

Developing Learners' Oral Communicative Language Abilities: A Collaborative Action Research Project in Argentina

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This paper describes and evaluates the implementation of an English oral skills action research project carried out at Colegio Atlántico del Sur (henceforth, CADS), a private middle school in Argentina. The participants of this study were 24 learners, their teacher and a teacher-researcher and evaluator. Data were collected from the learners' oral output, questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations. The findings were analyzed against a set of given criteria based on the literature and our own experience as teachers of English. The results revealed that after having worked with collaborative tasks, which combined a focus on form during a relatively short period of time, these learners were able to moderately improve their spoken English; they became more aware of how certain aspects of language work and they were able to develop their self-confidence and stimulate their motivation to continue learning in class. Secondly, action research projects of this type, where teachers are made to work collaboratively and reflect on their practices, are also valuable in that these aspects contribute significantly to improve teacher development. Finally, some avenues for future research in this area were highlighted.

Key words: evaluation, oral skills development, action research, tasks

INTRODUCTION

A basic challenge to language teaching is to provide learners with plenty of opportunities for using the target language communicatively. However, by simply using language, learners are not able to develop continuously (Skehan, 2002). Indeed, language use certainly needs to be practiced in classroom pedagogy in combination with a focus on form. Second language development involves fostering learners' awareness of the structural or grammatical features of the target language so that they are able to associate those features with their functional usage, and thus use both forms and functions properly for establishing meaningful communication. This, as a result, calls for the implementation of an eclectic approach to language teaching whereby teachers working as controllers, facilitators, and assessors should adopt a diversity of roles and use a wide selection of activities ranging from accuracy to more meaning-focused interactional tasks through which learners are pushed to interact purposefully with one another.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the implementation of an oral skills action research (henceforth, AR) project, where one teacher with some training in research methods will provide some assistance and support to another colleague in need of effecting a change in her current teaching context. This cooperative project took place at CADS, a private middle school in Argentina. In the first part of this paper, we will present the background to the study which will be used as criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of the instrumentation of this small-scale action research project. In the second section, we will refer to the development and later implementation of the project *per se* and to its subsequent evaluation. Finally, in the light of the findings obtained, we will provide some recommendations and give some suggestions for further investigation in this area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The main challenge for language teaching is to develop learners' communicational language skills through pedagogic intervention. As this requires a range of different processes, assorted types of learning activities may each contribute to develop a learner's ability to use the language successfully in different ways and contexts.

The ability to use language for communicative purposes comprises the ability to employ formal linguistic resources such as vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, collocations, patterns, grammatical structures, and phonological features, among others, to express ideational, interpersonal and discoursal meanings in order to achieve communicative goals in genuine contexts effectively. To be able to develop this ability and the capacity to use these resources in real contexts and time, second language learners must internalize the existing relationships in the target language among form, meaning and use (Bygate, 2001).

For second language development to occur, learners should be provided with plenty of opportunities in their classrooms to use these formal linguistic resources available to them. The experience of language production pushes learners to notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge, triggering an analysis of input or of existing internal resources to fill in those gaps (Swain & Lapkin, 2001), and to prepare their knowledge base for the reception of new language.

However, considerable exposure to meaningful samples of language and plenty of opportunities for practicing it freely are not as much as necessary to guarantee native-like output. Indeed, a carefully contrived focus on the meaningful forms of the target language might help to develop the quality of learners' language performance. Hence, output practice combined with a focus on form seems to be the essential conflation to enable learners to integrate successfully language knowledge into productive use.

As for this study and considering this particular context, the teacher in charge decided to use a diversity of techniques in which two or more learners were assigned a battery of comprehensible tasks that involved collaboration

and self-initiated language. The fundamental principle underlying the use of group work in the language classroom is that through this technique the students are given opportunities for “self-initiation, for face-to-face give and take, for practice of negotiation of meaning, for extended conversational exchanges, and for student adoption of roles that would otherwise be impossible” (Brown, 1994, p. 173).

When students work collaboratively in groups they are encouraged to use language to learn as opposed to merely demonstrate what has been learned. As a result, group work offers more informal language use and student-centered styles and strategies for learning that are generally inhibited during teacher-directed instruction (Johnson, 1995). Along similar lines, Kowal and Swain (1994), Swain (1998) and Swain and Lapkin (1995, 1998, 2000, 2001) support the use of collaborative tasks in the English class whereby learners are made to work together or in small groups. These authors argue that through talk in collaborative tasks, learners are pushed to notice linguistics problems; through their interaction in those tasks students engage in making meaning clearer by debating language form (in Garcia Mayo, 2002).

Although some researchers and teachers may think that learning occurs only between teachers and students and that student-student interaction stands for off-task behavior, discourages achievement, and leads to classroom chaos, others believe that cooperative learning may be more important for educational success than teacher-student interaction. Constructive student-student interaction, in fact, influences students' educational aims and success, develops social competencies and encourages taking on the standpoints of others, increases students' self-esteem, and contributes to improving not only the rapport among learners but also to generating a positive feeling toward school (Johnson, 1995).

Nonetheless, as was pointed out earlier, putting students to work in groups is not enough if they are to develop their language skills and learning strategies productively. For this to happen, instructional as well as learning goals should be structured properly in such a way that students can work collaboratively, compete for fun and enjoyment, and at the same time work

on their own receiving direct instructional guidance and support from their teachers (Johnson, 1995).

Collaborative group work will create more opportunities for students to use language for learning, to negotiate meaning, self-select when to participate and manage the topic of discussion, while teacher-directed instruction will create more opportunities for students to reflect on the structure and organization of the language. If at all possible, second language classrooms should create opportunities for learners to take part in both meaning- and form-focused instruction, as both, theoretically, contribute to second language acquisition (Luchini, 2004).

Some researchers claim that second language acquisition occurs when input is made comprehensible to the learner, that is, when optimal input is not grammatically sequenced but focused on meaning and not on form, either through the context within which it is used, or as a result of simplified input (Johnson, 1995). On the other hand, and rather polemically, some other researchers hold the view that intelligible input alone is not enough for second language acquisition to happen.

Indeed, Swain (1985) suggests that besides the comprehensible input, learners should have opportunities to produce the language if they are to become fluent speakers. For learners to really use the language, they must attend to both the meaning of what they say and the form of how they say it. Van Lier (1991), on similar grounds, expands this concept by proposing an ideal progression in which learners are made, first, to notice the language, then understand it, and, lastly, use it appropriately (in Johnson, 1995). Lightbown (1992) and Long (1991), on the other hand, argue that, for quite some time, although many teachers and researchers have denied the importance of incorporating meaning-focused instruction in the EFL classroom, many now have become aware of its need to be complemented with form-focused instruction of some sort (in Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001).

On looking back at all these assumptions, it can be said that an optimal situation for second language acquisition to occur would be to stress the

importance of creating opportunities in the classroom for learners to have to focus their attention on the language, of giving them vast opportunities to use the language for both meaning-focused communication and form-focused instruction, of their receiving enough instructional guidance and support from their teachers, and of creating a variety of authentic contexts that allow for full performance of the language.

After exploring the different opinions on what seems to be the most effective way for second language acquisition to occur, based on the literature and on our own teaching experience, in this study, we decided to adopt an eclectic approach which conflated both meaning- and form-focused instruction whereby the students were presented with some kind of comprehensible input featuring the target form they would then have to produce. These theoretical assumptions were partly used in his paper as criteria to evaluate the teacher's contribution to the implementation of this developmental AR project.

THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Burns (1994) defines AR as “the application of fact finding to practical problem solving in a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it, involving the collaboration and cooperation of researchers, practitioners and laymen.” (in Burns, 1999). AR relies on exploratory and interpretative methods which are often appealing to the classroom teacher. These methods enable teachers to explore the realities of practical situations without the need of controlling the variables of their classroom contexts. The flexible and eclectic nature of AR implies that teachers are able to modify the questions or issues guiding their research, to take on different research methods or to take their interpretations in new directions as the need arises, a variant that would not be suitable in quantitative research.

However flexible and eclectic, this research method *does* require systematic and rigorous data collection and analysis. In fact, it fulfils essential research

requirements in that it comprises a researchable question or the identification of a puzzled area, planning, collecting data, information analysis, reflection and interpretation, hypothesising, intervening, observing, reporting, writing and presenting. These features do not necessarily need to be clearly delineated and separate points in the research. The crucial aspect of AR lies in the participants' collaborative discussions that occur regularly throughout the process.

This research method enables researchers to take on interpretations that are motivated by data derived from the actual social situations -in this case teachers' own classrooms- rather than by theoretical concepts alone. It is a highly flexible research process which can respond rapidly to emerging political, social and educational questions as they impact on practice (Brown, 1999).

Identifying the Problem

Since 1999, I have been working at CADS as supervisor of the English Language Department. At this school, students receive four hours of instruction of English a week and, as one of the institutional requirements, learners have to take and pass two term tests (written and oral) which are administered after each academic semester in order to win promotion to subsequent courses. The written test consists of a reading comprehension section, a grammar part and a written production task. For the oral test, the students are required to answer a set of content questions related to a set of stories previously dealt with in class. Besides, based on their own personal opinions, sometimes related to the content of the stories they have read, they are often made to complete a spontaneous speech task.

By the end of June 2004, and after the first term test had been administered and rated, I held an evaluation meeting with the six teachers in charge of the classes they taught and that I supervised at this school. At that meeting, we analyzed, in particular, the oral test results in relation to the students' speaking skills and the instructional objectives set by the teachers prior to the

start of instruction. During the meeting, we realized that the students' present level of oral language competence and the instructional objectives of their courses for that term were not fully well-matched. While the course objectives aimed at enabling the students to become trained competent speakers in English at an intermediate level, their oral performance level, however, revealed that most of the students had failed not only to organize their ideas properly, but also to use adequate specific linguistic forms, a fact that did not allow them to communicate effectively.

As in this case, when there is a discrepancy between instructional objectives and learning outcomes, informed decisions may be required to eradicate or reduce potential problems and improve chances of attaining instructional objectives (Genesee & Upshur, 1996). After the meeting, I decided to engage in a collaborative AR project with only one of these teachers and with her students exclusively because I wanted to explore them in depth in a particular incident in an attempt to provide a description, explanation and, above all, judgment about existing assumptions, which were held before the implementation, and later evaluation of this oral skill development project.

Instructional Setting: Context and Participants

Ana was the teacher responsible for the design and later implementation of the AR project in her class. She has been working at CADS for more than 25 years. Her students were 24 teenagers aged 14, whose L1 was Spanish and their L2 was English. Their level of English oral proficiency at the time this project was carried out was equivalent to that of a low intermediate or intermediate. In this study, I worked as supervisor and evaluator of this oral skills development project.

Development of the Collaborative AR Project

Before the design and implementation of this AR project, I held a meeting

with Ana where she told me about her perceptions and feelings about her teaching methodology, her students' reactions to it, and the teaching materials she used prior to effecting her change. As regards her teaching experience, she admitted that most of the times, she had adopted a teacher-fronted approach whereby her students were given just a few opportunities to participate using the target language meaningfully.

Regarding her students' attitudes to learning, she insisted that she felt that they lacked the necessary motivation to learn English, and, as a consequence, they typically conversed and refused to take an active role in class. In reference to the teaching materials she employed, she pointed out that she used a course book provided by the school authorities and had to teach a scheduled syllabus.

After that meeting, we agreed that she should bring about a change in her classes if she meant to help her students develop their oral communication skills. Based on my experience (see Luchini, 2004 where I carried out a similar study with Chinese students at Shanghai Normal University), and on the literature, and with my support, Ana decided to engage in the design, planning and implementation of the present collaborative AR project. The project consisted of a battery of comprehensible tasks which aimed mainly at promoting output practice combined with a focus on form. The students were arranged in six fixed groups to complete these tasks (Appendix B).

Implementation

Ana arranged her students into fixed groups of 4 members each, according to their preference, and explained to them that they would be assessed, both individually and as a group, at each step of this developmental project. As a general rule, the teacher encouraged her students to use L2 for the completion of all the tasks set. To supervise that all her students made effective use of L2 while completing their tasks, the teacher walked around the class and among the groups in her role of supervisor and facilitator.

The groups' first task was to select a traditional version of a fairy tale of

their choice which, later on, would be used as a trigger to complete a set of different comprehensible tasks. Then, the students worked cooperatively within their groups to produce a written summary of the selected story. With the purpose of helping the students write a coherent and unified text, they submitted a draft copy to their teacher. Based on their teacher's comments and suggestions for improvement made on their first draft, the groups edited their works and turned in a final version of their summaries for reviewing.

Once the students finished with their summaries, they began crafting the modified versions of their chosen fairy tales. Ana suggested several possible changes that the students could make in order to come up with a modified version of the original tale. When the students finished their written works, they submitted them to their teacher for feedback.

The next step consisted in having the students compare and/or contrast orally both versions of the same tale following a given schematic structure (see TASK 4, Appendix B). Before completing this task, the students were presented with this marking scheme for assessing oral work (Table 1) to remind them of the essential linguistic aspects they should consider in order to perform the speaking activity successfully.

TABLE 1
Marking Scheme for Assessing Oral Work

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----|------|
| Discrete elements of pronunciation | Sounds of English | 30% | 60% |
| | Stress and intonation | 30% | |
| Communicative oral discourse features | Planning & Organization of speech | 10% | 40% |
| | Clarity & intelligibility | 10% | |
| | Command of grammar | 10% | |
| | Vocabulary expansion | 10% | |
| Total average | | | 100% |

After giving their oral presentations, the students began to write the scripts of their modified tales to be, later on, put on a ten-minute skit. Before the actual play was performed, the students rehearsed it on several occasions under the guidance and supervision of their teacher. During the different rehearsal stages, special attention was placed on the correct use of the

discrete elements of pronunciation as well as on the appropriate management of communicative oral discourse features. At this stage, the teacher intervention was again required. During the students' oral performance stages, the teacher spotted deviant common core items - both at phonological and discursal levels - which, soon after, in subsequent sessions, she exploited as the foundation of remedial-work and follow-up activities with a strong focus on form.

Lastly, the groups acted out their modified versions of their tales. The students in each group devised their own aids (music and scenery) and costumes. Some other learners and their teacher from another class, together with the supervisor (myself) and the Head of the School were invited to participate in this hands-on experience as members of the audience.

Instruments of Data Collection

In this small-scale research the data were elicited from the students' spoken-English output before, during and after the implementation of change, students' questionnaires, students' interviews, and class observations.

Students' Oral Output

As was mentioned earlier, the students had to take two term tests throughout their academic year. The first test was administered in June, and the second in November. Each one of these tests consisted of two sections: an oral and a written one. In order to pass these exams, the students were expected to score a grade equivalent to 7 (seven) or above in both sections. The format of these tests and the type of tasks in them were consistent with the kind of activities done in class. Table 2 below shows the number of students in percentages per term classified according to the grades obtained. The grades were grouped on a scale ranging from 1-4: Fail, 5-6: Poor, 7-8: Good, and 9-10: Very Good.

TABLE 2
Progression of Students' Outcomes Throughout the Academic Year

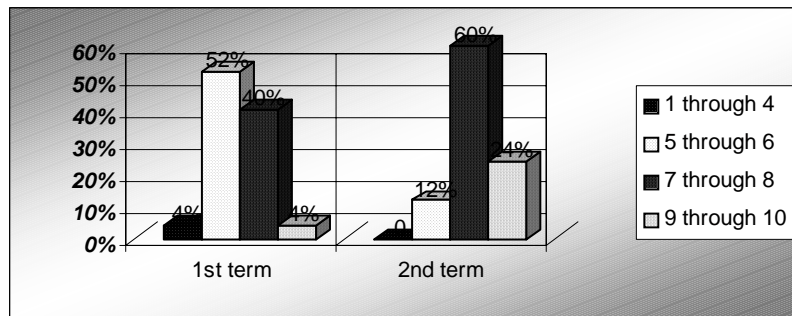
| Grades in numbers | Grades in letters | 1st term | 2nd term |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | | No. of stds. in % | No. of stds. in % |
| 1 through 4 | Fail | 4% | 0 |
| 5 through 6 | Poor | 52% | 12% |
| 7 through 8 | Good | 40% | 60% |
| 9 through 10 | Very Good | 4% | 24% |

On looking at Table 2 above, after analyzing the students' speaking first term test results, it transpires that the majority of the learners (Grades 1-4: 4%, Grades 5-6: 52%: Total 54%) failed to meet the instructional objectives regarding the development of their speaking skills set for that period. This result was, as was mentioned earlier, the major reason that pushed us to engage in the implementation of change so as to improve chances of accomplishing our instructional aims.

After the completion of this project, we analyzed the results emerging from the second term tests. Careful examination of these findings revealed that the number of the students who had failed their first term tests plummeted considerably (see Table III above) from 54% (first term test) to 12% (second term test). Not only had the number of those students who had passed their first term tests with scores ranging from 7-8 and 9-10 increased favourably after carrying out the project, but also their grades had improved noticeably (see Appendix A).

However, the most significant and positive change was observed in the drastic fall in the number of those students who had failed their first term tests with grades 5-6 (52%) compared with the number of those who had failed their second term tests with grades 5-6 (12%). The graph below illustrates the students' evolution and the impact this project had on the development of their oral communicative skills after the implementation of the change effected.

FIGURE 1
Students' Linguistic Evolution



These findings strongly correlate with those coming from the students' interviews and evaluative questionnaires (see discussion below), where most learners involved in this study seemed to have perceived significant improvements in their oral communication abilities after completing this project.

Students' Questionnaires

Towards the end of this project, the students were given an evaluative questionnaire which aimed at eliciting their perceptions and opinions regarding the impact this oral skills developmental project might have had on their learning process. Out of the 24 students who participated in this project, only 21 were present the day this questionnaire was administered.

The questionnaire consisted in a multiple-choice section in which the learners were required to indicate their responses to the questions asked by choosing a number along a 4-point scale (1- A lot, 2- Reasonably, 3- A little, and 4- None) that best corresponded to their feelings or impressions. Table 3 below shows the questionnaire administered to the students and the results obtained in percentages:

TABLE 3
Questionnaire and Results in Percentages

| Questions | A lot | Reasonably | A little | None |
|--|--------|------------|----------|-------|
| 1. To what extent the type of activities done throughout this project contributed to the development of your oral language skills in English | 76.19% | 14.28% | 4.76% | ---- |
| 2- To what extent you think working in groups is a useful technique for the improvement of your spoken-English | 66.66% | 28.57% | ---- | 4.76% |
| 3- To what extent this oral skills project has had an impact on the development of your spoken English | 80.95% | 19.04% | ---- | ---- |

On looking at the results of this questionnaire, it can be observed that 16 out of the 21 (76.19%) students found the activities done throughout the implementation of this project, helpful for their language development. While 3 students (14.28%) acknowledged having made reasonable language developmental gains, only 1 (4, 76%) indicated having made no language progress in any way.

In connection with the implementation of the group work technique, it seems that most of the respondents (66.66%) recognized its usefulness for the development of their oral language communication skills. Some others (28.57%) referred to the group work technique as having contributed sensibly to their language improvement, while one respondent, however, expressed his dissatisfaction with the adoption of this meaning-driven approach to teaching.

Concerning the overall impact this spoken-English project had on the development of the students' oral language performance, the majority of the participants (89.95%: a lot and 19.04%: reasonably), indicated having made some kind of evolution in their language improvement. This information, as was stated in the section above, matches the results emerging from the students' oral test terms where a significant improvement was observed subsequent to the instrumentation of the project.

Systematic examination of the findings obtained coming from these three elicitation questions in combination with the result coming from the other

instruments of data collection, divulges that the implementation of this project was, at this initial stage, reasonably effective. The inclusion of a battery of comprehensible tasks that promoted interaction combined with a strong instructional focus on form was fairly well received and taken on by the students.

Similarly, the adoption of the group work technique, as part of the new class dynamics, was also welcome as this may have provided the learners with a safe classroom environment in which they were able to work cooperatively, away from the criticism of their teacher and other peers. Alternatively, the progression of tasks, which represented a sub-goal each, allowed for short term learners' achievements which, in turn, might have had a powerful motivational function.

In the next section, the results of the interviews and the class observations will be analyzed and compared to those coming from this questionnaire and the students' test outcome with the intention of strengthening the validity of this study.

Student Interviews

Six students were randomly chosen to participate in semi-structured interviews. The aim of these interviews was to obtain valuable information vis-à-vis the students' perceptions and feelings about the implementation of this new learning experience. So as to reinforce the validity of this study, we decided to cross-reference the data sources. Thus, data coming from the students' test outcomes, interviews, questionnaires to students and class observations were analyzed first, independently, and, then, in combination with the intention of identifying cases of match and/or mismatch of information emerging from the examination of all the data sources. Cross-referencing information coming from the different instruments of data collection, as is this case, is an effective technique to corroborate the findings obtained.

During the interviews, the six students were asked about their feelings as

regards the different task types they had completed during the implementation of the project, their reactions towards working in groups in relation to their language learning process, and their general impression of the project in relation the development of their spoken-English. As regards the type of activities done, four out of the five students interviewed agreed that, in the past, when their teacher was in full control of their classes, most of the time, they were deprived of opportunities to use the language communicatively. With regard to this, one learner said:

Student A: Before, the teacher worked with grammar and vocabulary. We used the booklet and the book and did many, many exercises. The teacher corrected our exercise and then we work more and more with the book. It is very bored.

With the adoption of this new methodology which combined meaning-with form-focused tasks, however, all the learners interviewed claimed that during the implementation of the project, they felt they were invited to take an active role in class where they were allowed to interact and negotiate meaning to complete their tasks, and this, consecutively, they said, was beneficial for their language learning process. The acknowledgement of the usefulness of these task types for language development was also present in the results emerging from the questionnaire above (see question 1.). In relation to this issue, another respondent pointed out:

Student B: It was very difficult to arrive at the play. We read and read one fairy tale "Cinderella". Then, with this story and other stories we invented our crazy story. Then the teacher correct the story. Then we write the dialogues in our groups. Then, the teacher corrected more and more. The teacher stopped and teach us the past verb that we used bad in our stories. Then we did exercises of the past. Then we wrote the story again but better, with the verbs in past. Then we invented a dialogue and practiced acting for the play. The teacher stopped us and corrected the pronunciations of the past ... "invited" = /invaitID/. I learn the past, now I will remember!

When asked about their experiences of working in groups, four out of the five students interviewed recognized the significance of using collaborative work in their classes for their language evolution. This information also correlates with the data coming from the questionnaire above, where it can be observed that more than 90% of the students rated the group work technique as an important ingredient in their classes where the main aim was to help them develop their oral communicative language abilities. With respect to this, one learner said:

Student C: I like to work in groups because I can speak with my friends and the teacher don't listen! If I don't know the meanings of a word, I can ask my friends and tell me or we ask another group. In groups we can have fun and learn together.

However, one of the girls interviewed claimed that she often prefers studying by herself to sharing her work and class time with her partners. Indeed, she added that she finds working in groups fairly impractical and disordered; two characteristics that, in her opinion, do not contribute to the development of her language skills. Concerning this issue, she stated:

Student D: I don't like groups. Everybody talk and the work is very disorganized. When I don't understand, no one never know the answer. I like to study alone, so I have my time and can ask my teacher if I don't know anything. I can learn better alone.

Regarding the learners' impressions about the impact this project had on their communicative oral language abilities, the majority of them reported having made significant language progress, a fact which was also shown in the results coming from their second term test outcomes and the evaluative questionnaire above. In reference to this, two students expressed:

Student E: Work in group helped to express my meanings with my friends. Now I know the order of ideas and the verbs in past. I know the pronunciation of many words and the meanings. My vocabulary is bigger.

When I make a mistake, my teacher or my friend correct me and I learn more.

Student F: I can speak fluent now. I liked the play. It was very funny and I learn how to say my part and learn many new words. I like to do one more plays like this. It was a big party and we are actors!

Meticulous analysis of these excerpts suggests that after eight weeks of instruction, which is the approximate time Ana and her students took to complete this project, these learners were able to make considerable headway in the development of their oral skills. Seemingly, the type of activities done throughout the implementation of this small-scale study enabled the learners to become more aware of how certain aspects of language work, and to develop their self-confidence and stimulate their motivation to continue learning in their English classes. Indeed, during our last post-class debriefing session, after the performances were held, where together with the teacher, we discussed the implications of using dramatization in the language class and its direct link with the development of learners' self-esteem and motivation.

Class Observations

Observation is a mainstream of AR as it enables the researchers to document and reflect systematically on classroom interactions and events, as they really occur rather than as we think they occur (Burns, 1999). On the other hand, classroom observation and any other type of associated inferences about teaching and learning are important alternative assessment methods that can be used for evaluation purposes. One of the distinct values of observation is the possibility it affords of noting unprompted, unexpected, and vital information about teaching and learning in the classroom (Genesee and Upshur, 1996).

During the implementation of this AR project, I observed a total of three classes. After I observed each class, I held post-class debriefing sessions with Ana, where we discussed in depth those aspects and instances drawn from

her classes that we considered interesting, and, that, we thought, would provide us with some kind of central information for the development of the focus of our study. During our first debriefing session, we discussed the implementation of TASK 4 (see Appendix B), where the students were asked to compare or contrast the two versions of the same fairy tale they had chosen to work with.

During our discussion, we both came to the conclusion that most of the learners had been unable to complete the task successfully, and this, we assumed, could have been the result of the students' lacking of the necessary formal linguistic resources to perform the activity as the teacher had initially expected. We both noticed that most of the sentences that the learners used to express their ideas contained irrelevant and extraneous information, they had no sequence of thought but seemed to jump from one idea to another or they did not relate to the topic of discussion nor flow from the preceding sentences. In our discussion, we both agreed that if the students, in a subsequent session, were presented with a list of common transitional words or phrases to connect their thoughts and to provide for a logical sequence of ideas, they would eventually be able to complete this same task successfully.

In her next class, Ana decided to do some remedial work with her students based on the results emerging from TASK 4 (See Appendix B). In view of these results, the teacher selected some connective words, which she thought would be more beneficial for her learners (on the one hand/ on the other hand, as opposed to, whereas, although, similarly, for instance, consequently, among a few others) and presented them to her students formally. She insisted not only on their grammatical function but also on their semantic value as well as on how they are used in context. She decided to turn to sentence-level instruction first so she started by breaking and isolating sentences and asking students to join them by using connectives. These types of activities, which call for teacher intervention and explicit instruction, support the notion of the rhetoric approach which states that once learners can control the exponents at sentence level, they may move on to paragraph-level and then to full text-length exercises (Luchini, 2003). As a result, after

working with connectives at sentence and paragraph levels, the learners went back to their stories and thus were able to complete the task of comparing/contrasting both versions of their same fairy tales effectively.

The third and last class that I observed consisted in the putting on stage of the students' scripted plays (see TASK 5, Appendix B). This time, the learners completed a comprehensive task in which they were given the opportunity to integrate form with meaning. The learners, in their fixed groups, were asked to put on a ten-minute play on a chosen fairy tale which they had previously worked on in class thoroughly. The Head of the school, another teacher and her students belonging to another class, and myself were invited to participate in that class as part of the audience. During that activity, the teacher intervention was, to a great extent, limited in that she just presented the names of the different plays to be performed and their participants in their assigned roles. As the learners, disguised in hilarious costumes, acted out their skits, they were able to make use of their communication skills with a relatively high degree of fluency and accuracy at phonological, semantic and discoursal levels.

In our post-class debriefing session, we both agreed that the combination of different task-types throughout the development of the oral skills project had helped the students raise their awareness of how language works, a fact that, at first sight, seemed to play a crucial role in their language development. Besides, we could see that the students markedly increased their self-esteem and self-confidence in their language class, two fundamentals for second language acquisition to occur, which in the past, using a rather traditional approach, had been ignored.

DISCUSSION

A tentative conclusion from studying these data is that, at least, in this preliminary stage of the development of this AR project, the results obtained so far seem to be beneficial for both the students and teacher alike. However,

in this section, some observations will be made.

Concerning the number of classes observed, it would have been interesting to sit in more classes during and after the instrumentation of this project. This would have provided the researcher and the teacher in charge with more information about instances in action which could have been used to determine the extent of the impact of this project and its overall effectiveness. However, due to time constraints, this plan had to be called off.

For reasons of practicality, I chose only one teacher to work with in depth. Nevertheless, it would have been ideal to count on the information coming from more than one teacher to carry out this research. This would have enabled the evaluator to have a greater research scope, a fact which would have strengthened the validity of this study. However ideal, this scheme had to be overlooked considering the amount of time it took to design, implement and evaluate this collaborative AR project.

On looking at Ana, the question will remain if, under similar conditions in the future, this same teacher will be able to design and put into action similar projects to the one carried out in this study by herself, that is, without the supervision and guidance of a supervisor.

Notwithstanding these observations, the findings obtained reveals that the implementation of this AR project and its results were fairly effective. The underlying assumptions behind this work is that projects of this sort, where students are made to work collaboratively, exchange ideas, negotiate meaning, put their creative potential at play, engage in extended conversational interactions, and adopt roles that would otherwise be impossible, are beneficial for their learning process.

The framework used in this study could be replicated or adapted to investigate how these results relate to other contexts where some other students who might be in vast need of developing their oral skills are facilitated successful communication (See Luchini (2004), where the author conducted a similar study with Chinese students at Shanghai Normal University in China).

CONCLUSION

This small-scale study reported the design, implementation and later evaluation of an AR project carried out in a private middle school in Argentina. On looking at the results obtained, a series of assumptions can be made.

First, when learners are put to work on projects that consist of oral tasks which promote collaboration, exchange of ideas, negotiation of meaning, creativity, extended conversational interactions, combined with a focus on form, students are pushed to take on responsibility for their own learning process, and this is crucial for second language acquisition to happen. Second, projects of this type whereby teachers are encouraged to reflect upon their own teaching practices and, as a result, engage in change with the aim of redirecting their instructional objectives to meet their students' needs are also valuable in that these aspects, it might be argued, contribute to enhance teacher development.

The steps taken in this project are modest and limited in the narrowest of its scope. The pedagogical implications discussed here need to be rigorously investigated across a broader range of contexts in order to build a picture of how both teachers and learners might interact with a proposal similar to the one deployed in this study and how it might affect and shape acquisition over time before claims for effectiveness can be made. However, at this preliminary stage of this developmental project, some interesting issues have come into sight that warrant that there is scope for further research to be conducted in this field.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Students' grades before and after the implementation of change

| Students | First Term Grades (Before) | Second Term Grades (After) |
|----------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. | 5 | 6 |
| 2. | 7 | 8 |
| 3. | 2 | 5 |
| 4. | 5 | 7 |
| 5. | 8 | 9 |
| 6. | 8 | 8 |
| 7. | 5 | 7 |
| 8. | 6 | 7 |
| 9. | 5 | 7.5 |
| 10. | 5 | 7 |
| 11. | 7 | 7 |

| | | |
|-----|-----|-----|
| 12. | 8 | 9 |
| 13. | 5 | 7 |
| 14. | 7 | 8 |
| 15. | 7.5 | 8 |
| 16. | 7 | 9 |
| 17. | 4 | 6.5 |
| 18. | 5 | 7 |
| 19. | 8 | 10 |
| 20. | 7.5 | 9 |
| 21. | 6 | 8.5 |
| 22. | 9 | 10 |
| 23. | 6 | 7.5 |
| 24. | 6 | 7 |

APPENDIX B

Battery of comprehensible tasks

TASK 1

Reading: The students were made to choose and read a fairy tale of their choice.

TASK 2

Writing a summary of a fairy tale: In groups, the students were asked to write a brief summary of the fairy tale chosen. The schematic structure of their summaries should contain the following segments:

- ✓ Introduction (setting, characters, and anticipation of the problem).
- ✓ Development or conflict (development of the problem described in the introduction).
- ✓ Conclusion or resolution (ending of the story).

After interacting in their groups, the students were asked to submit a draft of their summaries to their teacher for reviewing.

TASK 3

Creative writing: Based on the chosen fairy tale, the students were put to work collaboratively to craft a modified version of the same tale. They could make modifications to the original version based on a list of several options provided by the teacher:

- ✓ Add a new character.
- ✓ Change the ending of the tale.
- ✓ Change the setting (time and / or place).
- ✓ Merge two or more stories into one.
- ✓ Any other (if students chose this alternative, they were asked to negotiate it with their teacher).

The students were encouraged to negotiate ideas, come to terms, and submit a draft of their modified version to their teacher who looked at it for general comments.

TASK 4

Speaking: Following this schematic structure (Table A), the students were asked to compare and / or contrast orally both versions (the traditional and the modified story) of the fairy tale they had chosen.

TABLE A
Schematic Structure of a Comparison/Contrast text

Introduction: (Say whether you will compare or contrast the two different versions of the same story and mention briefly the aspects you will discuss in details later on)

Original Version: (Refer to the aspects belonging to the original version of your fairy tale presented in the introduction and describe them in detail)

Modified Version: (Refer to the similarities or differences between the two versions of the same fairy tale in relation to the aspects presented in the introduction)

Conclusion: (Acknowledge some differences/similarities between the two versions, but concentrate on the differences/similarities between the two stories coming from the same fairy tale)

TASK 5

Dramatization: Based on their modified version of the original tale, the groups were asked to create a script to be later on put on in a ten-minute play. After exchanging ideas, the students submitted a draft of the script of their stories to their teacher for general comments and suggestions for improvement. The students rehearsed their plays, first, reading from their scripts and, then, without them. The teacher and her students scheduled their plays to be performed in front of an audience. Other students from a different class with their teacher, the supervisor (myself) and the Head of the school were invited to watch the plays.

TASK 6

Portfolios: Once all these activities were completed, each group was asked to submit a binder containing all their assessed outcomes:

- ✓ Summary of the traditional story.
- ✓ Modified version of the fairy tale.
- ✓ Script of the modified version.