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Licenciatura en Educación con Énfasis en Inglés

Improvement of High School Students' Oral Skill Using Task Based Instruction

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Cartagena de Indias D. T y P.

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Improvement of High School Students' Oral Skill Using Task Based Instruction

Trabajo de grado para Optar al Título de

Licenciado en Educación con Énfasis en Inglés

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Abstract

This paper illustrates how a specific group of learners that belongs to tenth and eleventh grade in high school improves their oral skills by learning through Task Based Instruction. Based on the action-participative research , firstly, a speaking test is applied to students. The results of this evaluation shed lights about the oral English level of the students, Secondly, participant observations are carried out in TBI classes in order to know the performance of the students in this kind of classes. It can be reported that in the speaking test, the learners presented several failures in the oral skill according to the level they were supposed to be. On the other hand, the English classes based on TBI help students to engage and improve their oral competency. According to the present research, Task Based Instruction provides benefits to the learners since they are involved in the target language as they learn in a meaningful way. This makes students use the language and be able to participate in a conversation with a native person; expressing their ideas with more confidence.

KEY WORDS: Task based Instruction, oral skill, young adults.

Resumen

Este documento ilustra la forma en que un grupo específico de aprendices pertenecientes a décimo y undécimo grado de secundaria mejora sus habilidades orales al aprender mediante Task Based Instruction. Basado en la investigación-acción participativa, primeramente, se aplicó un test de expresión oral a los estudiantes. los resultados de esta evaluación sacaron a la luz el nivel oral de inglés de los estudiantes, en segundo lugar las observaciones participantes son llevadas a cabo en las clases de TBI (Task Based Instruction) con el fin de conocer el desempeño de los aprendices en este tipo de clases. Puede señalarse que en el test de expresión oral, los aprendices presentan muchas fallas en la habilidad de habla, respecto al nivel en el que deberían estar. Por otro lado, las clases de Inglés basadas en TBI ayudan a los estudiantes a desarrollar y mejorar su competencia oral. De acuerdo con la presente investigación, Task Based Instruction provee beneficios a los estudiantes ya que están inmersos en la lengua objeto mientras aprenden de una forma significativa. Esto hace que los estudiantes usen el lenguaje y sean capaces de participar en una conversación con una persona nativa; expresando sus ideas con más confianza.

Palabras claves: Aprendizaje basado en tareas, habilidad oral, Jóvenes.

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Introduction

In Colombia one of the biggest problems in the English teaching is the fact that students do not reach the appropriate English level, especially in the oral skill when they are in high school. For this reason Task Based Learning (TBL) becomes relevant. In order to prove if this approach is useful to promote the improvement of the oral production this study has been carried out.

Task Based Instruction has been useful in English learning as it promotes interaction among students, keeping learners involved in class when speaking the target language through strategies as: meaning exchange, situations according to the real context of the students, role plays and negotiation of meaning. According to Richards and Rodgers (2004) “engaging learners in task work provides a better context for the activation of learning processes” (p. 223). Then it is worth saying that English oral production gains benefits because of the environment provided by TBI.

It is necessary to describe the context in which the process is developed to have a clear view of the problem; It involves The school Niño Jesus that is located in Turbaco town, which has 50 years to be providing services to the community. This educative center has 30 students in tenth grade and 24 in eleventh. The students from elementary to high school who belong to the second strata. The English teacher in this institution does not have studies in English teaching, she just took a general English course that certifies that she has a B2 level according to the Common European Framework.

This research was carried out since the English teaching-Learning process has a lot of shortcomings in Turbaco, specifically at Niño Jesus school, as the teacher uses strategies in which there is no a focus on meaning but on form, it means that students only analyze aspects of the language, by memorizing structures and words without any context. In this regard, we could experience several actions that the teacher does in class that reflect what was mentioned before, for instance, when the teacher gets into the classroom, she greets in Spanish, then she writes the topic in a structural way (simple present), after that she explains the topic in the native language through translating isolated sentences; such as: they play soccer with their friends, Camilo plays chess in the afternoon, Juan goes to the church on Sunday; finally, she assigns them exercises like: to learn a list of verbs, and select the suitable combination for each pronoun, these procedures could be improved by giving the students the opportunity to develop their own knowledge, by taking into account the target language, letting the students participate in class, ask questions about the topic, and create a context.

Another fact that can be mentioned is that the teacher does not teach based on Estándares Básicos de Competencias En Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés (Ministerio de educación nacional, 2006), as she never socializes what students are supposed to learn according to this guide, in the same way, they are not able to accomplish any of the goals illustrated in the the B1 level that they are supposed to reach. Furthermore, the teacher just teaches by using resources such as: the board and the book; therefore it makes the learning process slow and less attractive to the students. Focusing on the student's behavior, pupils most of the time do not pay attention to the teacher and they do not participate orally as they feel they have a bad pronunciation. It is worth mentioning that through an interview, we could realize that learners are not motivated toward the

class, since they feel English as something really hard to learn. Students just know some words in the target language but they do not know how to use them in a meaningful way as well. As a result, it can be mentioned the following issues in the English Teaching-Learning process: the lack of interaction among students, the native language is overused, the contents are based just on structures, and the main goal seems to be making students to be able to translate.

For those reasons this research was executed in order to improve learners' English oral skill in Colegio El Niño Jesús, since probably the teacher does not provide students the appropriate instruction for the development of the foreign language. therefore, we found some issues on the pupils, such as: stagnation in the verb to be, very little oral participation, expressions of daily use are not managed, impossibility to participate into a dialogue, among others. It is worth to say that this fact is due to the shortcomings found in the classroom, either by the use of traditional approaches or little dedication that it pays to the foreign language. Having as purpose to improve the oral skill of a specific group of students in a private school in Turbaco, we decided to choose Task Based Instruction in order to implement it; since in this approach, interaction plays a crucial role, the tasks that are to be carried out in such approach require the constant use of language toward tasks which arise on the daily life. As well the methodology based on task encourages learners to pay more attention on meaning rather than form.

Therefore, this investigation has as research question how to improve the oral skill on the students that belong to tenth and eleventh grade in a private school in Turbaco through Task based instruction?. Likewise, a general objective was set up which is to improve learners' oral

skill. In order to achieve this goal, we have to describe the students' English oral skill based on a standard test and to analyze how students deal in TBI classes.

With the intention to know if this investigation is possible to be carried out, several articles from Costa Rica, Argentina and Colombia have been considered, which are about the implementation of Task Based Instruction by illustrating aspects like its advantages, disadvantages, its function to teach students on how to express their ideas, develop autonomy and acquire good oral production in the target language.

Cordoba and Navas (2009) "Using task-based instruction in an ESP course in the computer center at the University of Costa Rica" present the advantages and disadvantages of using task based learning to help learners to infer the rule of superlative form of adjectives in English. This group of learners was taking an ESP course that was team taught by two instructors. The course lasted four months, and the instructors covered four different units.

In the lesson presented in this article, the students were asked to express their own ideas, either orally or in a written mode, about the topic of the lesson, the superlative form of the adjectives in English. It is important to mention that when the lesson was over, the main objective of the lesson had been achieved since the students had come up with the rule of the superlative form of adjectives in English. Students were motivated and proud of having done the task on their own, only with the help of the materials given to them and the help of their partners (Cordoba and Navas, 2009).

As well as, Davis and Engemann (2010) implemented TBI in Argentina, with a project called “Hacia un enfoque basado en tareas en el aprendizaje de inglés como lengua extranjera para la optimización de logros en la UNLaM”. In this case it was raised that students develop the language by themselves, the same ones were developing major autonomy in his learning across tasks that were facilitating the search of necessary information to realize every task and the attainment of the raised goals.

Furthermore, Peña and Onatra (2009) applied task based instruction in Colombia, in order to promote oral production; in its action research named “Promoting Oral Production through the Task-Based Learning Approach: A Study in a Public Secondary School in Colombia” is described an experience developed with a sample of learners belonging to four groups of seventh graders along nine months. Data were collected by means of audio recordings, field notes and performances. The results of the study let us analyze the different demands of transactional and interactional activities among novice EFL speakers. They can also be considered an attempt to understand the implications of such activities within the framework of the Task-Based Learning approach presented by Willis (1996). Thanks to the use of this approach, students were able to acquire: Good vocalization, words clearly pronounced, and speak aloud.

Based on the background illustrated before, it can be inferred that TBI has been successful in the different contexts it was implemented, this is due to its methodology, which takes a great quantity of grammar and presents it as situations, also make up situations where students can solve problems.

To have a better conception about this research, it is essential to know the different issues related to Task Based Instruction, such as: its features, concepts, design and procedure; this will allow us to identify its impact or effects in foreign language teaching.

Task based instruction is really helpful in language teaching thanks to its great characteristics. based on Nunan(2004) TBI holds features such as: “an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, the provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself, an enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning, and the linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom”. These features make the learning process something easier and also promote the fluency in the students.

Making a broad research based on its concept appear different definitions about what a task means; according to Nunan (2004)“a communicative task is a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right”. This means pupils have the chance to see the language like something useful and easy to learn.

In the same way, Skehan (1996) claims that “a task is an activity in which: meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has more priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome”.

Lee (2000) asserts that a task is “a classroom activity or exercises that has: an objective obtainable only by the interaction among participants; a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and a focus on meaning exchange; a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/ or produce the target language as they perform some set of work plans” (cited by Ellis, 2003, p 4) .

Another author is Fathet (2013) who considers that “Task based learning is an alternative approach to communicative language teaching because a task involves a primary focus on meaning, real-world processes of language use and any of the four languages skills”.

| PROCEDURE AND DESIGN OF TBI | |
|--|---|
| <p>Design</p> <p>According to Nunan (2004) “a syllabus design is concerned with the selection, sequencing and justification of the content of the curriculum”. This approach uses a design that creates an environment where students are supposed to learn by doing different tasks related to the real world, for instance: Taking part in a job interview, completing a credit card application, finding one's way from a hotel to a subway station, and checking into a hotel”.</p> | <p>Procedure</p> <p>In a class where task based instruction is implemented it is necessary to follow the following steps at the moment to put it in practice:</p> <p>Pre-task</p> <p>In this stage teacher explain to the students what is going to be done, so he tries to activate their prior knowledge about the topic.</p> <p>During the task</p> <p>The second phase is based on how the teacher distributes the time in each activity, and how to promote fluency by letting them to speak as much as possible as long as they achieve the goal. In addition, there are two ways to manage the time; one is to assign a period of time, and the other one is to give them a free time. Both of those options could be appropriate depending on the kind of tasks.</p> <p>Post-task</p> <p>The final phase is ‘post-task’, based on Ellis (2003) it “affords a number of options. These have three major pedagogic goals; (1) to provide an opportunity for a repeat performance of the task, (2) to encourage reflection on how the task was performed, and (3) to encourage attention to form, in particular to those forms that proved problematic to the learners when they performed the task</p> |

With this information about TBI, it can be inferred that this approach helps pupils to think in the target language through meaningful tasks based on the reality.

Elsewhere, to achieve this research, it is necessary to have a clear view or conception about the following concepts; since it is important to know the differences that exist among them and how they are useful to this researching.

It is found the concept of communicative competence, which is the different knowledge we have about a language; according to Canale & Swain (1980) “communicative competence engages different language competence such as: Linguistic competence that is the knowledge of the language code (grammatical rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, etc.); Sociolinguistic competence – the mastery of the socio-cultural code of language use (appropriate application of vocabulary, register, politeness, and style in a given situation); Discourse competence – the ability to combine language structures into different types of cohesive and coherent texts (e.g. letter, political speech, poetry, academic essay, cooking recipe); Strategic competence – the knowledge of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies which can enable us to overcome difficulties when communication breakdowns occur and enhance the efficiency of communication”.

Furthermore, there is the speaking skill which is defined by Luoma (2004) as “ an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the

participants themselves, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking”. which is related to TBI because of the focus on speaking, meaningful learning and functional English.

1. Methodology Design

Besides to the intention to transform an educative situation, it is necessary to take a critical point of view related to this fact in order to notice the causes of the failures that are taking place, and in this way solve these issues by keeping in mind new ideas. As well as, it is essential to make conclusions based on the interpretation of study units; this will allow us to create an improving plan, this implies to carry out a research under a qualitative paradigm.

For all these facts mentioned above this research is characterized for being qualitative. For this research has been taken as units of study the tenth and eleventh grade students, the English teacher, and the institutional P.E.I; the characteristics of each ones will be featured below: the learners belong to tenth grade are 31 which are 15 and 18 years old; and the students who are in tenth grade are 25, their ages are from 14 to 15 years. It is important to say that these teenagers live in a medium status and most of them own the necessary implements to their formation. Focusing on the English teacher, who has an English level belong to B2 after taking the English courses at the Centro Colombo Americano, he has one year of being teaching in high school and in primary. It is worthy to mention that the teacher is 26 years old. It is also important to describe the P.E.I, which is based in a humanistic education that highlights the values, by forming autonomous and integrated human beings.

Emphasizing on the way to approach this research, and how to achieve the main objective which is to improve learners' oral skill by using TBI, it is being made two specific objectives, which are based on the action-participative research. The first one is to diagnose the English level of the students according to European framework. To achieve this objective it will be

applied a test named the b level speaking test; this is a test based on the Common European Framework of Language. The b level exam has the following characteristics:

1. It is an integrated-graded exam. Each module contains an equal number of B1 and B2 level items.
2. It aims to assess the foreign language knowledge and skills developed within or outside the formal school system
3. The B level exam includes mediation activities for production. That is, candidates at this level are required to produce oral or written speech in English prompted by a Greek text.
4. Rubrics are always in English.

This module aims to test candidates' speaking production and specifically, candidates' ability to (answer questions about him/herself and his/her environment (two sets of questions, each containing a B1 and a B2 level question, i.e., four questions in total), (b) develop a topic on the basis of a visual prompt (1 task for B1 level and 1 for B2 level) (c) relay in English a message conveyed in a Greek text and respond to two tasks related to this text (1 task for B1 level and 1 for B2 level, which belong to the same set). The maximum total mark the candidate can obtain from all three oral activities is 20 points from examiner A and another 20 points from examiner B. In other words, the successful candidate can obtain a maximum of 40 points for module 4. The duration of the test is 25 minutes.

Here is presented how the test is carried out:

| | |
|--|---|
| Duration | 25 minutes |
| Mode of participation | Candidates are tested in pairs but do not converse with each other. They interact with the Examiner / Interlocutor. In activity 1, the examiner interacts with each candidate in turn. In activities 2 and 3 the examiner does not interact with candidates; s/he sets the task and the candidates respond. |
| <p>Warm-Up/Introducing Ourselves: (2 min for both candidates)</p> <p>Addressing each candidate separately, the Examiner asks a few general questions (where do you live, which school do you go to, what do you do for a living) to break the ice and get to know the candidates. The questions also provide information in relation to the candidate profile, enabling the examiner to choose more appropriate tasks. <u>Candidates are not assessed.</u></p> <p>Activity 1: Dialogue (6 minutes for both candidates- 3 minutes each)</p> <p>Dialogue between the examiner and each candidate. The candidate answers two sets of questions, each containing a B1 and a B2 level question about him/herself and his/her environment (i.e., four questions in total), posed by the examiner.</p> <p>Activity 2: One-sided talk (8 minutes for both candidates – 4 minutes each)</p> <p>Each candidate responds to two tasks (one B1 level task and one B2 level task) and develops a topic on the basis of a visual prompt.</p> <p>Activity 3: Mediation (10 minutes for both candidates- 5 minutes each)</p> <p>This activity tests candidates' ability to relay in English a message conveyed in a Greek text and answer questions about this text. Each candidate responds to two tasks (a B1 and a B2 level task belonging to a set) based on input from a Greek text.</p> <p>NOTE: Grading in the B level oral test occurs on many levels. There is an equal number of B1 level and B2 level questions throughout all activities. B1 level questions and tasks are cognitively and linguistically less complex and require less complex language production than B2 level tasks.</p> | |

The results of this evaluation will allow knowing where the shortcomings are, in which English level their oral skill is and what aspects need to be supported. It should be emphasized that also it will be observed the performance of the learners in their English classes, for that reason another of our specific objective is to analyze how students deal in TBI classes. To accomplish this objective it will be necessary a participant observation in which the researchers

are going to describe what happens in every moment of the class by writing a descriptive text. As well some surveys will be done in order to know students impact and opinions.

What follows is the survey's format:

Teniendo en cuenta que TBI corresponde a Task Based Instruction, TD (totalmente en desacuerdo), D (desacuerdo), P (parcialmente de acuerdo) y TA (totalmente de acuerdo), por favor realice esta encuesta:

| Descripción de los puntos a encuestar: | TD | D | PA | TA |
|--|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| En las clases de TBI he perdido el miedo a hablar en el idioma inglés. | | | | |
| Al usar TBI, he sentido que mis habilidades orales han mejorado. | | | | |
| TBI usa metodologías que tienen en cuenta mi contexto, gustos y necesidades. | | | | |
| Las interacciones en TBI facilitan mi aprendizaje. | | | | |
| TBI me ofrece variedades de actividades donde mejoro la fluidez verbal. | | | | |
| El rol que desempeño como estudiante en las clases de TBI es un rol interactivo y de mucha comunicación. | | | | |
| Al utilizar TBI siento que es más fácil expresar mis ideas de forma oral en el idioma Inglés. | | | | |
| Considero que TBI me permite tener una conversación en el idioma inglés. | | | | |
| Desde que empezaron las clases con TBI mi pronunciación en el idioma Inglés ha mejorado. | | | | |

2. Results

It can be reported that in the speaking test, we selected 20 students at random of 53 students from 10th and 11th grade and applied the test. 90% of the learners presented several failures in the oral skill such as: low fluency, misunderstanding of the questions, , they did not give long answers, there was lack of vocabulary, bad pronunciation, there was no connection between the words , as well they combined their native language with the target language.

On the other hand, in the English classes based on TBI, students were engaged in every moment, as they realized what the real use of the language is. For instance, in the class that pretended to teach them how to understand questions and expressions related to them and their friends, learners participated a lot in every stage of the class, as in the pre- task pupils looked how the teacher introduced himself in order to do the task by themselves, in the during task they watched a video in where they had to identify the questions and expressions that were used to meet someone for the first time, in that part of the class they were really focused trying to catch as many expressions as possible. Finally, in the post- task, learners interviewed each other exchanging ideas by interacting. In this task, learners felt involve in the class, since they did not stop talking in the target language and were making and answering questions about personal information.

Focusing on another class, it can be asserted that it was also successful due to students developed their oral skill having a context and a communicative purpose, this can be reflected in the following description: in the pre task learners saw how the teacher describe himself taking into account: his/her size, height, skin color, shape of hair, eyes color, among others features. In

the during task students were given a puzzle word in where they had to find several adjectives and then describe themselves using those words. in the post task every pupil was asked to stand up in front of the class and describe his/her favorite actor and their partners had to guess who he or she was . It is worth to highlight that learners achieved the main goal that was to be able to describe themselves and other person in the target language, and they reached it by learning in a functional way improving their oral skill.

It can be mentioned the description of a third class based on TBI which the topic was Daily routines.

In the pre task they listened a song about the topic, then they saw some pictures that the teacher pasted on the board, in categories as: morning, afternoon and evening. Next they identified pictures with people doing activities and saying “it’s morning, In the morning I wake up. I wake up at 6:00 a.m”. Then the teacher shared the objective to the class of learning to ask questions about daily routines and answering with appropriate dialogue about daily activities.

In the during task the students were answering Yes/No questions about the pictures, such as, “Do the boys take a shower at 6:30 a.m?” .“What does the girl do at 6:30 p.m.?. The students practiced by answering as a group and then individually. After, there were Pair students in groups, they were given some cards Student A pointed to a picture and asked a question such as, “What is she doing?” Student B (while covering up a word list) answered, “She is waking up.” Then, Student A and Student B switch roles.

In the post task each student was given a blank calendar of the particular month of the lesson and was told to write their daily activities for each day. They were going to report to the entire class, they had to place in the calendar one or two activities they participated in during the last week and the times they did them.

It was concluded that the objective of the class was successfully achieved, since the students were immersed in each activity, they guessed, talked, imagined, and created. It was meaningful because of the type of activities, there were presented activities that they do in their real life so they can still keep us production, ping them for everyday situations.

Elsewhere, the surveys applied to 29 students at random to 53 students from 10th and 11th illustrated that 85% of them agreed with the different statements in favor of TBI presented.

Conclusions And Recommendations

According to the research already made, Task Based Instruction provides a lot of benefits to the learners, as they can be involved in the target language as well learn in a meaningful way. This makes students use the language and be able to participate in a conversation with a native person; expressing their ideas with confidence. In TBI classes the teacher also acquires really good features such as monitor, language facilitator, and he or she starts speaking the target language in every moment of the class. Indeed the teacher knows how to teach what is demanded by the common European framework and is going to realize if the students are really learning. This is due to TBI evaluations are based on the use of the language, for that reason is easier to identify who perform the tasks without cheating.

Otherwise, in this research can be mention the fact that at the beginning is hard for learners to assimilate the change from a structural class to a functional one , as functional classes requires more effort from them in order to achieve the goals, so that they have to spend more time studying and practicing English. However, it is really grateful when they start realizing of their ability to speak in the target language. For that reason they change their attitude and feel motivated as well eager to continue learning.

On the other hand, taking into account the importance of the oral skill when learning a foreign language, it can be asserted that it is not easy to create the adequate environment to develop this skill. As to think in the target language requires a lot of input and situations in order to practice. For that reason, we tried to find out a form that involves these important aspects. TBI

was a really good choice since it provides the strategies based on the communicative aspects of the language.

As well these kinds of strategies have positive effects on the learners such as, motivation, production and participation.

Furthermore, this approach is suitable in large or small classes as it makes students be practicing all the time and helps to the teacher to have a better control of the class discipline, thanks to the fact that pupils are busy most of the time doing the tasks or the activities. Elsewhere, TBI does not depend on the materials, since the main idea is to promote communication into the classes, so that teachers just need to have as purpose to encourage students to speak by focusing on the meaning rather than form, learning in a functional way. This can be done without resources since the most important is that teachers have very clear the tasks and how learners are going to reach the main goal. However, it does not means that the use of the flash cards, vide vein, or other materials aids is not going to be meaningful, on the contrary make easier the learning process.

Powers (2005) claims that “Task Based Instruction is suitable for all ages and backgrounds, especially young learners. All children have learned their L1 in a contextualized setting, learning grammar and structure inductively. Their focus is on meaning, not form. A special consideration for these learners is that their language skills are still developing and teachers must be careful to create appropriate tasks for their level”.

When TBI is used, is important to take into account that the activities must be interesting for the students based on their ages in order to keep them motivated; as well as language used does not have any limit, pupils speak by producing whatever tense they want.

Focusing on the disadvantages, Powers (2005) also affirms that “a major one is that Task Based Instruction requires a high level of creativity and initiative on the part of the teacher. Other disadvantages are that students may prefer more traditional types of teaching. TBI relies heavily on student motivation and commitment. Students, who are used to a teacher-fronted classroom with little interaction on their part, might feel uncomfortable and even unwilling to take some of the language risks involved in completing the tasks, especially if the tasks occur outside the classroom”.

It is worthy to say that these disadvantages help us to improve as teachers, since the several demanding this approach provides turn into a challenge to overcome.

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