How to Help EFL Beginner Students to Communicate Fluently

JORGE LUIS ESPINOZA CAMPOS
Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje
Universidad Nacional (Costa Rica)

Abstract

It is always difficult to make beginner level students lose the fear to speak in English due to different factors like students' lack of confidence, insecurity, lack of motivation, fear, among others. Therefore, students need to feel motivated to communicate in English in class for a real purpose, so that they can use English in different social contexts, not just the class. This study contemplates the students' contributions and their opinions to make them active participants of the English lessons. The presentation includes some theoretical information on the field, the results and findings of a survey carried out to some beginner students, the use of innovative activities like communicative video projects, songs and realia based activities which were selected by the students plus the results achieved after implementing those activities and some recommendations that help learners gain confidence. Additionally some possible solutions to help other EFL professors to face this issue will be given.

Key words: beginner students, students' contributions, use of language, innovative activities, English lessons

Resumen

Resulta siempre difícil lograr que los estudiantes debutantes pierdan el miedo a hablar inglés, debido a diferentes factores como falta de confianza, inseguridad, desmotivación y temor. Sin embargo, los estudiantes necesitan sentirse motivados para comunicarse en inglés en su clase, de tal manera que puedan usar este idioma en diferentes contextos sociales, no solo el aula. Este artículo comprende las contribuciones de los estudiantes y sus opiniones para hacerlos partícipes de las lecciones de inglés. Se incluye información teórica sobre el tema, los resultados y hallazgos de una observación llevada a cabo con algunos estudiantes debutantes, el uso de actividades innovadoras tales como proyección de videos, canciones y actividades basadas en elementos de la realidad, seleccionados por ellos mismos, más los resultados obtenidos luego de llevarlas a la práctica, así como algunas recomendaciones para ayudarles a ganar confianza. Además, se ofrecen posibles soluciones para ayudar a los profesores de inglés para hacer frente a este problema.

Palabras claves: estudiantes debutantes, contribuciones de los estudiantes, uso del lenguaje, actividades innovadoras, clases de inglés

Introduction

Oral communication problems among EFL beginner students are major challenges for language teachers and students. It is common to find students who have a lot of problems in communication because many of them don't feel comfortable speaking English. For this reason, this study pretends to find out what causes the fear of speaking English to the UNA beginner students. Then, other goals of this research are to find the students' preferences, to help them to lose the panic to talk in English and to improve the learners' speaking skills and increase their class participation. Additionally, this paper also pretends to provide an overview of the various problems encountered in EFL students' oral communication. To carry out this study, the course methodology was adjusted to communicative language teaching giving emphasis to content based and task based instruction. In this way, the students could be exposed to use English in different tasks and activities which could be applied to real life situations and associated to the content of the course.

This study was carried out at Universidad Nacional Costa Rica to the students of Integrated English. These learners study different majors like business administration, biology, topography, economy, sociology, forestry among other majors. The research includes some theoretical framework that was used to know the factors that may affect the students' communication in English. Additionally, this research shows the results of two surveys that were applied to 86 beginner students with the goal of finding their preferences regarding the methodology, so that other instructors can apply it in their lessons to help their students to communicate fluently.

Literature Review

Speaking a foreign language is always difficult especially at the beginning for different reasons that change from learner to another. So, the first question before carrying out this study that I asked myself is "what makes speaking a foreign language difficult?"

According to Kang Shumin (n.d) "learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules" (as cited in Renandya & Richards, 2002, p. 204). Shumin (n.d) also adds that "speaking a language is especially hard for foreign language learners because effective communication requires the ability to use the language appropriately in social interactions." (as cited in Renandya & Richards, 2002, p. 204).

Shumin (n.d) also states that speaking a foreign language involves both verbal and nonverbal communication elements like pronunciation, intonation, stress, body language, facial expressions, etc (p. 204). Therefore, EFL teachers need to pay attention to these elements since most learners are not aware of their social and cultural meaning.

In fact, Shumin (n.d) affirms that not enough attention has been given to the factors that inhibit or facilitate the oral production and for this reason; learners tend to experience a lot of difficulties speaking the foreign language. (p. 204-205)

Factors Affecting Adult EFL Learners' Oral Communication

Age or Maturational Constraints

Krashen, Long and Scarcella (1992) state that "the aging process itself may affect or limit adult learners' ability to pronounce the target language fluently" (as cited in Renandya & Richards, 2002, p. 205).

This does not mean that adult learners do not have the ability to learn to speak a foreign language, but they need to work harder in pronunciation prosodic features like stress and intonation. However, it is important that teachers motivate adult language learners to imitate native speakers' pronunciation because what matters is to be understood not to sound like a native speaker.

Aural Medium

Linguists recommend that foreign language learners need to work on listening comprehension to improve the speaking skills. Shumin (n.d) states that "speaking feeds on listening" (as cited in Renandya & Richards, 2002, p. 205). "In fact, during interaction every speaker plays a double role -- both as a listener and as a speaker" (Renandya & Richards, 2002, p. 205). This means that learners need to understand the target language in order to be able to speak it. For example, in a conversation, the speakers need to understand the message before giving an answer.

Sociocultural Factors

Experts like Brown (2001) and Richards (2002) affirm that communication occurs in the context of structured interpersonal exchange, and meaning is socially regulated. So, values and beliefs play an important role in language use, so learners should know how the language is used in a social context because every language has its own rules of usage as to when, how and why. Therefore, it is important that as teachers we help our students to identify all those socio cultural aspects that characterize every language.

Affective Factors

Oxford (1990) affirms that language learners' performance is influenced by their success or failure. The affective factors can be related to motivation,

self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, fear, personal attitude and emotions depending on the context and the situation. For instance, speaking to native speakers can cause anxiety and different emotions to non native speakers. Also, speaking a foreign language in public provokes anxiety up to the level that the speaker can become tongue-tied or lost for words in an unexpected situation. This causes to the speaker a sense of failure and a concern of how others will judge him or her which leads to insecurity when speaking the foreign language. Additionally, it is common that nonnative speakers experience fear to address people in the foreign language especially at beginning levels because they feel insecure and they are afraid of making mistakes. Lastly, another example is that learners sometimes have no motivation to talk in the foreign language because they only use the language in class not for a real purpose, so they avoid using the language because they don't have the motivation to do it since they don't really need it (as cited in Renandya & Richards, 2002, p. 206).

Looking at this theory, I carry out a study among my students to see what makes speaking difficult to them. The purpose of the study is to know the reasons that make students not speak English confidently and adapt the courses' methodology to help them to communicate better in English.

Importance of the study

As a matter of fact, there is a high number of beginner EFL students who have serious limitations to use English in class and outside. For this reason, this study can be used as a source of information by different language teachers to see the possible factors and reasons that cause this problem, and to find new ideas that help EFL learners to communicate in the target language.

Research Methodology

The study was made to three groups of Integrated English I at UNA. The study consists of two surveys, one at the beginning of the semester and the other one at the end of the period to identify the students' progress and to compare their performance in the course and their answers in both surveys. The students of these groups were not English majors, so there were students of many different majors; most of them were young adults. Most learners had a beginning level, but some of them hadn't taken English in a long time because they took the English courses in their senior year, a few of them did not take English after ninth grade of high school. Each group originally had 30 students, but some of them dropped the course. So, at the beginning of the semester 86 students completed the first interview and 79 completed the second questionnaire. Since students have a beginner level of English they were allowed to answer the questions in Spanish to get more detailed answers for each of the questions.

Aims of the Study:

1. To help UNA beginner students lose the fear to speak English.
2. Making the English Integrated I course more communicative based on language functions.
3. To consider the students' opinions to help them improve their oral performance.
4. To adapt the course content to the learners' needs.
5. To give emphasis to the students' creativity and participation.

FIRST SURVEY

Research Tools

On the third week of the course a short survey with four questions was conducted to 86 students from three different groups of who were taking the same course to see their opinion and suggestions to help them to lose the fear to use English in different context. Then before the end of the semester students were surveyed again. These are the first survey questions.

1. Why is it so difficult for you to speak English in class? Explain the reasons
2. What do you use English for?
3. What kind of activities will help you to communicate better in English? Choose three

_____ Songs _____ Games _____ Watching movies or videos
_____ Group or pair work _____ Other, specify_____

4. What **oral** activities do not you like to do in class? Explain Why

Answers to the survey

Question 1 Why is it so difficult for you to speak English in class? Explain the reasons for this question students provided different answers which vary according to different factors such as level of proficiency, confidence, motivation among other. Some of the reasons mentioned by the learners are lack of knowledge, insecurity, nervousness, shame, lack of vocabulary, lack of confidence, peer pressure, anxiety, lack of opportunities to use the language in class and outside, fear to use grammar and vocabulary improperly, students don't feel comfortable speaking English, class activities were not attractive or engaging for them, fear to mispronounce words. Then, a few students also provided as part of their answers that they do not feel comfortable speaking English

with their classmates and other also answered that they do not speak English because they want to sound as fluent as they do it in their native language. After analyzing these reasons we can connect them somehow with what Bailey and Savage (1994) mentioned that many of us felt shocked or disappointed when we started to use our second or foreign language. This happens because we had not been prepared for spontaneous communication and we cannot deal with all its simultaneous demands and all these factors make speaking a formidable task for students (as cited in Murcia, 2001, p. 103). Therefore, it is common that some learners develop nervousness, fear and anxiety to communicate in the foreign language mainly in the beginner stages. This is supported by Spolsky (1989) who stated that "anxious learners generally speak, write, and participate less in the language classroom" and Ely (1986) "reports that anxious learners were less likely to take risks in the language class" (as cited in Cutrone, 2009, p. 56).

Question 2 What do you use English for? The goal of this question was to see if the students used English outside of the classroom or they just used it during the lessons. Since beginner students do not speak the target language often the answers given were not many and some of the responses were similar in many cases. So, the answers given by the students were to speak in class, to chat in the internet, to read on the internet, to read newspapers and magazines, to speak with friends from other countries, to speak to English native speakers, to listen to music, to read video games instructions and to travel to other countries.

Question 3 What kind of activities will help you to communicate better in English? Choose **three**

_____ Songs discussions _____ Games _____ Watching movies or videos _____ Group or pair work _____ Role plays _____ Speeches _____ Other, specify_____

These were the results for this question

Activity	Percentage
Songs discussions	80%
Games	63%
Watching Movies or videos	61%
Role plays	51%
Group or Pair work (discussions)	32%
Speeches	0%
Other: Bringing native speakers to class	13%

In this question different oral activities were provided so that the students choose the three activities that worked best for them. It is interesting to see that a post listening speaking activity (song discussions) was the activity with the

highest percentage, 80%. This shows a coincidence with Liangpanit and Thien-permpool study made in Thailand where they found that post listening activities are preferred by college undergraduates apparently because students believe that these activities can be applied to their daily lives (Liangpanit and Thien-permpool, n.d, p. 4). On the other hand, not even one student marked speeches as a useful communicative activity for them.

Question 4 What oral activity do not you like to do in class? Explain Why?

Activity	Percentages
Long speeches	42%
Recorded oral tests	33%
Dialogues and role plays	15%
Interviews	7%
Other:	3%

This question asks for the opposite information of the previous question. However, there is a coincidence since speeches was the activity that students dislike the most in the previous question and the same happened in this question. This is an activity that many language teachers use and the students don't like it for different reasons such as nervousness, fear, insecurity, time and shame. Students also mentioned that speeches force them to memorize and that the topics assigned to present speeches are usually difficult. Barkhuisen's study (1998) carried out to South African learners reveals that 73% of the students do not enjoy the oral speeches being the second activity that they dislike the most. Some reasons that these students gave are that oral activities like speeches are shocking "because if your boyfriend or someone you loved is in the same class with you, you find it difficult to talk. After that you see she'll blush" (as cited in TESOL Quaterly 32 (1), p. 99).

Then, in the same study another student expressed that he is afraid of making mistakes in front of the class because some partners will laugh at him. (p. 99).

Regarding oral tests the students claim that they do not have time to prepare for the task requested, and the fact that oral tests are recorded produces extra pressure, stress, and sometimes your partner does not follow you because the situation is unplanned.

The students who chose dialogues (Role plays) mentioned that this kind of activities are not attractive for those who are not good at improvising. Students say that they don't like role plays or dialogues because they get lost easily, acting is weird and asking questions is very difficult.

Lastly, students mentioned that interviews are not attractive for them because they have no time to think, they feel on the spot, looking at the teacher taking notes is too stressing. They also mentioned that in the interviews there are some questions that can't be answered and because of that they end up getting a bad grade.

First Survey Conclusions

After analyzing the students' answers, some changes were made in the course methodology to help learners to feel more motivated to speak, so that they feel less afraid of speaking English in different situations. A key element to do this was to consider the students' needs and preferences using the survey's information. Based on the answers given I decided to use the activities that students show more interest in the three groups to strengthen their oral production and to increase their motivation. The activities that were used in the course for the three groups were:

- Role plays (Students chose the topics and the teacher suggested some)
- Communicative Games and tasks
- Songs with discussions
- Exchanges with native speakers
- Students made their own videos as the course final oral test.
- Some students chose to do oral presentations about food, cultures and places.

SECOND SURVEY

After implementing some adjustments in the methodology of the course in the oral part, students were surveyed again in the last week of the course to see if those changes helped them communicate more fluently in English and if they felt satisfied with the activities implemented during the course.

Survey Goals

1. To check students' opinion regarding the methodology used.
2. To verify if the activities used in class help them lose the fear to speak English.
3. To see other suggestions given by the students to follow them in future courses.

Questions

1. Did the oral activities used in class help you improve your oral performance? Explain why? If your answer is **NO** which activities would you recommend?
2. Did the communicative activities used in class encourage you to practice new vocabulary?
3. Did the oral activities used help you lose the fear to speak English?

4. In your opinion, was the methodology used in the course helpful to enhance your level of communication? Explain your reasons.
5. Which of the activities used in class did you find more useful?

Second Survey Answers

1. Did the oral activities used in class help you improve your oral performance? Explain why? Circle Yes/ No or Kind of. If your answer is NO which activities would you recommend?
Here are the results:

Question 1
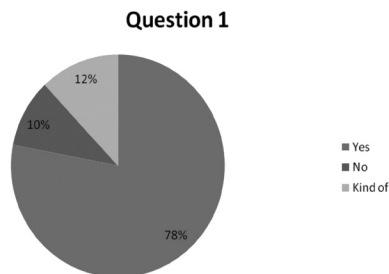
As the graph shows 78% of the students answered that the activities used by the professor to evaluate their oral communication were useful. This kind of answer was somehow expected because as a professor I tried to make an effort to take into account the student's preferences and to incorporate their knowledge in the oral activities, so that they could learn from them. According to Cook (2001) "one crucial factor in L2 learning is what the students bring with them into classroom" (p. 9) because the learners' personalities and minds have effects on their ways they learn. Johnson (1999) affirms that professors need to reason before making decisions in order to ensure students' motivation, understanding and involvement (p. 59).

On the other hand, 10% of the students answered that the oral activities used in class were not useful for them. Some these learners did not provide reasons, but they suggested that the oral activities have to be less complicated. They recommended interviews, games for oral presentations and more interactive activities. This answer somehow contradicts the findings of the first survey and eventually these answers cannot be taken as authentic. Possibly, these students did not do well in the course because they did not overcome their language problems not only in communication, but also in other areas like grammar, reading and listening. Learners can take this position due to attitude and motivation problems towards the class and the language.

2. Did the communicative activities used in class encourage you to practice new vocabulary? Circle Yes/No or Sometimes

QUESTION 2
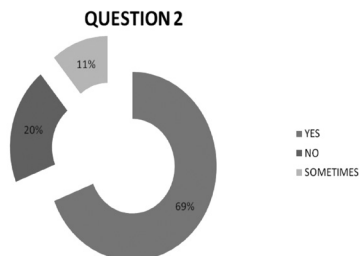
Learning and practicing new vocabulary is an important factor to take into account mainly in beginner levels because these learners give a lot of emphasis to it. According to DeCarrico (n.d) with beginner level learners it is necessary to teach communicative activities that incorporate vocabulary because "most learners expect to have to learn vocabulary, and it would be a mistake not to capitalize on those expectations" (as cited in Murcia, 2001, p. 287). For this reason, I included this question to find if the communicative activities used have helped learners to expand their lexicon. 69% of the interviewees answered "yes" to the question, and 20% of them responded "sometimes" and 11% said that "no". Unfortunately, those students who answered "no" did not provide reasons to justify their position. However, this negative answer might have been given by the students who have a higher level of competence and the activities used were for high beginning students, so the vocabulary required was not new for those particular learners.

3. Did the oral activities used help you lose the fear to speak English? Circle Yes/No or Sometimes

QUESTION 3
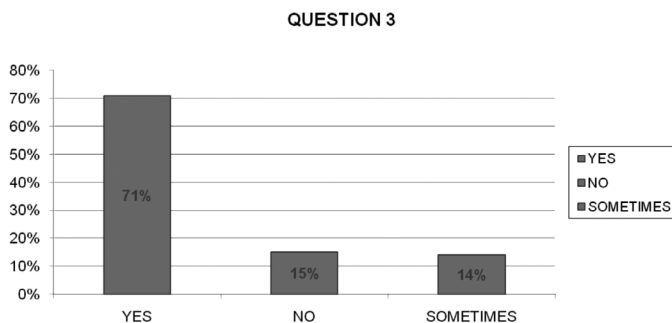
At the beginning of the course there were some students that showed a lot of fear to speak and some of them did not have a high level of motivation. For this reason, "one of the major obstacles learners have to overcome in learning to speak is the anxiety generated over the risks of blurting things out that wrong, stupid or incomprehensible" (Brown, 2001, p. 269). Brown also mentions that

learners experience fear when speaking because they are afraid to be judged by others and it is the teacher's job to provide a warm embracing environment that motivates them to talk (p.269). For this reason, throughout the course I worked engaging activities that increased the students' participation and involvement. The results of this question showed the students' perception at the end of the course was positive since 71% of them answered affirmatively and 14% that sometimes. This perception was very different that the one they had at the beginning of the course. Of course there were learners who gave a negative answer since not all of them were able to improve their speaking skills due to linguistic level, attitude and motivation problems.

4. In your opinion, was the methodology used in the course helpful to enhance your level of communication? Circle Yes/No Or Sometimes and Explain your reasons.

These are the results

QUESTION 4
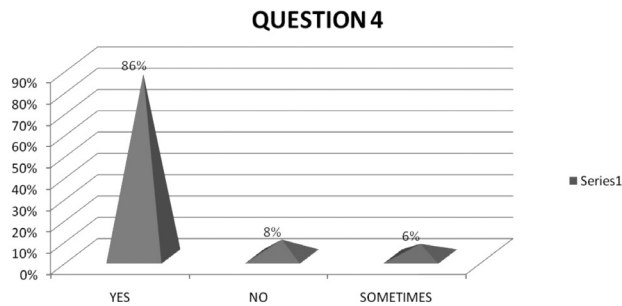
The goal was to know the learners opinions regarding the methodology used by the professor throughout the course. They were exposed mainly to content and task based instruction to give a higher emphasis to communication and the development of all the language skills. According to Brown (2001)"content-based classrooms may yield an increase in intrinsic motivation and empowerment, since students are focused on subject matter that is important to their lives". (p. 49-50). Then, Brown states the importance of using task based instruction because "it views the learning process as a set of communicative tasks that are directly linked to the curricular goals they serve, the purposes of which extend beyond the practice of language for its own sake (Brown, 2001, p.50). At the end learners supported the methodology used since 86% of them provided an affirmative answer. The students also provided different positive reasons to justify their answers like the following: the activities were great, I have never had such a complete English class, through the activities used in class we had the chance of talking about what we like, now I feel less afraid of making mistakes when I speak, excellent methodology it was very creative, excellent because the lessons were varied and entertaining, the activities provided a lot of interaction, the tasks facilitate spontaneous communication, speaking activities help me improve my fluency and pronunciation, we learn more and I can express freely.

On the other hand, 8% of the students answered "No" to the question and 6% of them marked sometimes. These students justified their position giving the following reasons: the videos were not appropriate for me, all the oral evaluation activities require a lot of time to prepare them, I would rather have interviews. I had to memorize for the oral presentation, we need more basic things, activities were very advanced for me, I did not like to work with different partners; I prefer to work only with my friends, the vocabulary of the songs and the videos was very complex.

In fact, there are some aspects that need improvement, but some of the reasons given by the students showed evidence that some of them do not want to take time to learn English and as if it is known learning a foreign language takes time and a lot of effort, so these students will not have the chance to fulfill the class objectives.

5. Which of the activities used in class did you find more useful?
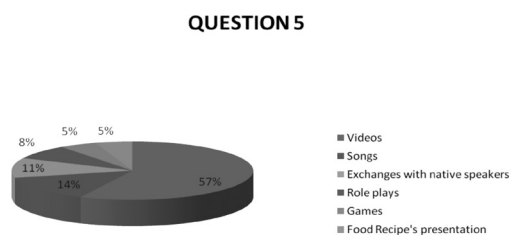
QUESTION 5

In this question students chose one of the activities used in class according to their judgement and preferences. The goal was to see which activity they liked the most in order to use it more often in the future courses. So, students chose videos with 57% of the total and songs with 14%. They also mentioned other activities like exchanges with native speakers, role plays, games and food recipe's presentation showing some differences to what they have answered in the first survey.

Conclusions and Findings

In these groups, I found that students who have the same gender, similar age and language background have similar preferences and likes. Another thing that I confirmed in my findings is that students need to be motivated to use English which is not a secret, but the hardest thing is to find the ways encourage them to use it since most of them do not like English and they just take the course because it is a major requirement. Among the factors that may affect the students' communication are that the students don't like to do the traditional activities like speeches, interviews and recorded conversations due to emotional and external factors. This means that young beginning learners don't feel comfortable speaking when they are pressed to do it. Students use the language

more when the instructor brings games, songs or other activities that they feel identified to talk. Also, learners felt very satisfied with the study because their opinion was considered and that motivated them a lot. After following the students' suggestions there was a lot of improvement in oral communication since many students did their best to improve. Consequently, the results of the speaking part were better than the ones from the previous groups of the same level that I have taught. The 79 students who concluded the course scored an average of 23% out of the 30% total of the speaking part, which is equals to 77% out of 100%. Additionally in the last survey, the majority of the students were quite satisfied with the course methodology and they affirmed that it had helped them to lose the fear to communicate in English, so the methodology used was useful for most of the students. On the other hand, there were students who do not pass the course and they didn't do well in communication scoring half of the percentage of the speaking part total or even less of that percentage. Fortunately, these were a few cases and what matters is that the learners' performance in the speaking part has improved considerably in comparison to previous courses of the same level and this can be demonstrated comparing the answers of the first survey with ones of the second.

Finally, I hope this study helps other instructors to find the way to motivate the beginning EFL learners to speak English more confidently, so that we can have better results.

Bibliography

Barkhuisen, G. P. (1998). Discovering learners' perceptions of ESL classroom teaching/learning activities in a South African context. *TESOL Quarterly 32(1),* 86-108.

Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy,* Second Edition. New York: Pearson Education.

Cook, V. (2001). *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching,* Third Edition, New York: Oxford University Press

Cutrone. P. (2009). Overcoming Japanese EFL Learners' Fear of Speaking. *Language Studies Working Papers,1,* 55-63.

Johnson, K. E. (1999). *Understanding Language Teaching: Reasoning in Action.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle Thomson Learning.

Liangpanit, C. and Thienpermpool, P. (n.d). Different Age Groups' Conceptions of Preferred English Lessons. Retrieved January, 2013 from http://www.fllt2013.org/private_folder/Proceeding/187.pdf

Murcia, M. C. (2001). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language,* Third Edition. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Renandya, W. & Richards, J. (2002). *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice.* United States of America: Cambridge University Press.