

“IMPROVING ORAL PRODUCTION IN ADULT EFL STUDENTS AT THE LANGUAGE CENTER OF UABC-TIJUANA”

Paper presented at the VII Encuentro Nacional e Internacional de Centros de Autoacceso: Innovación educativa y autoaprendizaje. Mexicali, B.C. October 30th and 31st 2008.

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Summary

The purpose of the present study is to improve oral production in adult students of English as a foreign language of intermediate level at the Language Center of Universidad Autónoma de Baja California (UABC).

The method used is a case study based action-research project, consisting of an intervention program that implements a set of interactive speaking activities that include learning strategies, so that students improve their oral production. The learning strategies applied to improve student's oral production were chosen according to the type and characteristics of the activity.

It has been proven that through the application of interactive speaking activities that include learning strategies, strategy training, a careful selection of the speaking activities, and in a nice environment, the oral production of adult EFL students of intermediate level improved considerably.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL), learning strategies, interactive speaking activities, and oral production.

Introduction

Dubin and Olshtain (1991) say that English is the most requested language around the world because it is the language of wider communication. This is also the case of English as a foreign language taught at the Language Center of UABC-Tijuana, where English courses are more requested than French, Japanese, German, Italian, and Spanish courses for foreigner students.

Different situations observed in the classroom called the author's interest in working on this project. Firstly, students of intermediate level semester 2007-1 were eager to speak, however, they got intimidated, pressured by time or fellow students,

tended to use their mother tongue, if they did not know a single word they interrupted their speech and refused to continue, among others.

Folse and Ivone (2005) point out, that some students are naturally good at speaking, and they tend to participate in all conversation exercises while others can be quiet and reserved. This is, while some students are naturally extroverted others are quiet, and this is because of their personality types. However, understanding why adult EFL students had a poor oral production when speaking required a deeper investigation

Regarding speaking skills, Huntley points out in the conclusions section of the investigation she conducted in UABC-Tijuana in 2006, that “the classes remain mostly teacher-fronted and few pair or group activities are taking place” (Huntley, 2006, p.3). She observed that students talking time was uneven, some students spoke a lot while others remained quiet. The teachers used to speak English throughout the class in all higher- levels, but in basic levels the class was taught in Spanish because the teachers assumed that the students would not be able to understand if they spoke only English.

The problem:

The lack of interactive speaking activities that include learning strategies to improve oral production in adult EFL students of intermediate level, results in a poor performance when speaking.

This project expects finding valuable information that contributes to overcome the different problems adult EFL students of intermediate level face when speaking in the target language in the classroom. The objective of this study is to improve oral production in adult EFL students of intermediate level at the Language Center of UABC, by implementing an intervention program.

English as a foreign language taught at the Language Center of UABC.

At the Language Center of UABC, English as a foreign language course is based on the textbook American Headway, which consists of a multilevel series for adults and young adults that combine the best of traditional methods and current approaches in language teaching.

The methodology of the Language Center, addresses the development of the communicative skills and the autonomous learning in both, the classroom and in the Self-Access Center. The curriculum integrates writing, reading, listening comprehension, and speaking skills through activities that are meaningful to students.

Learning strategies

The learning strategies used by the teachers to help students cope with the new language are the key to make a difference in the learning process. Steinberg points out that, “learning strategies are the particular approaches or techniques that learners employ to try to learn a second language” (2001, p.76-77). He says that learners will use a particular strategy depending on the problem they are facing such as to remember a new word. Learners can also remember and explain what they did to remember that word. This is, the learning strategies used by students vary from student to student depending on their individual mental processes.

For the purpose of this project, the definition of learning strategies provided by Oxford (1990) will be used, since it provides us with a holistic view because it involves making learning easier and enjoyable through the application of learning strategies. She defines learning strategies as “Learning strategies are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning. Strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for

developing communicative competence. Appropriate language learning strategies result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence.” (Oxford, 1990, p. 1)

Oral production skills:

Bygate (1991) lists a set of facilitation and compensation strategies that students naturally use to facilitate their production of speech. He says, “Firstly, we can see how helpful it is for learners to be able to facilitate oral production by using these features, and how important it is for them to get used to compensating for the problems” (Bygate, 1991, p. 20). The facilitation strategies are simplification, ellipsis, short-cuts, time-creating devices, formulaic expressions.

Basing interactive speaking activities on principles to achieve impact in learners

Different authors consulted to develop this project, provided a wide variety of interactive speaking activities according to their experiences. Some of the authors’ points of view and suggestions are briefly described as follows:

Folse and Ivone (2005), point out that having students write out their ideas before participating in a discussion, allow them to reexamine, rethink and recycle their thoughts. Tillitt and Newton (1993), suggest an easy way for students to learn communicative strategies and the functional use of language. They consider that students of English as a second language need to be aware of social rules for language use that may be different from those on their own culture. Tillitt and Newton distinguish between formal and informal speech people use when speaking. Yorkey (1985) suggests several activities that are designed to be complete by two students in order to practice communication and listening skills. They need to work cooperatively to solve different situations like follow routes on a map, reproduce line drawings, strip stories, make appointments, and so forth. The intention of this kind of activities is to help students develop real communicative competence.

Zelman (2005) suggests a series of speaking activities designed to promote conversational fluency, such as interviews, role-plays, group work, and discussions. Role-play activities, present hypothetical situations in which two or more students interact without any special preparation. This kind of activity demand students' creativity and imagination. It helps them improve their fluency, and creates a nice environment in the classroom. Some interactive speaking activities in which students participate in this project are the ones proposed by these authors, and will be widely explained in the Methodology section.

Methodology of the study

The purpose of the present project is to improve oral production in adult EFL students of intermediate level at the Language Center of UABC by implementing an intervention program. A series of elements of the intervention program are similar to the elements of the action-research method that is followed in this study such as: problem identification, needs detection, the look for solutions by implementing an action plan, and reflecting on the outcomes to improve a problematic situation, or continuing the investigation. Álvarez-Gayou (2003), points out that action-research method is successful in education because it has been used to look for solutions to problems related to situations in the learning process. The intervention program is composed of mini-cycles that involve the reflection on the findings in each one.

The subjects of study in this project are the group of adult EFL students of intermediate level, semester 2007-2, who willingly accepted to participate in the investigation when they were invited to. The investigation took place during regular classes at the Language Center of UABC, Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico.

Instruments:

Several instruments were designed to collect information from English teachers and students, according to the purposes for which they were elaborated. The instruments designed and aspects to investigate are described as follows:

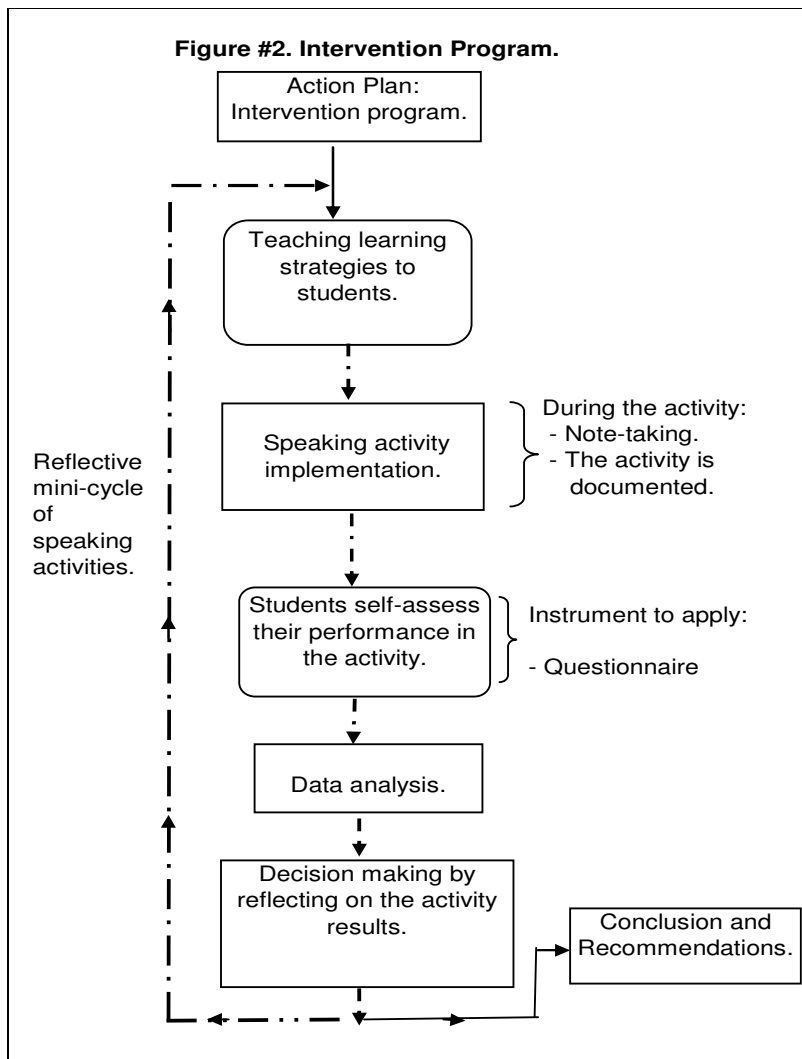
1. Questionnaire for English teachers: Teachers propose a speaking activity that they consider the most successful for its capacity to improve oral production in adult EFL students (appendix A).

2. Questionnaire to describe the subjects of study: With the purpose of getting familiar with the participants of the investigation, students answer a questionnaire providing personal information (appendix B).

3. Self-assessing questionnaire: The students will provide feedback to the teacher, by self-assessing their performance during the activity. This questionnaire will be administered after each interactive speaking activity (appendix C).

Procedure of the intervention program:

The intervention program's action plan consists of the application of a set of interactive speaking activities. The implementation of the speaking activities will form ten reflective mini-cycles; each one begins by teaching learning strategies to help students sound fluent when speaking. Then, students practice direct and indirect learning strategies the activity involves. Next, students self-assess their performance, the data is analyzed, and the mini-cycles finish with the reflection on the results to take into account students' needs in the next activity.



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Description of the interactive speaking activities:

The types of interactive speaking activities that were applied in this project are topic-based and task-based. Ur (2002), defines topic-based and task-based activities as follows: “the first simply asks participants to talk about a (controversial) subject, the main objective being clearly the discussion process itself; the second asks them actually to perform something, where the discussion process is a means to an end.” (p. 123) The learning strategies involved in the interactive speaking activities will be described within the activity purpose. Through their practice, it is expected that students improve their oral production. As an example, see activity 1 (appendix D).

Results

Data collection took place in two phases. The first one consisted of getting familiar with the subjects of study in order to know their language and situation needs. In the second phase, ten interactive speaking activities were applied in the field research, followed by the analysis and interpretation of the data through content analysis.

Within the first phase of the investigation, carried out on September 6, 2007, a questionnaire was applied to get familiar with the group of study. The information gathered is presented as follows:

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GROUP OF STUDY				
Table 1				
Students	Women	13	Occupation:	10
	Men	5		
Age	Ages range from:	18 to 40 years old	Work and study	
Marital Status	Married	7	Study English and a career	
	Single	11		
Place of Birth	Baja California	10	Only study English	
	South Korea	1		
	Other States	7		

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The previous information shows that the group of study is heterogeneous, due to the differences presented among the group members such as gender, marital status, ages, level of studies, occupations, and their personal goals and reasons to study English. The instrument applied allowed having a wide panorama of the students' needs and interests. Students pointed out having a purpose to study English, and

being interested in speaking fluently. Besides, they showed themselves wide open to learn and to work on their weakness areas.

Result of the intervention.

The table 13 contains the most relevant answers of the self-assessing questionnaire of the speaking activities. The data gathered is presented in frequency descriptions and percentages.

Most relevant answers of the self-assessing questionnaire of the speaking activities. Table 13.

Question:	Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 3	Activity 4	Activity 5	Activity 6	Activity 7	Activity 8	Activity 9	Activity 10
a) Did you like the activity? Why?	We spoke with no fear 40%	We practiced speaking 37%	We practiced speaking 45%	We practiced speaking 33%	It was fun 53%	It was fun 41%	It was fun 62%	We practiced speaking 46%	We practiced speaking and listening 33%	We could express our ideas 58%
b) How did you feel during the activity?	Confident 36%	Eager to participate 26%	Shy 36%	Eager to participate 47%	Eager to participate 41%	Eager to participate 41%	Eager to participate 38%	Eager to participate 46%	Relaxed 50%	Eager to participate 50%
c) How do you consider your performance during the activity?	Fluent 50%	Hesitant 46%	Hesitant 60%	Fluent 71%	Fluent 41%	Fluent 54%	Somewhat fluent 56%	Fluent 46%	Somewhat fluent 50%	Fluent 67%
d) Were you familiar with the topic beforehand?	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 73% No 27%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 75% No 25%	Yes 100%
e) Did you understand the activity instructions in English?	1) 100%	1) 100%	* 1) 67% 3) 33%	1) 100%	1) 100%	1) 100%	1) 100%	1) 100%	1) 100%	1) 100%
f) Did you find ways to express yourself orally even if you did not know all the words?	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%
g) Were the didactic materials appropriate to stimulate your oral production?	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 38% No 62%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%	Yes 100%
h) What changes would you suggest for this activity?	Nothing 94%	All students' participation 37%	To place the chairs in a circle 27%	Switching roles 54%	A better organization of the rules 24%	Having more time to discuss 20%	Bringing real objects 38%	Nothing 100%	More time for questions 25%	More time to interview 25%

* 1) I understood instructions since the beginning.
3) I did not understand instructions until I saw my partners participating in the activity.

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According to the main findings of this research, it has been proven that through the application of interactive speaking activities that include learning strategies, strategy training, a careful selection of the speaking activities, and a nice environment, the oral production of adult EFL students of intermediate level improved considerably. This was manifested on the next aspects:

a) Students lost the fear to speak. In this case, students reported having felt eager to participate in most activities, and several times, they suggested that the teacher acted upon getting the participation of all the students.

b) Their lack of vocabulary was not a big problem because students were taught with useful language before each activity, the use of synonyms, placing new words into a context depending on the situation, and mimic among others strategies to deal with this issue. Since they knew that they could make use of these strategies, they were able to communicate with each other.

c) Strategy training enabled students to get ahead in the activities. There was a tendency on students to self-assess their performance in the activities as fluent or somewhat fluent. This indicates that, through strategy training, they gained confidence and faith in them.

d) The limitations of time that usually impact oral production could be diminished by selecting topics that were familiar to students according to the context, as selecting topics of the textbook. Hence, it was easier for students to deal with the pressure of thinking what to say and how to say it. Besides, the use of time-creating devices gave students the elements to handle the limitations of time.

e) In most cases, students understood the activity instructions in English. However, when instructions were more complex (activity 3), it was proved to be difficult for them

to be followed. Perhaps, simpler rules would be more efficient for this type of activities at this level.

f) The students did not recur to their mother tongue when participating in the activities; strategy training gave them the necessary tools to find ways to express themselves without mixing Spanish and English.

g) Even though the use of didactic material is not a learning strategy, it has the capacity to stimulate imagination, creativity and oral production in students. Therefore, using didactic materials was so important in this investigation that when students participated in activity 7 without visual aid or realia, their main suggestion was bringing real objects to work with in the activity.

h) Adult EFL students are worried about their capacity to learn English because of their age. It is very common that they ask, "Will I be able to learn and speak English even though I am not a child?" However, it was observed that with a program that integrates the four areas of language teaching, applying speaking activities that include learning strategies to improve oral production in students and help them sound fluent when speaking, these worries were left behind.

To conclude, according to the results, the activities that help students improve their oral production should take into account the next aspects. Activities should not cause stress and help develop self-confidence, instructions have to be clear and brief, preparation in language and familiarization with topic are needed, fluency must not be interrupted, learning strategies should be taught in advance and didactic material should be included.

Recommendations

Based on the main findings of this research and after concluding, the recommendations to improve oral production in adult EFL students of intermediate level at the language Center of UABC are the followings:

a) Creating a nice classroom environment is as important as the contents of the class. The teacher is mainly responsible of the class atmosphere; however, students' attitudes are equally important. Working under the premise that within a nice environment it is easier to learn is recommended.

b) Recognizing that students of the same level have different strengths and personalities it is important to not to expect the same progress in the entire group. Ur (2002) recommends that in order to understand students' attitudes it is important to think back to our own experiences as either learner or teacher.

c) Informing students that language learning requires time, effort, and practice to keep them motivated to achieve their goals.

d) Working with task-based activities at this level is important because students feel comfortable not being exposed individually and speak more than in topic-based activities.

e) Selecting activities with appealing content, attractive presentation, interesting to students, novelty, enjoyable, problem solving oriented and that include day-to-day vocabulary.

f) Having students participate in activities that involve at least two areas of the language, such as reading and speaking, or writing and speaking.

g) Motivating students to keep in touch with English language by listening to radio stations, watching TV programs, reading magazines, books, and searching the internet in English will help them increase their input activities.

h) The Self-Access Center (CEMAAI) at the Language Center of UABC, provides excellent supplementary practice for adult EFL students in conversation sessions. Therefore, the teachers have a great opportunity to help students improve their oral production by working fully in this area.

i) It is advisable to implement a workshop for English teachers at the Language Center of UABC, in order to train them in the identification, design and use of a series of interactive speaking activities that include learning strategies here suggested.

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Appendix A

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ENGLISH TEACHERS

According to your experience as English teacher of UABC, describe a speaking activity that you consider it is the most successful for its capacity to improve oral production in adult EFL students of intermediate level.

IMPORTANT:

The activity you describe should include the next principles: to be interesting, novelty, problem solving oriented, capable to provoke student's creative responses, variety, fluency-focused, attractive presentation, appealing content and being related to day-to-day situations.

A) Activity name: _____

B) Is it a topic-based activity? _____
Is it a task-based activity? _____

C) Directions: _____

D) Put a check next to the didactic material that you use during the activity:

- | | |
|---|-----------------------|
| 1) Over head projector _____ | 6) Bond paper _____ |
| 2) Power point presentation _____ | 7) Realia _____ |
| 3) Tape recording _____ | 8) Cards _____ |
| 4) CD _____ cassette _____ | 9) A table game _____ |
| 5) The white board _____ | |
| 10) Visuals _____ If so, what kind visuals? _____ | |
| 11) Other _____ | |

E) Estimated time: _____

F) Activity format: Pairs _____ small groups _____ big groups _____ Other _____

Teacher's name: _____

NOTE: This activity will be applied to adult EFL students of intermediate level as part of the investigation project of Maria Georgina Fernández Sesma to get her master's degree.

Appendix B

QUESTIONNAIRE TO DESCRIBE THE SUBJECTS OF STUDY

The purpose of this questionnaire is to get personal information of adult EFL students of intermediate level of the group IIIA4, semester 2007-2.

Age: _____ Gender (F) _____ (M) _____

Place of birth _____

1. Marital status: Single _____ married _____ other _____

2. Occupation: (Choose more than one option if necessary)

a) I am only studying English _____ c) I am studying High school and English _____

b) I am working and studying English _____ d) I am studying a career and English _____

3. Level of studies:

a) High school _____ c) Graduate _____

b) Undergraduate _____ d) Other _____

4. Why did you decide to study English at UABC? (Choose more than one option if necessary)

a) The tuition is cheap _____ b) UABC has a good English program _____

c) UABC has good English teachers _____ d) English is necessary _____

e) UABC is near from my home _____ f) it is a requirement for getting my degree _____

5. Why do you want to learn English? _____

6. According to you, which are your language needs?

7. Which are your English goals to achieve in this semester?

Note: This information is confidential and will be only used for the purpose of the investigation.

Appendix C
SELF-ASSESSING QUESTIONNAIRE

The purpose of this questionnaire is that you self-assess your performance during the activity. Thank you for your participation.

Activity name: _____ Activity number _____

a) Did you like the activity? Yes _____ No _____

Why? _____

b) How did you feel during the activity? (Underline more than one option if necessary).

1) Stressed 2) Shy 3) Eager to participate 4) Relaxed 5) Confident 6) Other

c) How do you consider your performance during the activity?

1) Fluent _____ 2) Somewhat fluent _____ 3) Hesitating _____ 4) unable to participate _____

d) Were you familiar with the topic beforehand? Yes _____ No _____

e) The activity instructions were given in English. Did you understand them since the beginning?

1. I understood instructions completely since the beginning _____

2. I understood the general idea _____

3. I did not understand instructions until I saw my partners participating in the activity _____

4. I did not understand instructions and I was confused during the activity _____

f) Did you find ways to express yourself orally even if you didn't know all the words? Yes ___
No ___

g) Were the didactic materials appropriate to stimulate your oral production? Yes _____
No _____ Why? _____

h) What changes would you suggest for this activity?

Appendix D

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERACTIVE SPEAKING ACTIVITIES:

Activity 1: “Buying vs. Selling”.

Activity proposed by the teacher: Ana Rosa Zamora Leyva.

Estimated time: 40 minutes.

Format: Big groups.

Activity Purpose:

In this task-based speaking activity, students will be able to practice the direct and indirect strategies described as follows:

- a) Memory strategies: Students practice grammatical structures and new vocabulary.
- b) Cognitive strategies: They send and receive messages to hold conversations.
- c) Social strategies: Students cooperate with each other and negotiate.
- d) Facilitation and compensation strategies: To facilitate students' fluency, they will be trained with facilitation devices like simplification to avoid the use of complex sentences, and ellipsis, by using abbreviations like 'Who' 'The big one?', and so forth.

Directions:

Students bring to the class real articles or cut outs from magazines like wrist watches, perfumes, shoes, purses, etc. loosed or placed on constructive paper, cardboard, or bond paper to display their articles in approximately nine stands around the classroom. The class is divided into two groups “A” and “B”. Students from group “A” are going to sell their articles to students in group “B”. Students from group “B” are going to walk around the stands looking for an article to buy. They will make questions like “how much does it cost?” “Can you give me a better price?”, “This one?”, “How much?”, and so forth. After ten minutes, students switch the roles. The teacher walks around the classroom to monitor the activity and helps students with vocabulary or phrases. When the teacher indicates, students stop buying and selling and show the articles they bought, saying to the class how much they paid for them, and what they are going to do with them. At the end the students give a big applause.