

Oral Interaction Through Task Based Learning

[Interacción oral a través del aprendizaje por tareas]

Jeiny Silva Rangel¹

Abstract. The document aims to explore oral interaction by designing curricular units founded on task-based learning. It was carried out in a public school with sixth graders between the ages of 11 to 14 years old in Barrancabermeja Colombia. This paper analyzes the behavior of students to perform oral activities and the importance of designing authentic material in English for public teachers. The data gathering revealed that these curricular units moved the teacher-student interaction to student-student interaction; the students' oral interactions contributed to know their weaknesses in the structure of the language and they began to take different roles in their English learning.

Key words: task based learning (TBL); curricular units; oral interaction.

Resumen. El documento tiene como objetivo explorar la interacción oral mediante el diseño de unidades curriculares fundadas en el aprendizaje basado en tareas. Se llevó a cabo en una escuela pública con estudiantes de sexto grado entre las edades de 11 a 14 años de edad en Colombia Barrancabermeja. Este documento analiza el comportamiento de los estudiantes para realizar actividades orales y la importancia de diseñar material auténtico en Inglés para los maestros públicos. La recopilación de datos reveló que estas unidades curriculares mueven la interacción profesor-alumno a la interacción alumno-alumno; las interacciones orales de los estudiantes contribuyeron a conocer sus puntos débiles en la estructura de la lengua y comenzaron a adoptar diferentes roles en su aprendizaje de Inglés.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje por tareas, unidades curriculares, interacción oral.

Introduction

This research came from the necessity that I observed when I began to work in a public school. Once I came into the classroom I started speaking in English and what I could perceive was that a group of young people had a particular reaction; they were amazed to listen to their English teacher, they smiled and whispered. I noticed their lack of English oral interaction, they were only listeners. It made me reflect on how to

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provide opportunities to my students to interact in English. So started thinking about how to work on them in order to improve their English oral interaction.

Working in this public school made me reflect about the national policy of bilingualism which is one of the most outstanding aims from the government pretending to strengthen the English communicative competence. Nonetheless, there is something that is not working well because public teachers have to face students who study in lack conditions with a very poor level of English. For example; the number of hours of English lesson a week is not enough which means the English standards are only on the paper, they are far away from the reality of the public schools. In other words, working with those students is a difficult challenge which made me feel interested in strategies and teaching methods in order to make a good English learning process.

Developing communicative skills begins with simple interactions that should be practiced every day because new skills take a lot of time to refine. It takes time to realize that each time you use your communicative skills; you open yourself to opportunities and future partnerships. Therefore, I decided to make my own English material taking into account my students' conditions. I began applying a questionnaire to the students and it revealed that the students were interested in fostering oral interaction and working in groups. It was the beginning to design curricular units to foster group oral interaction.

The intention was to explore the oral interaction through the design of curricular units founded in the Task Based Learning and my students' needs to analyze the development of group oral interaction in the English lessons. In this paper, the reader will find the rationale; the theoretical framework which is divided in three main issues oral interaction, task based learning and the design of curricular units; research methodology; findings and conclusions.

Theoretical framework

This chapter addresses the most relevant issues for this research; first you can find some authors who have researched about oral interaction; they have provided diverse definitions about oral interaction; the second issue is task based learning, here I highlighted some authors who have described the framework about how to plan a class based on this approach and finally the third issue is the design of curricular units, in this part, there are some researches about this issue supporting my idea of designing curricular units.

Oral Interaction

After analyzing my real context, I realized the lack of English oral interaction between my students and the lack of English material to work. This was the starting

point to design the curricular units and in this way involve them in their English learning.

Mackey (1999) points out that the more you interact the more successful your second language development is. It means that if teachers want their students to improve their English oral interaction, they have to provide English material to practice Oral interaction. Teachers must make English lessons attractive for learners since we can not close our eyes to the development of technology and nowadays our students have access to new ways to interact with people from other countries. We should train our students to be competent to the 21st century.

Making my students interact in English was a challenge because I had to plan activities in which my students enjoyed the oral interaction and this required a good environment. Therefore, it was necessary to know a concept of interaction in the classroom.

Based on Malamah -Thomas (1996), he defines interaction as a process in which people and things have a reciprocal effect upon each other through their actions: as opposed to transaction, the interpersonal aspects of the communication event. Understanding this view I realized that oral interaction is a very important part of the English learning process which takes time.

After knowing what oral interaction implied, I thought about how to make curricular units that foster the students' oral interactions. I pretended to move teacher-student interaction to student-student interaction; my wish was to prove that my students could interact in English with their limitations.

However it implied more than designing units based on tasks; the environment of the class and number of the students were factors to take into account. González (2001) points out in her project "Encouraging interaction by cooperative learning" that it is possible to increase oral production of secondary students through team-work and ludic activities. Furthermore, it provides some ideas about the way to build teams and to be aware of the concept it entails. It fosters the rupture with traditional sequential organization of the classes and the adoption of a new structure.

After knowing the relevance of team-work and analyzing my students' preferences taken from a previous questionnaire; I determined to design curricular units based on tasks developed by pairs. It meant that the students were going to be more time sharing which would make them interact between them. According to Harmer (2001), he proposed that pair work increases the amount of talking time available to every learner in classroom. It allows learners to work and interact independently without the necessary guidance of the teacher, thus promoting learners' independence. It allows teachers to have time to work with one and more pairs while other learners continue working. This cooperation helps the classroom become a more relaxed and friendly place.

However, working in pairs or groups to foster oral interaction entailed other aspects as: anxiety and fears of the students. In a previous questionnaire, my students answered having fear of making mistakes. It was something that made me reflect about my students' anxiety. Based on Dörnyei (2002), she points out people with a low sense of self-efficacy do not perceive difficult tasks as challenges but as threats, and in this situation they become more concentrated on their personal deficiencies and obstacles rather than on how to perform the tasks successfully. It meant that the environment and the way of reacting as a teacher in front of possible students' mistakes were other crucial points in the development of English oral interaction. The design of tasks to develop oral interactions should be according to my students' level implying providing enough input to make my students feel confident in their linguistic competences to speak.

Also I found there are two main sorts of interactions; teacher- student and student-student interaction. The first is most common in the English classroom and it is required but here I pretended to move to student-student interaction and taking into account Long and Porter (1985), they consider that learner-learner interaction pattern is an attractive alternative to teacher-learner interaction.

Task Based Learning

Task Based Learning Framework was chosen due to the possibility to work with a variety of levels and the context of the students. Moreover the tasks can be developed to foster different skills. In this case, I proposed to foster student - student oral interaction in the English classroom. Based on Willis (1996), task-based learning is built upon sound theoretical foundations and takes into account the need for authentic communication. In the model of task-based learning, she describes the traditional PPP (presentation, practice, production). The students start with the task when they have completed it, the teacher draws attention to the language used, making corrections and adjustments to the students' performance. In *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*, Jane Willis (1996) presents a three stages process:

- Pre-task - Introduction to the topic and task.
- Task cycle - Task planning and report
- Language focus - Analysis and practice.

The first is the Pre-task stage during which the teacher introduces and defines the topic and the learners engage in activities that either help them recall words and phrases that will be useful during the performance of the main task or to learn new words and phrases that are essential to the task.

The second stage is Task Cycle. Here the learners perform the task (typically a reading or listening exercise or a problem-solving exercise) in pairs or small groups. They then prepare a report for the whole class on how they did the task and what

conclusions they reached. Finally, they present their findings to the class in spoken or written form.

The third and final stage is the analysis that students do about the transcript or text and the practice is oriented by the teacher. It is about relevant vocabulary or phrases used while and after the analyses.

Curricular units

This research focused on developing oral interaction through the design of curricular units. First I attempted to define what curricular unit is. There are authors not taking into account curricular units as material design. However; most teachers have been using them because it is the way to arrange activities to develop a curriculum based on the particular needs of the students. According to Ramos, Aguirre & Hernández (2012) curricular units may be understood as a source of input that is produced by teachers to better students learning. Some advantages of designing curricular units are that they are not expensive because being built by teachers; they focused on the students' needs and context; they are a way to take advantage of the teachers' creativity and they are a vehicle to make reflection about pedagogical practices.

This concept helped to understand the relevance of curricular units and the benefits that this type of material brings to teach in public schools. In addition something very important with the design of curricular units is their relation to the real context of the students which provide a pleasant English learning.

The importance of material design

There is a huge industry in charge of designing English material; but due to the low resources of public schools students, it is impossible to buy these books; so most of teachers try to adjust this material. However, It could be more valued if English teachers explore the learning atmosphere to make their own material.

Teachers should devote more time to design activities based on students' needs making students enjoy their English learning. For Seedhouse, (1995) it is a duty of the teacher to try to keep a balance among student's language learning needs, concerns, preferences, motivations and expectations, their affective needs, and the language learning objectives of the institutional program. Teachers should be aware of what they are teaching, how their students feel in the class and if English learning is meaningful for learners.

If teachers explore their creativity to produce English material taking into account students' needs, it could be innovating something for the students because they will involve in activities related to their real context. The idea of making authentic material

is to make the students active in the class. English classes can not be focused on handing a handout to the learners to be answered. The teacher's attitude influences on the learners' learning so teachers have the change of English learning in their hands.

According to Nuñez and Tellez (2009) the materials development requires designers to be reflective, resourceful and receptive agents with regard to their teaching practice, besides becoming more willing to take risks and make decisions related to the way they handle classes, and being less willing to single out what should not have been done as well as attentive to complimenting and praising their students' attempts to perform tasks in a different manner as there are not necessarily incorrect ways to do things, but rather different ways to do them. This idea was an input to design the curricular units.

This design was done following the components of Nuñez and Tellez (2009) a. needs assessment, b. setting goals and objectives, c. content, d. selecting and developing materials and activities, e. resources and constraints, f. evaluation.

Finally this research pretended to promote the English oral interaction of sixth graders through the design of curricular units due to the lack of English material in Colombian public schools.

Research methodology

This is qualitative action research. Based on Borg (1981), the action research emphasizes problematic situations happening in the classrooms. Rather than dealing with the theory, the action research allows practitioners to address those problems that they can observe in their real context and try to suggest possible solutions.

According to this statement, the goal of this research was to foster the English oral interaction of a group of sixth graders at a public school through the design of curricular units and show what this oral interaction reveals.

In this action research the problem was the lack of oral interaction in the sixth graders, the researcher planned an intervention through the design of three curricular units founded on Task Based Learning and after the analysis of the findings through three instruments; the researcher provided four categories revealing advances and achievements for the solution of the problem.

Settings and participants

This project was developed in a public school located in Barrancabermeja, Santander, Colombia. It has 14 classrooms, a small library, a court and girl and boy toilets; the number of students per classroom ranges from 38 to 45. The school did

not have an English program due to the lack of a permanent English teacher and the English learning in elementary school was taught by teachers who did not have an English teaching degree and the English level of the students was poor.

The subjects for this research were sixth graders between 11 and 14 years old from low social strata. Most of their families were part of the armed conflict in Colombia. There were 41 students in the classroom and there were three hours of English class per week.

They were aware of being part of the research and they agreed about participating. It was allowed through a meeting of parents, principal, coordinator and students. The researcher was a female English Teacher studying in a master program and having 1 year working with this institution.

The students were identified with different letter as A, B, C, D, in order to protect their identity.

Instruments and procedure

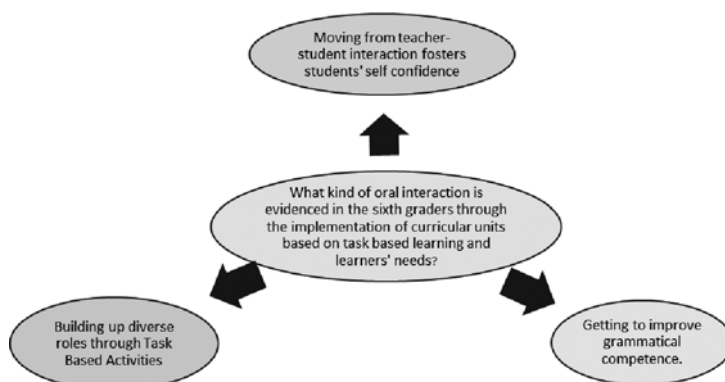
To gather the information of this research I considered three instruments: informal discussion, video tapes and field notes. First, I designed the curricular units which were given to the students and then there were some informal discussions with the students about this material; second, the oral interactions of the students were recorded and the teacher took notes while the students were developing the tasks; third, the information gathered through the recordings, the informal discussions and the field notes were coded by the teacher and finally, this information was analyzed to identify patterns and categories which helped me to address the conclusions for the research question. What kind of oral interaction is evidenced in the sixth graders through the implementation of curricular units based on task based learning and learners needs?

Data Gathering

According to Glasser and Strauss (1967) there are some steps to build a theory, these are: familiarization; coding and categorization; integration and theorization. In this case, the data for this study were gathered from informal discussions; video tapes and field notes. First, the findings were taken from each instrument, second, these findings were analyzed to find common patterns, third these common patterns were grouped in categories and subcategories being supported theoretically with different authors; and finally the theory emerged.

Findings

After having coded the data gathering and found common patterns; there was integration and theorization stage and these three main categories emerged.



Graphic No 1: Categorization of the data

Moving from teacher-student interaction fosters student's Self confidence

The outset of student- student interaction was not easy; I had to provide a lot of input so that they could do their first task. However, through the development of the curricular units, their oral interactions were exceeding the expectations, these interactions began changing without the students noticed, they began answering simple questions, then they started to ask about words and finally they interacted among them. Due to this change, different attitudes in my students began flourishing and this category emerged.

This category came from the analysis of the three instruments mentioned previously; each instrument threw similar evidences such as: Oral interaction stimulates students' production, competitiveness, independence and fellowship. Oral interaction promotes students' motivation to learning. Students empower themselves to correct others and being corrected. Students' confidence promotes practice and participation. These subcategories formed this first category.

Subcategory 1: Oral interaction stimulates students' production, competitiveness, independence and fellowship.

Examples 1:

Student A: What...What's [your] mother's name?

Student B: My mother's name is Elsa. [Why] your mother's name?

Student A: [My] mother's [naim] is Olga.

Student B: See you!!!!

Students: chuckles

Student A: See you!

Teacher: ok, bye bye. Excellent.

Students: Bye bye,

Teacher: Congratulations

Taken from: Development of Curricular unit Number 1. My Family

Verbatim from the students

Instrument: Video tapes

Date: April

According to Brown (2001) the teacher talk should not occupy the mayor proportion of a class hour because it does not allow the students to talk. This idea was a basis in the design of the curricular units, I looked for increasing the students interaction time and activities to make them produce something and it was revealed in this category.

Getting to improve grammatical competence

During the development of the oral activities proposed in the curricular units, I observed my students were advancing in vocabulary and use of simple structures through the oral interaction tasks. They began to use the dictionary and little by little they minded being accurate which allowed them to show their strengths. The participation was increasing and it was due to the fact that they felt identified with the units.

This category emerged from the three instruments used in this research. These displayed similar evidences as language context, enhancing English accuracy and the students' participation showed strengths and weaknesses.

Subcategory 1: Becoming aware of language context, strengths, accuracy and participation

Example 2:

Student P: bueno listo, ¿ya copio?

Student Q: ya, empieza

Student P: Hello, what's your [name]?

Student Q: pero deje que yo salude y no diga [name] es [niem]

Student R: disque niem,

Student P: ¿Entonces cómo es?

Student R: se escribe name pero se pronuncia [neim]

Taken from: Development of Curricular unit Number 1. My Family

Verbatim from the students

Instrument: Field Notes

Date: April

In this example, the students showed interest in being accurate. It allowed them to highlight their strengths because they made corrections among them. Based on Swain (2000), the interaction provides opportunities to negotiate meaning, to focus on form, to receive feedback and to use the target language. It makes the students become aware of their English learning. It was revealed through the development of the curricular units.

Building up diverse roles through Task Based Activities

This category was born from the process of organizing the oral tasks that the students developed in the English class, the students began to take different roles while they were sharing and interacting. This helped to reveal different students' attitudes and beliefs, I could affirm that oral interaction was a way to know my students' behavior; everyone began to assume different roles in the group. These activities helped to build a trusting atmosphere in the English learning.

Subcategory 1: Team work fosters interaction and decision making

Example 3:

Student F: Look at está Pheneas

Student G: Sí mire,

Student O: Pase la hoja y están todos

Student M: Teacher ¿Por qué todo tiene Pheneas?

Student N: porque esta de moda.

Teacher: because you like, because it is your favorite Cartoon

Student L: porque es nuestro favorito

Teacher: Yes, it is correct.

Student B: ¿Lástima los colores, cierto teacher?

Teacher: yes, but you can color

Taken from: Development of Curricular unit Number 2. Describing my favorite place in my home

Verbatim from the students

Instrument: Informal discussions

Date: May

At the beginning of each unit the students made their commentaries about the unit, they expressed what they liked and their expectations. All of this information helped to design the new curricular units. In this case, it was the second unit and they expressed they liked colors, so I projected the unit with colors and they felt happy.

I realized that taking into account the students' likes to plan and to design material for an English lesson was very useful; students were encouraged and interested in doing something with the curricular unit. They wanted to read the dialogue and without waiting for teacher's instructions, they proposed to do the role play. According

to Vigotsky (1978) a meaningful learning should be articulated with both the social context and the daily life of the learner, thus children have an active and creative participation in the construction of knowledge. It was one of the aims of the curricular units, I wanted the students felt identified and could develop English oral interaction.

Conclusions

I addressed the most important issues that revealed from the research inquiry; what kind of oral interaction is evidenced in the sixth graders through the implementation of curricular units based on task based learning and learners' needs?

Within the development of the curricular units, the oral interaction of the students was born. While the students were working in groups, their oral interaction began to be more powerful and different feelings bloomed; the students began to know one another and to reveal their strengths making the class more productive. They increased their self-confidence making a better environment of the class which brought motivation and this was crucial for the students' participation. Another feeling was the independence, the more interaction, the better independent they became in their English learning; the teacher was not a wise in the classroom; first they asked and solved their doubts among them, using the dictionary or their notes and the last resource was to ask to the teacher.

This independence was a pillar to stand out and it became leadership; some students began to be leaders in the classroom due to their oral interactions, and little by little, they started interacting spontaneously not only in the classroom but also outside.

The oral interaction helped to enhance the grammar competence, although it was not a crucial aspect in the beginning of this research, the students showed interest in being accurate when they interacted, they used the dictionary and asked about the pronunciation. They were aware of their mistakes and their classmates' mistakes; they started to correct one another.

Finally, the implementation of the curricular units allowed contextualizing the tasks with the reality of the students. These were focused on the students' needs and likes and it was worth since the students started interacting in English and enjoying their English learning.

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Appendix 1
Curricular Unit No 1: My Family

INSTITUTO 26 DE MARZO
ENGLISH SUBJECT
GUIDE No. 1
MY FAMILY

NAME: _____

GRADE: SIXTH

DATE: _____

MADE BY: Jeiny Silva Rangel

Teacher: Jeiny Silva Rangel

TASK : INTRODUCING THE MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY

Achievements:

1. Describing people, classmates and my family in short sentences.
2. Speaking about my classmates' family.

PRE TASK: Listen to the teacher and organize per couples. Practice the following dialogue.



Yulitza: Hello Miguel

Miguel: Hello Yulitza, How are you?

Yulitza: I am fine and you?

Miguel: I am fine

Yulitza: What's your mother's name?

Miguel: My mother's name is Elsa. What's your mother's name?

Yulitza: My mother's name is Olga.

Miguel: See you!

Yulitza: See you!

1. VOCABULARY



Listen to the personal pronouns and verb to be

THE FLINSTONES



I AM PEDRO



SHE IS VILMA



IT IS DINO



HE IS PABLO



WE ARE THE PICAPIEDRAS



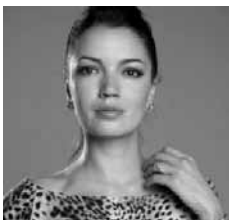
YOU ARE STUDENTS.

TASK PREPARATION

1.1 Choose the correct personal pronoun to complete the sentences.



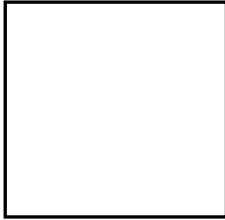
_____ is a singer.



_____ is an actress.



_____ is a pencil.



_____ am student



_____ are Colombian singers.

2. READING COMPREHENSION

2. 1 Read about Pedro and answer the questions.

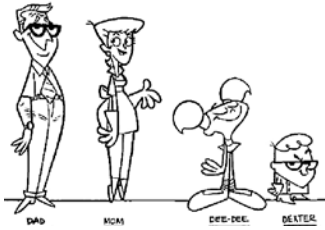
HELLO

I am Pedro, I am fat, Vilma is my wife, she is tall, thin and blond, we have a baby girl. Pablo is my friend, his wife is Betty, she is short, they have a baby boy.

1. Who is tall? _____
2. Who is fat? _____
3. Who have a baby boy? _____
4. Who is short? _____

3. LISTENING

3. 1 Listen to the description and complete with the words into the box.



Hello I ___ Dexter, I ___ intelligent and short, I ___ 10 years old. This is my ____, My father ___ tall and fat, he ___ 40 years old. My mother ___ beautiful, she is 35 years old. I ___ a sister, ___ is Dee dee, she is thin, she is 13 years old. They ___ my family.

GRANDMOTHER _____	GRANDFATHER _____	GRANDMOTHER _____	GRANDFATHER _____
MOTHER _____		FATHER _____	
SISTER _____	BROTHER _____		
YOU _____			

4. WRITING

4.1 Write a short description about your family on your notebook.

5. SPEAKING

5.1 Work with a classmate, ask and answer these questions.

- a. What's your mother's name?
- b. What's your father's name?
- c. What's your brother's name?
- d. What's your sister's name?
- e. What's your grandmother's name?
- f. What's your grandfather's name?

TASK REALISATION

5.2 **TASK:** Work with a classmate. Cut images from a magazine, organize a family tree and introduce it to the class.

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