A study on Oral Competence in the English Language

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Note: This version of the article in English was prepared with the collaboration of Lindsay Burford, teacher at the Language School of UABC in Tijuana.

Summary:
This is a report on the investigation that took place at the "Facultad de Idiomas" on campus at the UABC in Tijuana on oral competence gained in taking weekly English classes at the English Faculty at the UABC. Firstly, there is a brief introduction on the situation of English here at the Faculty. In the second part, there is a description of the courses given at the faculty. The third part covers the method used in the investigation. Finally in the fourth part, describes the results of the investigation.

1. Introduction
Teaching oral competence is a challenge for teachers in the area of languages.

The reason could be that in the majority of cases students do not have an opportunity to practice their new language out of their English class. Furthermore, in some cases, they do not give themselves enough time to practice their new skill, or the activities in class are not appropriate with the right end in mind. This is why the teaching of English as a second language falls heavily on the classroom teacher to create a wide range of activities to enable the student to obtain his or her object: oral competence. In addition, it is the responsibility of the teacher to be aware of his or her students' objectives, and, in addition, those objectives of the English program.

This project arose from the frustration of the author's observation that students completing their courses had difficulties and limits in oral competence. Also, from listening to teachers' comments who say that students do not reach sufficient oral competence and the students themselves express their own dissatisfaction. These were the concepts behind the idea to carry out a study to help throw some light on changing the situation.

Analyzing information from students and teachers, the author believes it is necessary that both parties need to modify their approaches to oral competence.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Context

Every effort is made at the Faculty to help those interested in developing oral competence with courses at different times and the number of hours to be studied. There are courses offered on a weekly, a Saturday, and a summer basis. This study focuses on the weekly six hour courses which include an optional two hour study session in Study Hall, a total of 128 hours per semester. The program consists of six levels terminating at a high intermediate level. On completion of the program the student receives a diploma which enables him or her to begin any 'licenciatura' program at the UABC.

The students are a mixture of professionals, university students, housewives, and assembly plant workers and the general public in general. The program includes the four skills: listening and oral competence, reading and writing. Furthermore, grammar and vocabulary acquisition are included as

learning tools. Self learning is at all times promoted, a teach yourself to learn approach.

2.2 Defining the oral communication

It is important to mention here that many authors' definitions of oral competence have been included. For example, Bygates (1991) defines oral competence as the ability to form abstract sentences that are produced and adapted to circumstances at the moment of speaking. Therefore, making rapid decisions and contributions that adequately fit the situation. On the other hand, O'Maley and Valdez (1996) say that oral competence refers to an ability to understand meaning between two or more speakers.

Yet another definition by Brown and Yule (1983) considers oral competence as an interactive process where a meaning is built on by producing and receiving processed information.

2.3 The Communicative Method

The communicative method favors interpersonal communication. The method works on the integrated skills of oral competence, written production, listening comprehension, and reading. Authentic language has an important role being taken from real life situations. The purpose of the activities is to produce and promote real communicative interactions.

Communicative teaching is organized around the three Ps, ie, presentation, practice, and production.

To explain in more detail what the Communicative Method entails Brown (2000:43) has compiled the following points:

1. The object of each class is to focus on all components of language learning (grammar, speaking, functions, sociolinguistics, and strategies) of oral competence

2. Fluency and accuracy are viewed as the principle objectives of communicative techniques.

3. In a communicative class students have to use the object language

4. Students can develop their own learning strategies to help them obtain their own objects.

5. The role of the teacher is to facilitate and guide, and not to dominate the class by having all the information and knowledge. This promotes genuine interaction between students that produces a real opportunity to develop their own real language and confidence.

Finally, it is necessary to mention that in a communicative class, in addition to what Brown says, it is important that the student is motivated, this is imperative to create an ideal learning environment that includes pictures, drawings, movies, TV shows, and meaningful activities for the student, variety of activities, etc

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Form of study

To carry out this study, it was necessary to use a method that would explore the situation and show what was actually happening. This type of investigation would

help to explore and get specific information that would later be interpreted. Qualitative research has the following characteristics: As in any form of investigation, this work was based on bibliographies and documents, that helped construct a theory that would guide the investigation and give substance to the conclusions that are presented in chapter 4. To carry out the investigation two techniques were used: observation and interviews.

3.2 Observations

Observations are necessary in an investigation to observe objectively determined phenomena in the context where it develops. Observations are, according to Hernandez, Fernandez and Baptista (1991, p. 316) "is the systematic documentation of valid and trustworthy components of behavior. They can be used as instruments of measurement in many diverse circumstances." In this context, they are used in the classroom, with the intension of identifying situations as the role of the teacher and the student, types of activities that take place, and the materials used, with the object of identifying the methodology employed in the classroom and the development of oral competence.

For the observations seven groups from the English courses at the Faculty of Languages were chosen, one group from each level. Each group was observed for an entire semester. The groups were chosen at random without any previous dialog with the teachers that the observations were going to be carried out, with the intension that classes under normal teaching situations would be observed, and not those being prepared with the observations in mind, therefore,

hindering the results. Each observation was for an hour during the first hour of the two hour class.

The observations were planned to detect the type of method used by the teacher in the classroom. On observing the class, a form was filled out with the different activities presented in each class situation.

In general, the observations analyzed:

-The types of activities. With this we tried to learn whether the teacher promoted activities directed toward oral competence, furthermore, to learn if they were sufficient with adequate variety. It was important to determine the type of activities applied by the teacher in class to generate information and to determine whether they were activities that promoted oral competence or not.

-Class organization. Here the types of interaction were observed that motivated the class, that is, if the students worked in pairs, or in groups, and the interaction between student and teacher.

- The materials used in class. With these activities we tried to determine the type of material used by the teacher and the object for using them. It was considered important that the teacher use appropriate materials that invited the student to speak.

The process to analyze the data was made in the following way:

On being in the classroom, the observer noted the situations that influenced oral competence and /or that had relevance in answering the questions designed for the purpose of speaking. (Annex 1) On finishing the observation, the forms were

filled out with the information showing that the activities actually promoted oral competence and with what frequency.

3.3 Interviews

The interview was designed to compile information by means of a student questionnaire on the English courses. The questionnaire attempted to learn about situations that could affect the development of the students' oral competence. It focused on attitudes toward the target language, culture, motivation, and anxiety related to language learning. Also, learning strategies were investigated.

The criterion to select a student to be interviewed was the following: that the student to have begun in the first semester and moved through the six semesters. Seven students were chosen as representing the student body in general and were composed of assembly plant workers, a professional and an assembly line worker, two housewives, two university students, and a pre-primary school teacher.

The object of the interviews was to explore the characteristics, attitudes, and strategies the students had to develop oral competence. It was decided to include external aspects of language learning, such as, the formal teaching in the classroom, and personal aspects like learning styles, aptitude, age, motivation, attitudes, family background, and personal strategies that the student brings to class that counts for learning.

The interview was structured around a questionnaire with "a series of prepared questions" (Pardinas, 1998, p. 113). Seven students from the course at

the Faculty of Languages on campus at Tijuana were interviewed. These students' ages ran from 20 to 50 years of both sexes. These are the questions asked:

-Do you like English or do you study it because it is a requirement?

-Do you like the culture behind the language, ie, US?

-Do you feel anxious studying the language?

Other factors were taken into account, age, studies, sex, motivation, stress and the frequency the student used English out of class.

4. Results: analysis of other data.

4.1 Observations

On observing classes it was found that few activities were used to promote oral competence. For example, in the first level group, of the five activities observed none were designed to promote oral competence, in two of the activities the teacher asked questions related to grammar exercises and the students were limited to short answers. These types of activities focused the students' attention on writing grammatically correct sentences, and one of the aspects of communicative teaching is that writing long grammatically correct sentences is not to be encouraged. Oral communication was limited to only a few of the students whereas time dedicated to speaking was scarce. This reflects a conflict between the communicative teaching method, in which the courses at the Faculty are based on, with a very limited speaking role students have in the classrooms.

The results demonstrated that classroom activities focused on resolving grammatical exercises and much class time was based on the teacher explaining

such exercises. In all the groups exercises of this nature were observed. When language teaching follows this line, students do not achieve oral competence. Students play a passive role, the teacher only corrects when mistakes are made, oral practice is limited to reading questions aloud and responding to exercises in the text book, in some of the classes observed, and above all in the beginning levels, the teacher translated the grammar structures when students had doubts or questions.

In these types of classroom activities, language being used is not authentic nor has it meaning for the student. An example of this was when the teacher asked, "Have you ever played rugby? the student was to answer with a complete answer, "No, I have never played rugby." which shows that the student is not using natural language.

Another activity that is often repeated in the classroom is reading a paragraph, the students read in silence, then after answer the questions on vocabulary and comprehension, and finally, the teacher asks each student to read one of the questions. Sometimes this reading is done aloud and the teacher corrects pronunciation. If a student makes a mistake, the teacher asks another student to read the question correctly. There is no natural language taking place in the classroom, only repetition of what is in the text book.

In the observations it was noted that to work with vocabulary development, the teacher asked if the students had any questions in respect to the vocabulary, and if there were questions, the teacher would translate the words in most cases. In some other cases, the teacher used the word in a sentence. A couple of

exercises came after to demonstrate comprehension or learning of grammar rules.

This approach does not help the student develop oral competence because the teacher would decide if it was good or bad, also, the teacher would decide who would or would not participate, or at best, only the advanced students participated, meanwhile the majority were silent. The students and the teacher translated to understand the grammar rules. An example, "I would have liked to go to Europe- Me hubiera gustado ir a Europa.," the abuse of this type of exercise was a problem in developing oral competence; continuing to be an approach based on the grammar of the language rather than on communication.

Furthermore, the communicative approach should promote the most authentic situations possible in the classroom where the student should be constantly interacting with his or her fellow student, taking advantage of the different functions of the language, like giving advice, asking for help, seeking information, among others. The teacher in this approach should function as a monitor of the activities and not always making decisions on who participate or not. Sometimes the teacher interacts with the students; however, the role of the teacher is to create situations for participation, discussions, and student interaction.

The overall analysis of data gathered arrived at the conclusion that activities with the object of producing oral competence were insufficient in all the groups, this can be seen in annex 3, where the type of activities for development were described in each class. Situations were not created that would help or

favor situations where students could express their own ideas or opinions. In the isolated activities where the students worked in pairs or in groups were directed towards resolving exercises from the text book, where the students filled in the blanks, or answered written questions.

The material used was the textbook; an exception was when a teacher brought a text downloaded from the Internet, which was a dramatic difference in this class in comparison to the rest. However, in general, only the textbook was used. Some teachers said that some times they changed the format of using lessons from the textbook to present more attractive activities for the students, more suited to the situation at hand, and therefore, more realistic, owing to the fact that the textbook contained themes that the students couldn't relate to or situations that they do not live in. For example, activities related to winter snow sports or activities set in high snow capped mountains, to give some examples. To find out why teachers did not use the textbook for most of the class time, and if this actually helped with oral competence, teachers were asked why and they replied: structures were repeated, there were no learning strategies, it is repetitive, it is boring, the practices are mechanical, and there were many grammar exercises with few activities and too much information.

On the other hand, other teachers commented that the textbook promoted communication from the beginner level helped the expression of ideas, opinions and emotions, there were real situations, and it had appropriate language for all levels and promoted the use of the language.

As can be seen, there was no clear unified opinion in regard to the textbook, if it was adequate, or not to develop oral expression. On one hand, some teachers agreed that the textbook contained exercises that helped the expression of ideas y emotions and at the same time that helped the student to practice the language of real life situations. Nevertheless, the opinion of others was that the textbook had too many grammar exercises, very few activities, too much information, and the practices were mechanical.

4.2 Interviews

With regards to the interviews, it was agreed that the students were motivated and liked the language they were studying with positive comments on the lifestyles of English speaking people and that they enjoyed contact with native speakers, although two of the interviewed said that they got nervous when they were confronted with situations where they had to speak English. All said they were happy with what they could do in English; that they could read, listen to songs, watch programs on TV, or listen to the radio in English. In regards to questions referring to activities carried on out of the classroom, most of the answers were "no" in the majority of the cases. This indicates that the majority of the students did not have any activities in English outside of their English class that would help them develop their learning of the language.

4.4 Conclusions

The teaching of a foreign language and the results obtained partially depend on the capacity of understanding the methodology being used and the effects that this can bring about on students and their needs.

If on the one hand, the prime need of the student is to communicate orally, then there is a clear need to give him or her every opportunity to do so, focusing on the language as a means of communication, and that this has the purpose of giving the student something to say when he or she needs to, and of helping the student use the different functions of the language from the very first levels.

On the other hand, the student has to be guided in finding his or her own way as a learner of the language and discover his or her own opportunities for using it, and above all, be conscious of his or her responsibility of success in the process of instruction and developing autonomy; this then will be the student who ultimately receives the most benefit from learning.

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Annex 1

ENTREVISTA PARA ALUMNOS INCLUIDOS EN EL PROYECTO DE INVESTIGACIÓN COMUNICACIÓN ORAL EN LOS ALUMNOS DE LA FACULTAD DE IDIOMAS TIJUANA"

NOMBRE_____EDAD_____

1. LE GUSTA EL INGLES O LO ESTUDIA PORQUE LO NECESITA?_____

2. LE GUSTA LA CULTURA NATIVA DEL IDIOMA?_____

3. HAY ANSIEDAD AL ESTUDIAR EL IDIOMA?_____

4. CUANTAS HORAS A LA SEMANA LAS DEDICA PARA PRACTICA INDEPENDIENTE DE INGLES?

_____

5. QUE ACTIVIDADES REALIZA PARA SU PRACTICA DEL IDIOMA

ve televisión
Oportunidades que busca para practicar el idioma oralmente
Lee en ingles
_____

CUALES?_____

_____

UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA DE BAJA CALIFORNIA
FACULTAD DE IDIOMAS TIJUANA
Instrumento para evaluar la metodología de la producción oral.

Fecha_____

Explique brevemente características de la clase: edad, nivel, no de alumnos, etc.

_____

_____

_____

1.ORGANIZACIÓN

a) Tipos de interacción.

Maestro /alumno. _____

Alumno/alumno._____

b) Tipos de actividades: Diálogos, entrevistas, conversaciones, presentaciones etc.

_____

_____

c)Cuantas veces se utiliza el recurso de trabajar en:

Presentaciones individuales, pares, grupos.

_____

_____

MATERIALES

a)Tipos de materiales: ej. Autentico, no autentico. Describa.

_____

b)Cuantas actividades son de practica controlada. ?_____

c)Cuantas veces se presenta la oportunidad de practicar la fluidez del idioma. ?

_____

d)Cuantas veces la practica oral esta dirigida para producir funciones del idioma. ?

_____

e)El alumno practica las pausas, el ritmo, entonación. ?

_____

f)Hay correcciones cuando hay errores? Si_____No_____

_____

g)El maestro expone a los alumnos a diferentes situaciones para producir el idioma.?
Si_____No_____

h)Si es, si cuantas veces_____

i)Tienen los alumnos oportunidades de hablar de temas no preparados de antemano. ?
Si_____No_____

j)Que duración tienen las actividades para hablar.

_____

k)Que acciones lleva a cabo el maestro para ayudar al alumno a hablar. ?

_____

_____

l)El alumno habla de sus emociones hace preguntas, juegos, discusiones, presentaciones
preparadas, simulación y caracterización de personajes. ?

_____

_____

_____

m)Cuantas veces el alumno toma la iniciativa para hablar. ?

_____

n)Tiene el alumno la oportunidad de hablar de situaciones reales? Si_____No_____

_____

Annex 3

NOMBRES DE LAS ACTIVIDADES	1	2	3	4	5	6
Lecturas orales voz alta	1		1	1	1	
Lecturas orales en silencio		1		1		
*Entrevistas						
*Resolver problemas		*1				
*Discusiones						*1
*Debate						
*Dar opiniones			*1	*1	*1	
*Presentaciones						
*Caracterizar papeles						
*Actividades en grupos		*1				
*Actividades en pares		*1		*1		
*Actividades de toda la clase			1			1
Pregunta respuesta /maestro-alumno	2	1	1	1	1	1
Resolver ejercicios gramaticales	2	1	1	1	1	1
*Repetición						
*Juegos						
*Discusiones				*1		
*Dar instrucciones						
*Contar historias						
*Canciones						
*Reconstruir historias						
Ejercicio de escritura					1	
Ejercicio de vocabulario						1