IMPROVING SPEAKING THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES FOR TEENAGERS: A CASE STUDY

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Nowadays, the development of speaking is one of the main issues in language education*,* and so, many theoretical and practical studies are concerned with this area (Chuang, 2009; Baleghizadeh and Oladrostram, 2011, etc.). It has been considered one of the most difficult skills that a student has to acquire and has even been associated with the proficiency that a person has regarding a target language when asked if they can speak a language (Roldán and Gómez, 2005: 322).

Many different components can influence the process of development of this skill and, consequently, the acquisition of a second language, which allow the access to other cultures (Kasper and Omori, 2010: 455). In this regard, it is important to keep in mind significant aspects, such as the effects of psychological and sociocultural factors and their connection in many cases. Psychological factors have to do with "the structures and processes which underlie a human's ability to speak" (Aitchison, 1988: 1) and, in this sense, motivation, aptitude and personality have an important role (Broussard's, 2002; VanPatten and Benati, 2010; Shams, 2006). Sociocultural factors, on the other hand, can affect learners in a higher or lower degree depending on their innate way of being (Brown, 1994b: 169), and comprise familiar background, teachers, friends, place where the students live and, in sum, the cultural environment, which will have a relevant role on their beliefs, learning styles, motivation, attitude, preferences, etc. (Fonseca, 2005: 79).

We can also mention the role of input and output, which allow the interaction among students; the importance of learning and using strategies in the path of improving their oral acquisition; the relevance of working communicative activities in class, appropriate to learners' needs; the significant role of the teacher as a guide to lead students towards their autonomy; and, finally, the use of proper criteria in assessment, as well as feedback.

My research is a case study, in which I will try to check if some communicative activities related to a place that a student knows can help in the progress of speaking

in terms of fluency, considering other elements which are connected with the individual and the speaking communicative skill: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, comprehension and interactivity in such a process.

To achieve my aim I have selected a 15 years old student who needs to improve his speaking skill and who will help me to reach conclusions in this regard. He is studying the first cycle of secondary compulsory education in a public High School. Spanish is his native language and he studies English as his second language. The informant shared his learning experience with five more peers of similar background, studying the same course and living in the same town.

The process followed in this study was as follows: students had to talk about whatever they knew about Estepona before starting the eight communicative activities I selected, and do the same after having worked with all of them. In this way, I could measure if the informant had made any evolution in his speaking. I measured it qualitatively and quantitatively using a rubric and showing the length of time of his speech. The ratings I used in my scale were: ´Excellent, Good, Fair and Poor´ and its numeric equivalents were ´4, 3, 2, and 1´. My marking implied subjectivity because I was going to assess a productive skill, although I tried to limit this degree of subjectivity by using the rubric.

I considered it appropriate that the informant should be the first and the last to talk about Estepona. Students did four activities and, after a period of one month, we started working on four further similar tasks. I thought it would be convenient if one month went by so that they could consolidate what they had already learned, and after a month, four more speaking activities could be useful as a review and as a way of acquiring a new level of oral proficiency.

Speaking activities included dialogues, problem-solving activities, role plays, descriptions, storytelling, questions and answers, etc., so they participated in a quiz, described printed images about Estepona (e.g.: clock tower, a beach, a bullring, a hotel, a golf course, Selwo, etc.), played roles (e.g. receptionist-client), organized a travel (routes, details of flight, etc.), participated in a contest, re-recorded a video and did its narration, etc. The materials were obtained from tourist offices (booklet and DVDs), Internet and voice recordings. No content modification was done in order that students should feel as close as possible to reality.

Finally, I proceeded to study the informant's speaking evolution using an analytic scale which I designed which included the student's proficiency in grammar, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation, comprehensibility and interactive communication

during the different stages.

To conclude, I could check that the communicative activities based on a place the informant already knew helped to improve his fluency and vocabulary. Nevertheless, I consider that it was necessary to pay more attention to some components that he needed to improve, although, according to his characteristics of a good learner, he is on the right path towards making that improvement.

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