

DEVELOPING ORAL SKILLS ON LANGUAGE SCHOOL FIRST LEVEL STUDENTS

FORMACIÓN DE HABILIDADES ORALES EN ESTUDIANTES DEL PRIMER NIVEL DE LA ESCUELA DE IDIOMAS

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ABSTRACT

This research is a design of communicative tasks to contribute to the oral skills development on Language School first level students. Analysis-synthesis methods were used based on the bibliographic review, induction-deduction, empirical methods, such as: surveys and interviews. Results showed that for the communicative functions that are developed at this level; the proposal encourages students to acquire skills for interacting and the practical use of language, focused on effective communication, fluency and confidence for using language in different contexts and real-life situations.

KEYWORDS: language skills; teaching-learning process; communicative approaches

RESUMEN

Se propuso el diseño de tareas comunicativas para contribuir a la formación de habilidades orales en los estudiantes del primer nivel de la Escuela de Idiomas. Para ello, se utilizaron métodos de análisis síntesis a partir de la revisión bibliográfica

realizada, inducción-deducción, métodos empíricos como encuestas y entrevistas. Lo anterior evidencia que la propuesta, desde las funciones comunicativas que se desarrollan en este nivel, propicia que los estudiantes adquieran las habilidades para la interacción y el uso práctico del lenguaje, centradas en la comunicación efectiva, la fluidez y la confianza en el uso del idioma en diferentes situaciones y contextos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: habilidades lingüísticas; proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje; enfoques comunicativos

INTRODUCTION

English teaching within Cuba's educational systems has been designed in the curriculum so that learners appropriate the essential minimum elements of this language, simultaneously enabling them to face new communicative situations in all types of contexts.

Language Schools offer the opportunity to study foreign languages to all employed adults interested in raising their cultural level, as well as their personal, work, and professional quality of life.

The main objectives of foreign language teaching in these schools reflect both the educational needs of the country and the demands of the global context. In this sense, the following stand out: fostering students' ability to communicate effectively in English, both orally and in writing; improving listening and reading skills, enabling students to understand different accents and text styles; providing linguistic skills that are highly valued in the national and international job market; promoting an understanding of English-speaking cultures with the idea of possessing a broader and more open perspective towards the world.

In this way, the aim is not only to develop linguistic skills but also to prepare students to be competent and active citizens in an interconnected world. This is why the English teaching in language schools is designed for students to acquire the

necessary knowledge to hold a fluent conversation according to the level in question.

The first level consists of nine units that facilitate students' familiarization with the language and develop habits and skills for oral communication.

It is important to emphasize that it is in the first level where the learner must acquire the communicative skills that will allow them to master the demands of the subsequent levels. A variety of resources and teaching materials are also usually used, such as textbooks, multimedia, interactive games, among others, to facilitate learning. Furthermore, the use of educational technologies that demonstrate advances in the field of its didactics is promoted, even if the desired results have not yet been achieved.

Regarding methodology, communicative task-based approaches are commonly used, where practical and meaningful activities are proposed, allowing students to progressively develop the linguistic skills necessary to communicate effectively in everyday and professional situations. However, in adult education, the teaching of this language takes on other nuances, establishing oral communication as the student's competitive expression.

Accordingly, the efficiency of teaching and learning English oral expression during the students' training in language schools is determined by a communicative approach, regular practice, constructive feedback, and the use of appropriate resources and technology.

By effectively integrating these elements, language schools can contribute to the successful development of their students' English oral expression skills. Hence, the need for these students to interact orally to guarantee efficiency in their activity and foster their subsequent integration into the professional community at regional and international levels. Many authors have researched this skill, among whom Rojas et al. (2019); Chahuillco & Jiménez (2020); Cruz (2020); Saborit, Herrera & Cuenca (2021); Mejía (2021); Hernández (2023) are highlighted. Their contributions are directed towards English oral communication for professional training, dramatization

as a didactic tool for improving the quality of oral expression learning, addressing the skill as a problem to be treated, its task-based learning at the intermediate level equivalent to B1, and the use of films as complementary tools to improve foreign language oral expression.

An essential shortcoming is noted at this point, given the need to implement communicative tasks according to the assimilation level and knowledge that learners must acquire to enhance the formation of English oral skills. Despite the efforts of the Moa Language School in teaching English, the desired results in terms of satisfying the students' communication needs in said language have not been achieved.

Upon applying the English language diagnostic tests to first-level students, it was found that the following insufficiencies show in the students' training process:

- ✓ Inadequate treatment of the communicative approach work.
- ✓ Insufficient vocabulary to express clear and precise ideas, which limits understanding by interlocutors.
- ✓ Scarce development of activities aimed at forming English oral skills to supply expressive deficiencies in real communicative situations.

The diagnosis of oral expression in English focused on evaluating several key aspects that influence effective communication, some of which are pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, accent, and intonation, elements which are insufficient to determine the quality of what is expressed.

The most significant results of this diagnosis show that the greatest difficulties lie in the direction of the teaching-learning process for the formation of oral skills; therefore, the design of communicative tasks is proposed to contribute to the formation of oral skills in first-level students of the Language School.

DEVELOPMENT

The teaching-learning process of foreign languages is constantly renewed in search of methods, procedures, techniques, and effective ways to achieve successful learning.

This process is complex, full of difficulties that occur over the long term and where several factors are involved that must be taken into account to achieve the acquisition of the English language. Therefore, it must be taught according to the needs of today's society, using interactive, participatory methodologies, where singular importance is conferred to oral skills over written ones, so that people learn to use the language, above knowing its grammar.

English teaching must develop in students a comprehensive personality that involves the ability to think, reason, deduce, and act creatively in the foreign language use. Thus, the student needs to develop linguistic and communicative skills in an integrated manner, both orally and in writing.

In this sense, the teaching-learning process oral expression in English, from a pedagogical perspective, does not simply imply paying attention to the linguistic material being taught, but also to the learning subject and his motivations for learning. The knowledge transferred from the teacher to the student helps the latter transform the knowledge received through the construction of meaning, the emission of judgments and assessments, through joint activity, and with educational resources.

This is what Stern (1983) qualifies as the stage of breaking away from methods to give way to the emergence of the communicative approach, which he names «Communicative Language Teaching» and addresses in detail in his book «Fundamental Concepts of Languages». Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000) states that the method main objective is to develop communicative competence, which means learning to use the foreign language in the appropriate social context; therefore, students must know how to understand their interlocutor.

The Cuban pedagogue Acosta & Fernández (1996), refers that this approach starts from the idea that language is communication and therefore tries to develop students' communicative competence. Taking into account the previous analysis, the communicative approach means a modern methodological conception, made possible by the textual linguistics contributions and communication theory. It is centered on a speech didactic, that is, in the communication process language functioning, which requires the student's competence to understand and construct texts coherently.

For Chomsky (2014), communicative competence is the unconscious knowledge that the speaker-listener has of the rules of his language system. From Hymes's (1972) point of view, competence must go beyond grammatical knowledge and include the appropriateness and acceptability concepts.

Thus, the teacher must focus his work not only on knowledge acquisition, students' development of skills, habits, and abilities, but also on encouraging affective interactions. In this way, it is manifested the cognitive and affective relationship, forming a unity as they respectively respond to the executive and inductive forms of the psyche regulatory function in general and personality in particular, and the collective and individual character of personality education where the activity, communication, and satisfaction of the student's personality to learn from his own experience is established through subject-subject interaction (communication) and subject-object interaction (activity), showing a developer learning.

In this sense, Vygotsky (2021) formulated the postulates of communication as verbal activity, determining its structure, its psychological content, and its psychophysiological mechanisms. Regarding the structure, he pointed out that the execution of verbal activity can be expressed externally (oral and written expression) or internally (listening and reading comprehension), which are carried out at two levels of communication: recognition (listening and reading comprehension) and reproduction (oral and written expression).

Reading and translation belong to an intermediate level. Vygotsky's theory demonstrates that oral expression plays a vitally significant role in human life and work activity, as it is a fundamental means of knowledge and communication.

On the other hand, in linguistics, oral expression is the set of techniques for communicating orally with effectiveness, serving as an instrument to communicate about processes or objects external to the speaker, considering that in certain circumstances oral expression is broader than speech, as it requires paralinguistic elements to complete its final meaning.

Authors such as Báez-Martínez et al. (2023) state that oral expression has three basic functions: To transmit ideas, emotions, and to persuade. That is, it is about establishing during communication: the expression of feelings, the ability to express clearly, directly, convincingly, and correctly ideas. This is because oral expression is the only way through which students will change from being objects of teaching to being subjects of it.

Clearly, the aforementioned authors agree in one way or another that oral expression is an innate skill, an ability that is developed and that satisfies basic human needs, both material and spiritual, since man as a social being constantly speaks, opines, converses, and transmits information.

Linguistic considerations for the oral skills development

According to the Real Academia Española (1942): « skill» is defined as the capacity and disposition for something. In this sense, speaking, listening, reading, and writing are the human beings' communicative capacities, and these skills are developed throughout their training, allowing them to communicate adequately.

In the academic context, special attention is given to learning the English language (Mendoza-Ponce et al., 2017), where oral communication is an object of analysis and transformation for class development.

In this regard, a significant number of studies and research on the oral skills development stand out. Such is the case of Orihuela (2019); Barrios & Velásquez (2020); Mamani & Arteta (2020); Vergara-Pareja (2021); Bensalem & Alenazi (2023). Their researches propose different strategies and procedures to develop oral skills in different student institutions.

Their contributions constitute an important approach to this phenomenon, revealing the need for research that provides new theoretical considerations and practical proposals that deepen the analysis of the English oral skills development within the teaching-learning process in different communicative situations, from a specific context of foreign language acquisition.

As can be seen, oral skills development during classes can vary greatly depending on the communicative intention, the teacher's experience, and the students' characteristics, as determining factors for achieving communicative competence.

That is why the English oral skill development is based on the communicative approach. In this regard, Wade (2009) argues that oral competence can be fully achieved in this model through interaction and in diverse contexts.

This approach emphasizes communicative competence, defined as the ability for language production in a situational and socially acceptable manner.

According to Hadaway, Vardell & Young (2001), it is necessary to develop confidence in the student by creating a comfortable environment in the classroom so that they can actively participate in oral interaction, achieving the communicative competence consolidation. Menéndez (2007) also points out that a plausible way to achieve students' communicative competence is through tasks, as they provoke in the student a need to communicate and create meanings.

In sum, establishing an optimal communication environment is a priority teaching task, as it not only leads to learning but also facilitates the student's communication skills development.

In contrast to the above, Fillmore (1979) points out that in oral expression, fluency is the ability to fill time with coherent speech, with adequate semantic and grammatical load; he considers it is the ability to say things appropriately in a wide variety of contexts and that it also involves being creative in language use. This vision expresses the need to foster in students an active, creative, dynamic, and imaginative character to express themselves orally, effectively using vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

Broadly speaking, some common limitations in oral English communication can include:

- ✓ Incorrect pronunciation: Errors in pronunciation can make it difficult for interlocutors to understand.
- ✓ Lack of vocabulary: Limitations in vocabulary can hinder the clear and precise expression of ideas.
- ✓ Fluency problems: Lack of practice can lead to frequent pauses or choppy communication.
- ✓ Grammatical errors: Incorrect use of grammatical rules can lead to misunderstandings in communication.
- ✓ Difficulties with accent: Some people may have difficulties adopting a natural English accent, which can affect the clarity of their communication.
- ✓ Lack of confidence: Insecurity when speaking can lead to less effective communication and difficulties in expressing ideas fluently.

It is important to remember that these limitations are normal in the language learning process and can be overcome with practice and dedication.

Obviously, one cannot overlook the process-like nature of oral skills, of which fluency and accuracy are components. Its systemic nature is also perceived, given its relationship with the rest of the communicative skills that take place in a social and professional context.

These elements highlight aspects, such as the psychological and philosophical, which undoubtedly play a role in the complex process that is in a foreign language oral expression, in this case, English.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research methods are considered relevant and necessary to undertake the research development, both at the theoretical and empirical levels, among which the following stand out:

Theoretical level methods

Analysis-Synthesis: it was carried out an analysis of documents and sources related to the topic, which made it possible to reveal the main contributions. Subsequently, through a synthesis process, it was interpreted the obtained information.

Induction-Deduction: it was taken into account for the study of documents, research reports, and consulted bibliographic sources.

Empirical level methods

Observation: it was used during class visits and teaching consultations to verify the main patterns of the English language teaching-learning process.

Document analysis: it was used to consult bibliographic sources and normative documents for adult education (EDJA), such as resolutions, curricula, and others.

Survey: it was applied to students and teachers to comprehensively assess the development of oral expression and verify the main causes and limitations that hinder its achievement, as well as to analyze the main patterns of the English language teaching-learning process.

Interview: it was applied to faculty teachers to learn about their theoretical and methodological knowledge regarding the development of oral expression.

Communicative tasks to contribute to the formation of oral skills in the Language School first-level students

Communicative tasks in the English language refer to activities designed to promote interaction and the practical use of language in real or simulated situations, focused on effective communication with the aim of developing fluency and confidence in using the language, as well as improving listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills through active and contextualized practice.

These tasks start from the communicative functions developed at the first level so that students acquire the necessary skills to communicate effectively in different situations and contexts. Likewise, viable examples are proposed that favor better guidance for the tasks and the function that teachers need to improve in the classroom.

Regarding the above, Estaire (2007) indicates that the task-based approach constitutes an evolutionary movement within the communicative approach in foreign language teaching. This task-based approach provides an innovative proposal for the design of communicative foreign language teaching, focusing on how to organize, sequence, and execute learning activities in the classroom.

To translate this idea into the classroom context of a foreign language class, specifically for Moa Language School first-level students, communicative tasks aimed at contributing to the formation of oral skills are proposed.

Communicative task 1. Role Plays

- Task: A customer and a salesperson in a store. Try to use this information to write a dialogue. Practice it with your partner.
- Objective: To practice vocabulary related to shopping and customer service, as well as to develop negotiation and problem-solving skills.
- Skills: written and oral expression
- Level of assimilation: partial production
- Organization: pair work
- Elements to be given special attention: vocabulary related to shopping and customer service

Communicative task 2. Debates

- Task: Is it better to live in the city or in the countryside? After listening your partner's ideas and debating about it, write a text answering this question.
- Objective: To encourage argumentation and expression of opinions, as well as active listening and respect for different viewpoints.
- Skills: listening, written and oral expression
- Level of assimilation: production.
- Organization: group work.
- Elements to be given special attention: to make comparisons

Communicative task 3. Interviews

Task: Students interview each other about their interests or experiences.

Objective: To practice questions and answers, as well as to improve confidence when speaking with others.

- Skills: oral expression
- Level of assimilation: production
- Organization: pair work
- Elements to be given special attention: questions and answers

Communicative task 4. Storytelling

Task: Tell a personal or invented story in small groups.

Objective: To develop creativity, speech organization, and emotional expression.

- Skills: listening and oral expression
- Level of assimilation: production
- Organization: individual work
- Elements to be given special attention: personal information

Communicative task 5. Question Games

Task: Use cards with open-ended questions for students to ask each other.

Objective: To encourage spontaneous conversation and practice various grammatical structures.

- Skills: reading comprehension and oral expression
- Level of assimilation: partial production
- Organization: pair work
- Elements to be given special attention: practice grammatical structures

Communicative tasks become a proposal that endow students with linguistic skills in the oral language use, to contribute to the English communicative competence achievement for the Language School first-level students.

It was corroborated the proposal feasibility through a socialization workshop with specialists, which concluded that the communicative tasks have scientific-methodological value for the English oral expression didactics in the context of the Language School student. The practical value of the contribution to the researched process was also verified.

CONCLUSIONS

In the English language learning, oral skills not only help students develop confidence but also foster social interaction. Hence, the importance of adapting communicative tasks to the students' linguistic competence level to maximize their effectiveness. Communicative tasks for the oral skills development, as a systemic construct that characterizes the qualitative transformation of the teaching-learning process, favor and refine the development of oral expression in the Language School first-level students and also contribute to the achievement of communicatively competent professionals.

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