

TEACHING SPEAKING STRATEGIES TO BEGINNERS

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Abstract

In our experience as language teachers, speaking has always been the most challenging skill for most of our freshman students, at the Foreign Language Bachelor Degree at the Facultad de Ciencias Educativas in the Universidad Autónoma del Carmen. Despite the fact that various oral activities including strategies are implemented in the classroom, it is difficult to monitor each student's progress. For that reason it was decided to invite some students to develop extracurricular sessions. During these sessions, they could practice the use of speaking strategies: Fillers, circumlocution, asking for clarification and expressing not understanding. Our main objective was to train the students on these basic speaking strategies so that they could use them regularly. The methodology to develop the sessions consisted in three stages: 1) a pre-task to know the participants' previous knowledge of speaking strategies, 2) the training sessions, which were taught through formal instruction and practice in oral tasks and, 3) a post task to show if the frequency of strategy use increased after instruction. In order to analyze the progress of the participants, a questionnaire to collect previous knowledge about the students' oral strategies, and a check list to analyze the video recorded sessions were used. The results from the post task showed there was an increase in the use of the strategies. Satisfactorily, the students showed more confidence when communicating or expressing themselves orally.

Keywords: Strategies, training, speaking, foreign language

Introduction

Along our lives through our learning process we try different strategies in order to store important elements in our memory; for instance, when we are learning to speak; the way our parents or the people around teach us to say certain words or sounds so that communication takes place is a strategy. The most common words that we are taught would be "mom", "dad", "milk" among others, but why do the parents teach these basic words? And, which strategy or strategies do they use so that the babies get familiar with the use of language or sounds? Most parents teach babies by repetition and association. For example, when they are drinking milk parents teach them the word "milk", until the baby is able to associate the meaning of the words, and begins to produce the language. Therefore, strategies take an important place during the learning process; each individual chooses the one that is the most suitable for him or her.

When learning a foreign language some students use different strategies as long as they work for them. Oxford (cited in Murrieta and Hernández 2012, p.15) for instance, points out that those students who learn easily use a great number of learning strategies. On the other hand, there are some students who see the English language learning as a challenge; even though they have already learned their mother tongue without any problem they see the

target language as something hard to achieve especially when they have to speak in English there is when the teacher has to help and motivate the student.

Since speaking is one of the main challenges for a basic student, and leads to student's frustration since the beginning of the degree; it was proposed to carry out a study based specifically on the speaking skill strategies at basic level in order to support and enhance student's oral participation. MacIntyre and Gardner (cited in Murrieta and Hernández 2012, p.15) found out that using learning strategies reduces the level of anxiety which is very common reaction at these early stages. This would be the beginning for searching new strategies that could be of great help for them in this new learning stage which is "learning English as a foreign language".

Introduction

Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche, is located in the south part of the Gulf of Mexico in Campeche, it has two main Universities one in the Capital which is the UAC (Universidad Autónoma de Campeche and the other in Carmen which is the UNACAR (Universidad Autónoma del Carmen) however, only the University of Carmen offers the English language degree to a number of 200 students approximately every year. The UNACAR accepts almost 90% of the students who pre-enroll because the number of the students who want to study this degree is low.

Therefore, most of them who come from public schools start learning English from secondary to preparatory school, unless they are paid a private English lesson in a private institution, but it happens with 2 or 3 students. These students begin college with a very basic level of speaking in the target language, the lack of the use of strategies during English language instruction at public schools do not cover the needs of a college student to communicate orally in English. On the other hand, students from private schools or students who have taken English private lessons have a higher level of speaking; but unfortunately only a few of these students decide to study English in this foreign Language degree.

Speaking, as it has been observed and confirmed with this specific group through oral presentations is the most challenging skill to produce. Basic students with very low level of English and lack of self-confidence tend to show certain characteristics such as: shaking while speaking, sweating, keeping silent for long periods of time, sitting when they cannot continue and others even crying because it is hard for them to say a word.

A workshop to train students was proposed due to these reactions at the moment of speaking in front of a group, and it was an opportunity to help students to gain more confidence as well. The main objective of the workshop was to enhance students to use strategies that could help them to improve in a future their level of speaking. Once students knew the strategies they could be able to choose the ones that work for them in an speech. As a first step, we reviewed the literature related to the use of strategies in the English language learning and got familiar with some of them to practice in the target language in order to implement it into our teaching workshop. Mendez and Marin (2007) of the University of Quintana Roo did a previous research and their results were very positive about the use of strategies.

Oral communication skill

As individuals we have the need to communicate. We have learnt to communicate in many different forms for instance, at the early ages pictures were ways of expressing ideas inside the caves; surprisingly, one of the most important cultures in Latin America as Mayans still communicate ideas through their architecture on their walls and pyramids. However, the most important and unique form to communicate for us is orally.

To communicate in another language which is not our mother tongue is a challenge, especially if there is little knowledge of the target language; students feel limited to speak just with the vocabulary they have learnt. Bygate (1987, p.3) mentions that one of the basic problems in foreign language teaching is to prepare learners to be able to use the language”; therefore students and teachers both face these problems regarding speaking in class.

There are some useful strategies that teachers could make his/her students use in order to apply them during oral activities and so students with the practice of these strategies could speak more and feel more confident. In the following section it will be given the most common strategies for speaking skill.

Speaking strategy

Douglas (2007, p.332) proposed these speaking strategies so that students are able to communicate in an oral way:

- Asking for clarification (what?)
- Asking someone to repeat something (huh? Excuse me?)
- Using fillers (uh, I mean, well,) in order to gain time to process
- Using conversation maintenance cues (uh-huh, right, yeah, okay, hm)
- Getting someone’s attention (hey, Say, So)
- Using paraphrases for structures one can’t produce
- Appealing for assistance from the interlocutor (to get a word or phrase, for example)
- Using formulaic expressions (at the survival stage) (how much does _____ cost?)

How do you get to the ___?

- Using mime and nonverbal expressions to convey meaning
- Circumlocution is another strategy which was used by Mendez and Marín (2007, p.78) and it was added to the four specific strategies taught during this research.
- Circumlocution which is the use of a synonym or a descriptive sentence for unknown words. For instance. An item you use to sit down (chair)

Procedure

To achieve the requirements, ten students of basic level were chosen to participate in a short workshop that we designed which was divided into three sections. The first part of the workshop was classified as a pre-task, a questionnaire was applied and the results were registered in a checklist where we collected the data to find out if students used any strategy, afterwards the students had to carry out an activity given by the teacher in order to speak. The purpose of this first session was to find out if students knew about the speaking strategies and how to use them at the moment of a conversation. At the end of the pre-task we realized that students did not use any of these. A journal was used as well to keep all the details observed during the sessions.

The decision to use Fillers, Circumlocution, Asking for clarification and Expressing not understanding, was based on the problems identified in class and the pre-task, observed in the video recording and the survey. During the training session or training task the students were given some speaking activities and before every activity they were taught how to use the strategies, one at a time. The first strategy taught was Fillers, the order was on purpose, since we believed that we had to start with fillers; this strategy would smooth the process of teaching the other strategies. Mendez and Marín (2007, p.79) suggest that fillers “help students to fill those silent periods” where they take a long time to remember the word they want to say at the moment.

The second strategy taught was circumlocution, students replace the unknown or forgotten word by a synonym or a descriptive sentence, which can help the student to avoid the use of Spanish during the English class and while giving the description they might

remember the word or while he/she explains, another classmate can recall the word and tell him/her.

The third strategy was asking for clarification, this strategy was taught in order to motivate students to ask for an explanation when they do not understand an idea, a question or a word which is very common at this basic level. Instead of being silent, students could use questions like: what do you mean?, or again, please?. Pardon?, or expressions like: You mean that..., what you are trying to say is...etc.

The last strategy taught to these first semester students was expressing not understanding by gestures (quizzical look) or expressions (I'm sorry... can you repeat that?), this strategy does not require a good level of English, actually if the student has a good level of English and is having a conversation with a student who barely speaks then this student will have to use the expressing not understanding strategy and vice versa.

Research approach

This research was both qualitative and quantitative. For the qualitative section we used a checklist which was completed through observation, and a video recording to keep all the necessary evidence. The activities were intended to improve students' results, which at the same time were observed and analysed to answer our research questions. On the quantitative technique students answered a questionnaire that we used to collect some important information about their language learning as well as each student's background. In order to have a clearer idea, the subjects and the instruments are briefly described.

Subjects

The study was based on ten students, they all speak Spanish and they all are Mexicans. They are in the English basic class in the faculty of English language degree; the textbook used is the traveler elementary level. The age range is from 18 to 22 years old. The Universidad Autónoma del Carmen is a public university so the socio-economic status of our students goes from low-middle class to middle class, this is one of the factors why most of them have not taken private English lessons before beginning college.

Only ten students were invited to take the training because they were identified as the most responsible students in the classroom so they would not miss any session. From our ten students, five had a good level of communication in English and did not show any fear when they have to explain something, on the other hand the other five students hardly ever talked in front of the class they just would say a few words, and sometimes they were not even able to communicate a complete idea, so they were the best candidates for this study, basically they had to be able to learn the use of the strategies and use them later on in the post-task freely.

The workshop took place at the student's classroom but outside the schedule of the class.

Instruments

In order to obtain information about the use of the strategies, a questionnaire was applied; the questionnaire was mainly to find out if students recognized the strategies or if they used any when speaking.

The questionnaire began with a statement in which they had to describe if they used any resource when they spoke in English. Then students had to read each sentence and mark with an X the answer that better described him/her when he/she speaks in English, they were eight sentences. In the last part of the questionnaire students provided us with general data about their ages, gender, mother tongue, the languages they use at home, years in which they have studied English or if they had had any training in speaking strategies. Another aspect that we consider was if their level of English and if they enjoyed learning the language.

Afterwards the questionnaire was analysed and classified in order to know if students used: fillers, circumlocution, asking for clarification and expressing not understanding.

Results

The questionnaire results showed that half of the students (five) used the dictionary when they did not know a word, and just 3 of them had previous knowledge of the target language, in spite of the fact they did not use the strategies with frequency they really enjoyed the learning of a foreign language. The students are aware that speaking English is not easy and they need many ideas to speak more. After the interview the students were invited to take a workshop, in which they would receive a very short session to learn 4 speaking strategies.

<i>Resource</i>	<i>Number of students</i>
Use of Dictionaries	5
Previous knowledge	3
Phrases they memorize	2
Gestures	1
Thinking in English	3

Questionnaire results

The workshop

The training was divided into 3 different sessions a pre-task, the training task and a post task.

The pre-task was a set up in which the students were going to show if they used the strategies while carrying out any spoken activity. They were given a role-play to start a conversation and they were video recorded at the same time they had to read the instruction and begin with the conversation. During the pre-task they hardly used the strategies as it was expected. The videos were analysed in order to get the number of strategies they used during this first session. The information was registered on a chart to illustrate the results of this first part.

Number of communicative strategies used in the pre-task											
Strategy	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	total
Fillers	0	1	2	4	1	1	5	2	2	1	19
Circumlocution	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Asking for clarification	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Expressing not understanding	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	3
Total	0	1	2	4	2	2	5	2	2	2	25

Pre-task results

The pre-task showed that students used more the filler strategy than any other strategy, despite mentioning that they did not know anything about them; fillers was the most used in the pre-task session.

In the training task the strategies were introduced to the students one at a time, the strategies were presented and explained through formal instruction. The students were given a speaking activity to practice the strategy, every detail was recorded to keep more evidence and avoid missing any detail. They did well since they used the strategy more than before; the results are registered on the table below.

Communicative strategies used in the training											
Type of strategy	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	Total
Fillers	8	8	1	1	5	8	5	3	5	11	55
Circumlocution	0	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	2	7
Asking for clarification	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	2	3	9
Expressing not understanding	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	4	7
Total	8	7	2	1	6	8	5	7	8	15	78

Training task results

After all the strategies presented they were given a post task to find out if the training sessions were helpful to students and if they learnt about the strategies taught.

Communicative strategies used in the post-task											
Type of strategy	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	Total
Fillers	6	7	2	4	5	2	6	7	10	10	59
Circumlocution	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Asking for clarification	0	1	4	1	3	0	4	4	0	2	19
Expressing not understanding	2	1	1	1	0	1	1	3	0	3	13
Total	9	8	5	6	8	2	9	14	10	11	91

Post-task results.

If we compare the three charts and we count the strategies that each student used in the pre-task, training sessions, and post-task we will see that the number of times each strategy was used increases in every section of the workshop. The results will be described below.

Discussion

The study was positive as Mendez and Marín's (2007) previous research was too; during the pre-task students had little knowledge of strategies so after the invitation to be part of the group of the training workshop they used them more often, at the end the results showed the differences in use since the beginning besides students gained even more confidence in communicating.

Students were asked to give some feedback, in general they said they enjoyed the workshop and learnt different ways to speak more, they even proposed a conversation club to keep practicing because they said they felt more confident to speak at that moment than before the workshop.

Students were enhanced to search and try new strategies, after this first step which consists on getting familiar with strategies students were invited to use knew ones to develop the four skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. Being realistic searching is not something our students would do because they are not used to, however the idea of a new workshop or the conversation club with more sessions would be a good beginning, the workshop could be planned so that they learn strategies through searching in book or magazines. Oxford (cited in Carter-Nunan,p.170) points out that "learning strategies are teachable" and the effects after teaching the use of them are always positive.

Conclusion

To sum up, this research project was a learning experience to everybody, the professors and the students involved. We all learned the effect teaching-learning strategies causes in our academic environment. The students' participations were focused on communicating orally through real sets; all students interacted in a friendly atmosphere and helped others to speak. The results presented here represent the beginning of a proposal to

motivate basic or elementary students to work with strategies at the beginning of their learning experience in order to (Oxford, cited in Carter-Nunan, p.170) increase motivation, strategy knowledge and positive attitudes.

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