can learn more words and learn.

STUDENT 5

I think that it's .. ah .. a great activity because it lets to .. to speak with other person, and .. practice your .. our oral English.

In this part of the lesson plan, the learners had the opportunity to express their views about the interactional activities that they had just performed. Interestingly enough, all of them agreed that they had spoken English very much, and that interacting with their peers was the only constant practice they actually had in the target language. They also mentioned that they had overcome their fear to speak English in class, and that they were able to learn new words. There were several patterns of interaction involved: Student-Class, Student-Teacher, Teacher-Class, Student-Teacher, and Teacher-Student.

From the learners' perspective, we can conclude that the speaking activities conducted in the class encouraged the learners to participate actively in English, helped them feel at ease when interacting with their peers and enabled them to produce significant learning outcomes. Obviously, Group & Pair Work along with a good sense of motivation and confidence on the learners' part, were decisive to start building up good speaking skills, which will allow them to use the English Language not only in the classroom, but also in their everyday life.

## 4.2. Results

The data collected and the analysis of all the items regarding the small-scale research project conducted at Centro Colombo Americano in Cartagena are summarized in the following chart, which illustrates the findings very clearly:

**Table 3.**
**Results Summary.**

| 1. The Research Problem Identified | The learners' speaking skills were found to be average mostly, showing a tendency to be poor. Taken from surveys done by students and teachers. |
|---|---|
| 2. The Research Question | We decided to pose questions as communicative strategies to use in order to help learners build a sense of confidence and good oral communication skills. |
| 3. The Research Objective | Our main concern was to identify, describe and apply speaking communicative strategies, such as group and pair work, cooperative work, to help students start building up good speaking skills. |
| 4. The Pedagogical Intervention | In our lesson plan, whose goal was to help our students achieve good speaking skills, we encouraged our learners to participate in activities that demanded a great deal of interaction, through group and pair work, in different patterns of interaction. |
| 5. The Research Instruments | Surveys for both students and teachers were conducted to collect interesting data. Additionally, video clips played an important role in showing how interactional activities were crucial to helping students speak English more confidently. |

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this project was initially to identify a challenging situation that a large number of students were facing while trying to communicate in spoken English with the people in their academic context. With this purpose in mind, a survey was conducted last year for forty students, whose levels of English were elementary (A2), intermediate (B1) and upper intermediate (B2) at Centro Colombo Americano in Cartagena, Downtown Site. Based on the results of this survey, we were able to determine that 45% of the surveyed students had some difficulty expressing their ideas in spoken English, and that they even believed they did not have a good level of English accordingly. As a consequence, *their speaking skills were not ideal for real communication.*

As English teachers, we felt this was a problematic situation that needed to be tackled and decided to intervene one class (intermediate level) pedagogically. The purpose was to give students the *opportunity to interact* with all their peers (teachers and classmates) through communicative speaking activities which included *group work* and *pair work*, using topics that were of *their interest* and promoting *collaborative work*. The students felt at ease and motivated, but most importantly, they exchanged opinions, negotiated meaning, and used the target language successfully! Penny Ur (1996, p. 232) suggest that "By dividing the class into groups students get more opportunities to talk than in full class organization and each student can say something. Penny Ur recommends that teachers working with large classes should divide them into five groups which is the most effective organization for practicing speaking." Brumfit (1984, p. 78) says that "Pair work and group work are the most effective techniques of classroom organization which combine aspects of communication learning and natural interaction in a stress free environment."

The video clip that was taped in the intervened class showed from beginning to end that the learners were motivated, interacted in pairs and in groups with the class and with the teacher, used the language to communicate their ideas, constructed knowledge and negotiated meaning, and lastly, expressed their opinions about the activities they were involved in, saying that it was a great opportunity for oral practice and social interaction.

We noticed that the best thing to encourage our students to produce and communicate in English is by creating in them the strong confidence to do so, is by conducting those activities in which they feel good working with people they know well, also by making then have small talks with people they do not know or are new in the class, where we conducted the social part of our research, as occurred in one of the classes that we had where students from other countries shared new and unknown information about their countries and cultures. We were fortunate to have a very varied class like that one because this condition also helped us to work in that group and the fact of having international classmates motivated them to talk about Cartagena and learn from Mexico and Spain, the countries the new classmates are from.

Needless to say, there may be disadvantages to having students work in pairs or groups, like the switch to their mother tongue L1 when the teacher is not monitoring a particular group, but it is the teacher´s role to minimize these drawbacks. Additionally, the advantages are more significant in the sense that they contribute to interesting learning outcomes and more real life-like interactions of the learners involved, generating actual communication. When students socialize, talk, discuss, negotiate, laugh, joke around, etc. in the class, they do the activities that they normally do in their everyday lives. This is the time when they are at their best regarding language use. Consequently, these interactions, along with appealing topics for conversations, should take place permanently in the English classroom.

A second survey that was answered by eighteen teachers at Colombo showed that their students' level of English was average (50%) or good (27.7%), that the teachers used strategies to promote speaking, among which *group work*, *pair work* and *role plays* were the most often used and successful, and that the most commonly used patterns of interaction in their classes were: student-student & teacher-class. These findings demonstrated that for students to be able to improve their speaking skills, along with the suitable language and functions, they need to be exposed to constant peer interaction, which will enable them to put everything they study into use, in context and in meaningful communication.

To sum up, as teachers of English, it is essential that we provide learners with the suitable pedagogical tools to *encourage* them to use English for oral communication. *Group work* and *pair work* activities play a paramount role in this respect since they put learners in a situation where they can exchange all types of information, messages, meaning, ideas, opinions, etc., working collaboratively, interacting actively and consciously, which allow for the facilitation of language learning.

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**ANNEXES**

ANNEX 1.  STUDENT SURVEY

FUNDACIÓN UNIVERSITARIA COLOMBO INTERNACIONAL – UNICOLOMBO
STUDENT SURVEY

Name: _____        Level: _____        Schedule: _____        Date: _____

Profession: _____        Address: _____        Age: _____

Directions: Please select the answer that best fits your context, and, if necessary, provide some extra information.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Why did you decide to study English at the Colombo?<br><br>a) Work    b) Pleasure    c) Study<br><br>c) Travel    d) Other _____ | 4. How do you feel about  participating in speaking activities in class?<br><br>a) Interested    b) Nervous<br><br>c) Bored    d) Other _____ |
| 2. How do you feel about using English to communicate in class?<br><br>a) Motivated    b) Nervous    c) I can´t.<br><br>d) I prefer Spanish    e) Other _____ | 5. Do you practice English outside the classroom? *If not*, why not?<br><br>a) Yes    b) Sometimes    c) No<br><br>d) Because _____ |
| 3. How often do you practice speaking English in class?<br><br>a) In every class    b) Sometimes<br><br>c) Not usually    d) Rarely | 6) How well do you communicate in English, according to your level?<br><br>a) Well    b) Not so well    c) I can´t. |

Comments _____
_____.

ANNEX 2. STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the different age groups of the students who did the survey. The majority (80%) of the students are within the range of 15 – 30 years old.
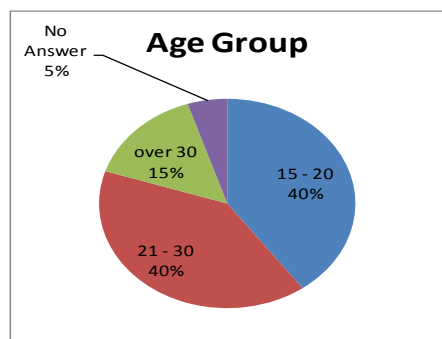
Figure 2 shows the reasons why our students are studying English. The main reason is study (50%). Work and pleasure also play an important role (20 % each).
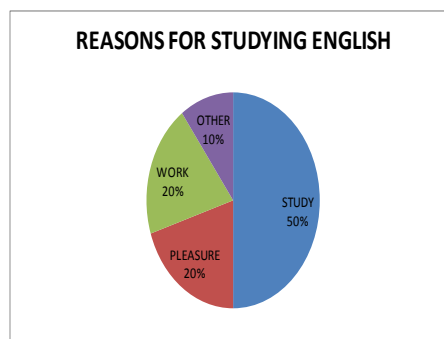




Figure 3 shows the students' feeling towards using English to communicate in class. A large number of students (81%) feel motivated, while some (15%) feel nervous.
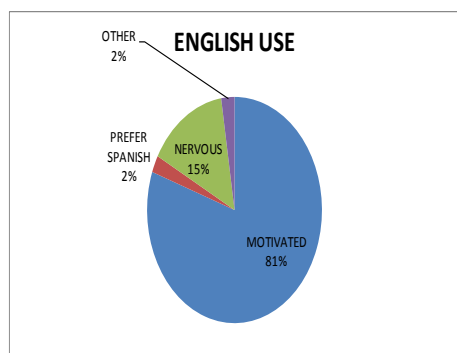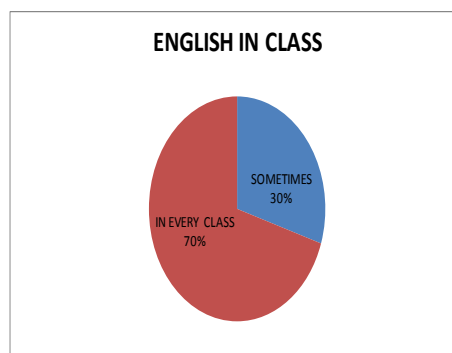
Figure 4 shows how often the students use English in class. The majority of the students (70%) use their English in every class, while some (30%) use it sometimes.

Figure 5 shows how the students feel about using their English in the classroom. A really large number of students (87%) feel motivated, while a few (13%) usually get nervous.
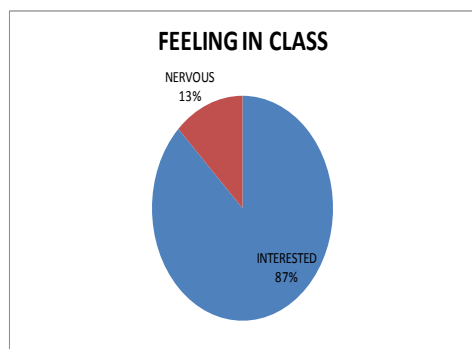
Figure 6 shows whether the students use their English outside the English classroom, and how often. Some (30%) students said that use English outside the classroom, and the majority said that they sometimes do.
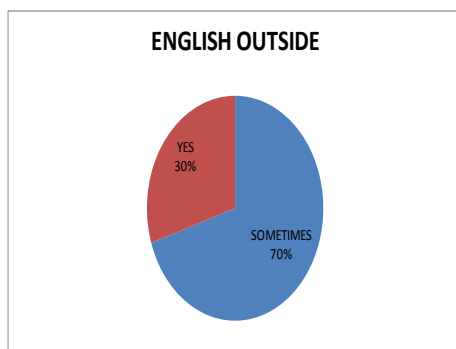
**FEELING IN CLASS**

NERVOUS
13%

INTERESTED
87%

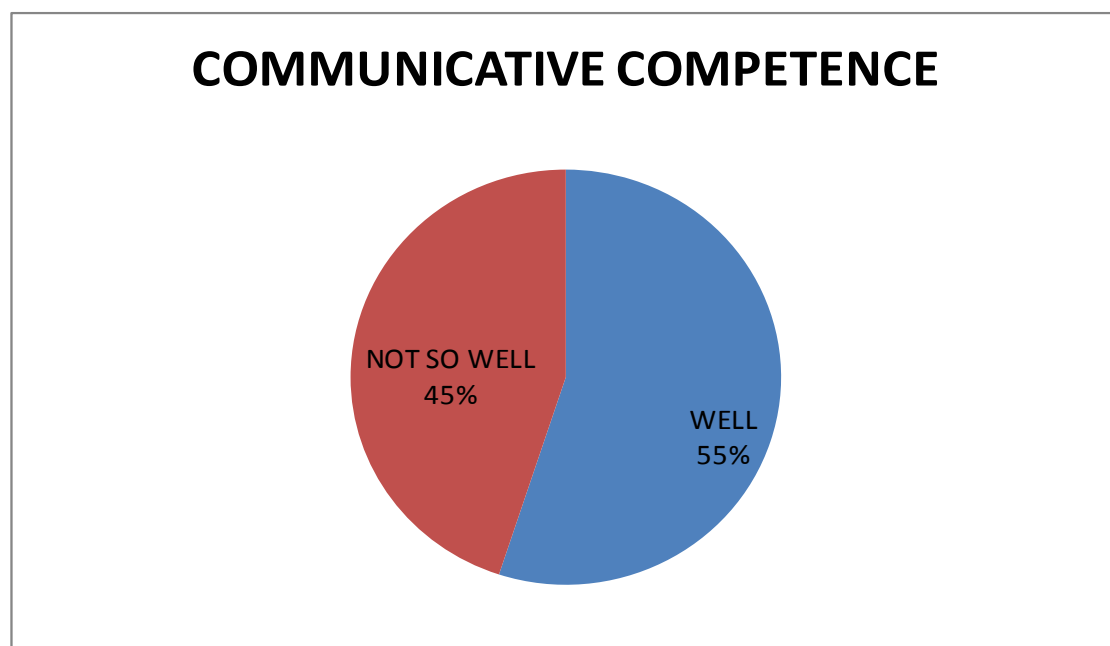**ENGLISH OUTSIDE**

YES
30%

SOMETIMES
70%

Figure 7 shows how well they can communicate in English, according to their level. Basically, about half (45%) of the students said that they don´t speak English well, according to their level, and the rest (55%) stated that they do it well.

# COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

NOT SO WELL
45%

WELL
55%

ANNEX 3. LESSON PLAN

INSTITUTION: CENTRO CULTURAL COLOMBO AMERICANO DE CARTAGENA

| Teacher's name: Exon Cabeza | Term: April Cycle | Date: April 21/14 | Allocated time: 2 hours (120 min) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Unit in the syllabus: | | Level 11, Book 3, unit 8, | |
| Topic of the lesson: | | Expressing Wishes about Imaginary Situations | |
| Objective: Sts will be able to talk about their wishes and imaginary situations in their lives. | | | |
| Key words: Wish, If, Could, Would, Afford, Have, Know, Buy | | | |
| Materials/equipment: Board, Questionnaire, Flashcards, PPT Presentations (optional) | | | |
| INSTRUCTIONAL PROCEDURES: | | | |

| Lesson Stages | Interaction | Skills involved | Time |
|---|---|---|---|
| A warm-up activity: Write the following question on the board: How would you like your life to be different? Why? Have sts discuss with a neighbor. | St-St St- Class | Speaking | 10 min. |
| Teaching procedures (lesson core): | | | |
| 1. Provide sts with a list of situations and ask them to check the ones that are true for them. (See Table 1) Example: *1. I don´t have an air conditioner in my room. (    )* | St | Writing | 5 min. |
| 2. Now, have students exchange their answers and how they would like to make these changes in their lives. Example: *I wish I had an air conditioner in my room!! Encourage sts to provide reasons for the change. Example: Cartagena is a really hot city!* | St-St | Speaking & Listening | 15 min |
| 3. Now, have sts get in groups of 3 and choose the most common situations. Be ready to answer the question: Why would you like to …? Provide a model for the answer: Example: *I would sleep like a log!! That way, I wouldn´t be sweating like hell!!* | St-St | Speaking & Listening | 15 min |
| 4. Hand out flashcards to each student and have them make comments about the pictures. Encourage sts to make wishes about them and go beyond. Example: (Picture of a fancy car*) I wish I had a car like that!! All the girls would love to have a ride with me. I could get from home to school in no time!!* | St-St | Speaking & Listening | 15 min |
| Assessment: Sts will make a short presentation about their everyday life at home, and how they would like it to be different. They will talk about themselves and the members | St-Class St-St St- | Speaking, Listening, Writing & | 60 min |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| of their families. They will be ready to answer questions from other sts.<br>Example: I live a normal life, but there are a few things I would like to change about it. One of them is, for example, that I share a room with my older brother. He loves to listen to music at night and snores like a bear!! *I wish I had my own room!!* | Teacher | Reading | |
| Closure: | | | |
| Teacher gives sts feedback on their presentations and assigns homework related to what they would like the cities they live in to be better. For the next class, these wishes will be used as a warm-up activity. | | | |

## Table 1. LIST OF SITUATIONS

Directions: Check the situations that are true for you.

1. My cell phone isn´t working well. (     )

2. I have to take public transportation every day, and it is really uncomfortable. (     )

3. My job is quite difficult and they don't pay me well. (     )

4. I never have any time to travel. (     )

5. My parents don't understand me! (     )

6. I hate getting up early in the morning! (     )

7. Exams give me a terrible headache! (     )

8. Sometimes I can´t understand my English teacher! (     )

9. The house where I live is really small! (     )

10. My neighbors are very noisy!! They won't let me sleep on weekends!! (     )

ANNEX 4.  SCRIPTS

SCRIPT 1

STUDENTS EXPRESSING AN OPINION ABOUT LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

STUDENT 1: I am agree….with the first love …because if you are rich or you have a lot of money…and you have your *Fortuner* (SUV)… can see your partner person or other beautiful person… and say "Hi, I am rich!"

STUDENT 2: I think that love on a first sight doesn't work because you need to know... you need to know the other person, you need to know her family her .. I don't know .. attitude .. if he's .. I don't know .. crazy ..  I don't know .. but you need to know the other person .. anything! I don't know, .. for example .. Hernán. I don't know.  It's impossible! For me is impossible .. doesn´t work.

STUDENT 3: In my opinion .. the first sight .. only could be .. for a physical attraction. Or .. when you are in a place and you see a man .. that is dancing and .. it's OK… handsome .. at first sight .. but the love for me is .. is a question more important .. and you need to know the person, the family, the friends .. where he live.

STUDENT 4: Actually, I'm not agree with him. I think money is .. is not the most important. I think you have to know the person .. the personality about the other person .. you have to know the other person!

SCRIPT 2

EXPRESSING AN OPINION ABOUT THE INTERACTIONAL ACTIVITIES THEY PERFORMED IN CLASS

STUDENT 1: It was a good activity because .. we can (How do you say "interactuar?) with other classmates, and I don't know .. maybe I .. I think .. my English .. in my opinion .. I could talk with .. everybody and .. I don't have scared! I wasn't scared!

STUDENT 2: In my opinion it's an important activity because .. perhaps it's the only place that you can speak English

STUDENT 3: I think it was a good exercise with .. conversation skills!!

STUDENT 4: I think it is a good .. eh .. it is an important to work activity .. because you can learn more words and learn.

STUDENT 5: I think that it's .. ah .. a great activity because it lets to .. to speak with other person, and .. practice your .. our oral English.

.. perhaps you have your friends .. don't
speak English, and you .. neither.
ANNEX 5.

SPEAKING-SKILLS-IN-CLASS TEACHER SURVEY

Directions: Please check the answers that apply to your pedagogical activity in your English
class. In addition, write your *speaking strategies* accordingly.

| Do your students speak English in class on a regular basis?<br>Yes _____       No _____ | 3. What *strategies do you often use to get your students to speak in class?<br>a. _____       b. _____<br>c. _____       d. _____ |
|---|---|
| 2. How would you describe your students' speaking skills according to their level?<br>Excellent _____       Good _____<br>Average _____       Poor _____ | 4. Which of the strategies in item 3 have worked for your classes at Colombo?<br>a. _____       b. _____<br>c. _____       d. _____ |
| 5. What patterns of interaction normally take place in your classes?<br>a. Teacher–Student (  )       b. Student-Teacher (  )       c. Student-Student (  )<br>d. Teacher-Class (  )       e. Class-Teacher (  ) | |

*Motivation, Group Work, Debates, Role Plays, Dialogs, Conversation Lesson Plans, Cooperative Work, Social English Examples, etc.

ANNEX 6. TEACHER SURVEY RESULTS

Figure 1 shows that 72.2% of the learners at Colombo, downtown Site, use English in class on a regular basis.



USE OF ENGLISH IN CLASS ON A REGULAR BASIS
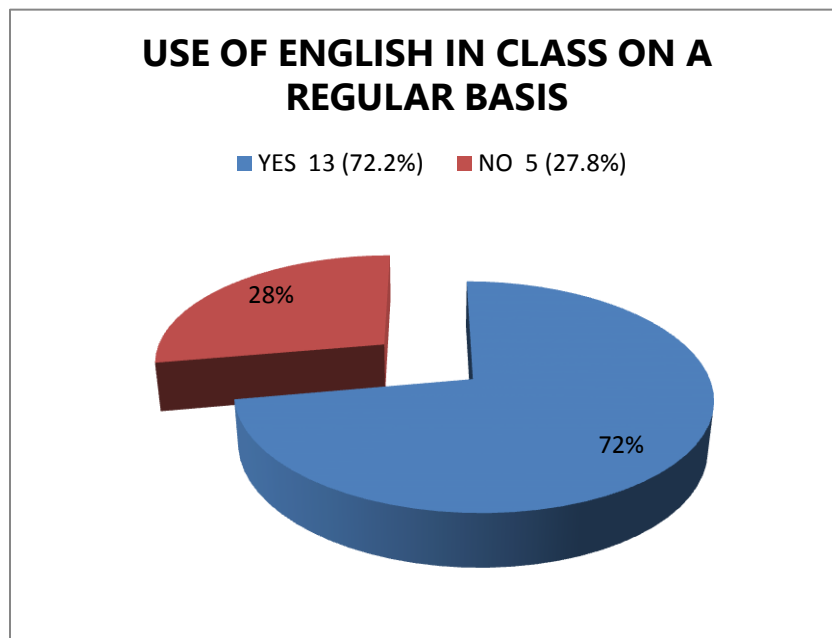YES 13 (72.2%)   NO 5 (27.8%)
28%
72%

Figure 2 indicates that 50% of the students have an average level of English, while only 27.75 seem to have a good level.
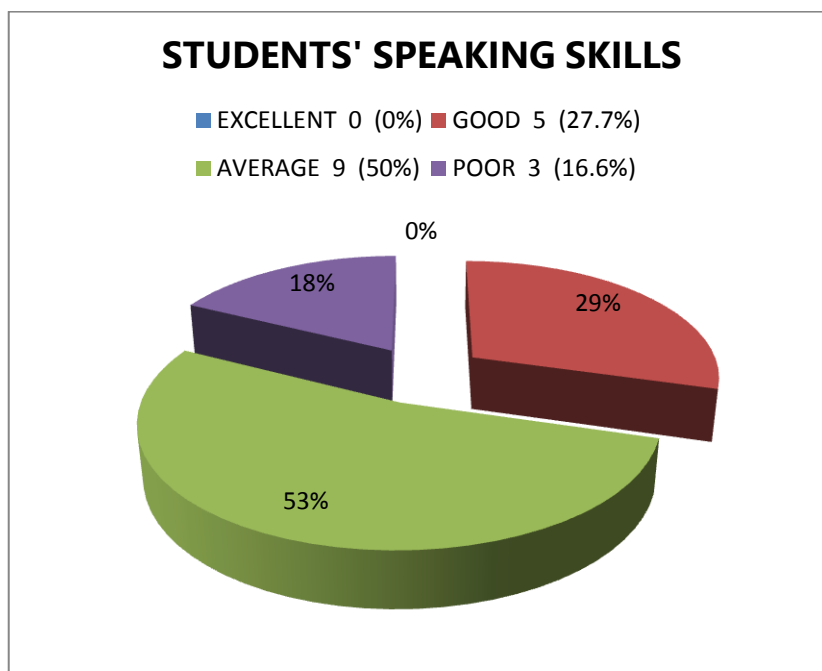


Figure 3 reveals that group work (72.2%), role plays (66.6%), and pair work (38.8%) are the most common strategies used to encourage students to speak.
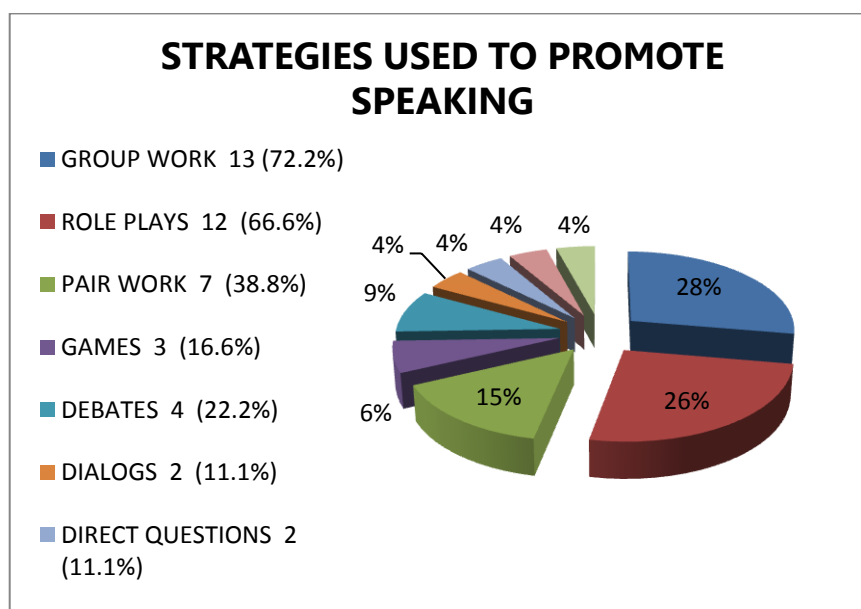
Figure 4 suggests that the strategies that have produced good results regarding speaking skills in the learners are group work (50%), role plays (50%), and pair work (22.2%).

**STRATEGIES THAT HAVE WORKED**

- GROUP WORK  9  50%
- ROLE PLAYS  9  50%
- PAIR WORK  4  22.2%
- DIALOGS  2  11.1%
- GAMES  2  11.1%
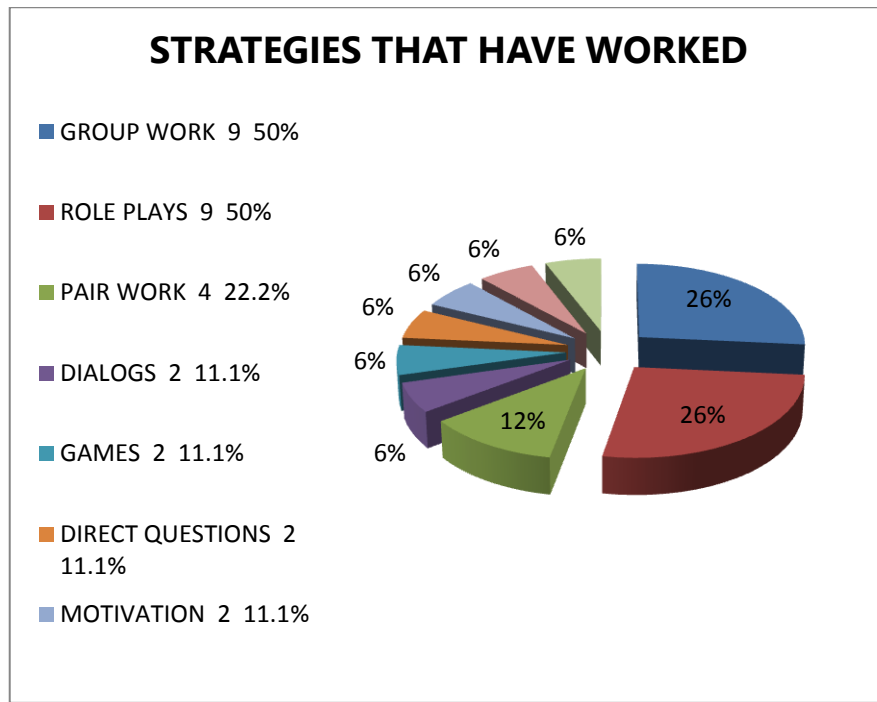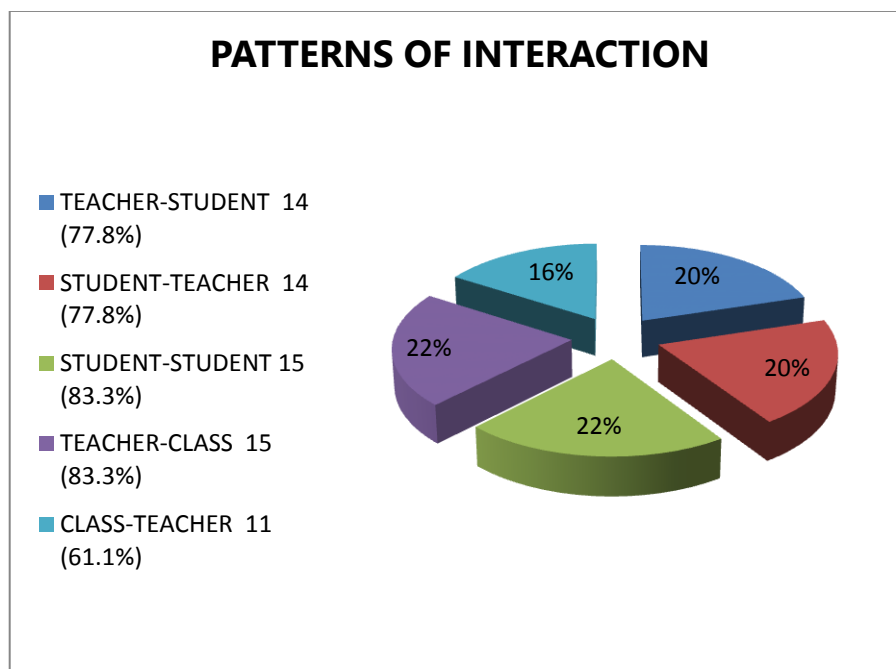- DIRECT QUESTIONS  2  11.1%
- MOTIVATION  2  11.1%

Figure 5 illustrates the fact that there are five different patterns of interaction in the class, among which the most commonly used are student-student & teacher-class, 83% each.

**PATTERNS OF INTERACTION**

- TEACHER-STUDENT  14 (77.8%)
- STUDENT-TEACHER  14 (77.8%)
- STUDENT-STUDENT  15 (83.3%)
- TEACHER-CLASS  15 (83.3%)
- CLASS-TEACHER  11 (61.1%)

ANNEX 7. (Taken from SIGEP, Colombo)

## ACADÉMICA                                             *Información Calificaciones*

### *Datos del Curso*

**Sede:**Centro
**Programa:**ID-2H
**Ciclo:**2014-04-30 2014-05-28
**Hora:**6:30 pm 8:05 pm
**Curso:**10
**Aula:**206
**Docente:**Exon Cabeza
**Estado:**Activo

| Identificación | Nombres | OE | FE | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1143360314 | Angelica Camargo | **44.00** | 46.00 | 90.00 |
| 96041616331 | Ana Castillo | **46.00** | 41.00 | 87.00 |
| 9143229 | Nicolas Chedraui | **40.00** | 49.00 | 89.00 |
| 430787 | Sonia Ezquerrena | **42.00** | 48.00 | 90.00 |
| 73192776 | Hector Florez | **44.00** | 40.00 | 84.00 |
| 45524946 | Hannia Gonzalez Del Rio | **46.00** | 34.00 | 80.00 |
| 73429020 | Hernan Lascarro | **34.00** | 40.00 | 74.00 |
| 1143359597 | Leidis Martinez | **34.00** | 36.00 | 70.00 |
| 1047442081 | Dulfay Monsalve | **46.00** | 49.00 | 95.00 |
| 1143359470 | Joice Orozco | **46.00** | 45.00 | 91.00 |
| 37325 | Lazaro Ortega | **46.00** | 48.00 | 94.00 |
| 1047410989 | Lilibeth Pardo | **50.00** | 48.00 | 98.00 |
| 95122928382 | Luis Ribon | **40.00** | 36.00 | 76.00 |
| 1047470748 | Catherine Ricaurte | **46.00** | 46.00 | 92.00 |
| 97102824486 | Albeiro Rivera | **40.00** | 42.00 | 82.00 |
| 1047481218 | Jeisson Salas | **48.00** | 44.00 | 92.00 |
| 1047438615 | Samanda Verbel | **46.00** | 48.00 | 94.00 |