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Teaching Practices In Order To Promote Verbal Interaction : Pre-service Teachers Reflections : A Preliminary Survey Study

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Abstract

The fact that most students finish mainstream compulsory education in Spain without having developed the ability to verbally communicate in English as a foreign language is a matter of great concern in the Spanish context. As part of their 45-day student teaching experience, 63 student teachers from the Andalusia region (southern Spain) filled in an observation tool designed as a questionnaire about their cooperating teacher's classroom practices in teaching speaking in their English as a foreign language class. The goal of the observation tool was to help them reflect on their own practice. Conclusions of importance for teachers and researchers will be provided in the present study.

Keywords : Teaching Practices, Verbal Interaction

Introduction

Being able to speak English is increasingly becoming a major need in contemporary globalized society. 350 million people speak English as a second language (Crystal, 1997) and it is the language for communication in international trade, the film industry, Internet discussion, and many other fields. In Spain, more than 90 percent of the schools have English as the first foreign language (FL) subject (MEC, 2006b).

The context of this study was Southern Spain, Andalusia, which is sometimes perceived as one of the least developed regions of Spain. While Andalusia has been one of the most dynamic regions in Spain between 1995 and 2005, official data report that Andalusia still shows a low degree of internationalization regarding foreign marketing (ICO, 2007). Andalusia presents a disadvantageous situation regarding foreign affairs (MEC, 2006a), and the number of citizens being able to communicate in English is presumably very low (no official or empirical data has been reported yet).

Notwithstanding, general data in the field of education for Spain does not show a much better situation. Concretely, in the area of foreign language learning, Eurobarometer 63.4 (2005) confirms that only 22 percent of the population claims to be able to maintain an ordinary conversation in English—one of the lowest rates of such in Europe.

Andalusian people also present a peculiar linguistic profile, which may generate negative attitudes for language learning. The Andalusian dialect is considered a variation from Spanish, with phonetic, morpho-syntactical and lexical-semantic

deviations. It is mainly characterized by the clipping of final consonants, the use of specific vocabulary, and a particular pitch and tone intonation. Although linguists support the idea that Andalusian dialect is an evolved version of Spanish (Ropero Núñez, 1997), Andalusian speakers are regarded as poor speakers by Spaniards and themselves (Quiles, 2004: p. 7), creating the so-called "linguistic inferiority complex." Language practitioners have repeatedly heard from different primary- and secondary-level Andalusian students' statements about how futile they find learning an FL when they do not even speak their own language well.

Furthermore, little research has been carried out to ascertain what major factors affect foreign language learning and which main differences in these factors are uniquely Andalusian.

Therefore, it can be said that the Andalusian situation is not unlike other situations throughout the world: the Deep South in the USA, the southern region of Italy, and other less-developed regions within "developed" countries that have a local dialect variation that is considered "less than standard."

In this study, we focused on the teachers' practice rather than on student behaviors. If teachers are aware of the sociolinguistic complexities of their context, then extra attention might be dedicated to the practice of speaking, and to ascertain what classroom practices are being employed within this particular context. Therefore, this study aimed to gain insights into their teaching practices in the classroom, in order to promote verbal interaction within an interesting sociolinguistic context.

Teaching practices in order to promote verbal interaction

The term "Classroom practices" refers to the different teaching activities used in the classroom to foster learning. In this paper, only the practices that deal with the development of speaking as a communicative ability were addressed.

In the language classroom, teaching practices are directly related to students' learning and to the development of their language skills (Ellis, 1990). As Wright (2002) points out:

Becoming a language teacher involves a number of related processes, in particular learning to create connections between the linguistic, or 'content', and the methodological, or 'teaching', aspects of language teaching. (p. 113)

Teachers aim to design procedures to involve students in a variety of verbal practices. Most of these practices should have an outcome that has a communicative purpose. Therefore, speaking is not a skill to be developed by memorising, but by meaningful interaction with others. As Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) make clear:

The most important feature of a classroom speaking activity is to provide an authentic opportunity for the students to get individual meanings across and utilize every area of knowledge they have in the second or foreign language. (p. 176)

Speaking is one of the most challenging skills for most students to learn because it is a complex cognitive process that takes place within a social environment. As Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) put it:

In some ways speaking can be considered the most difficult skill to acquire since it requires command of both listening comprehension and speech production subskills (e.g. vocabulary retrieval, pronunciation, choice of grammatical pattern, and so forth) in unpredictable, unplanned situations. (p. 165)

So for students to become effective speakers, they need to process language cognitively-taking into consideration the stages of planning and organization-formulate linguistic utterances, and finally articulate the utterance, thus producing messages that are comprehensible and meaningful (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFRL], 2001). Therefore, these features are crucial when developing effective teaching practices. In fact, for many students, learning a foreign language is the most anxiety-provoking school subject (Horwitz, 1986).

In this article, the following items have been included in the observation tool in order to help student teachers reflect on their teachers and finally on their own teaching practices of

speaking in the classroom:

- Amount of time for speaking activities;
- Type of verbal activities (role-play, question-answer, presentation, description, singing a song, etc.);
- Classroom movement during speaking activities;
- Error treatment: fluency versus accuracy;
- Use of native and foreign language in class.

Amount of time for speaking activities

As stated above, speaking is the most difficult skill to develop because it requires a very complex cognitive process (CEFRL, 2001). On the contrary, the act of speaking requires less time within a session than other activities (such as writing). In spite of that, there are two arguments that make the speaking skill in the class difficult to develop. Firstly, some specialists (e.g., Abello, 1989) indicate that the overall time devoted to teaching a language in mainstream education is not enough to produce independent verbal users of the target language. Moreover, we have found no research surveying the actual time that foreign language teachers use in their classes to teach the different language skills. Therefore, reflecting on these issues was crucial information in this exercise.

Type of verbal activities

Not all teaching practices to promote spoken language are the same. In many contexts, there are wrong assumptions about the purpose of some of these activities. For instance, singing songs was one of the most typical activities observed by the student teachers. However, this wonderful and engaging verbal language activity does not necessarily involve complex cognitive processing. In addition, some questions and answers (teacher-student or student-student) used to promote spoken language usage in the class usually followed a repetitive and mechanic pattern. Students who use authentic communication activities-such as a role-play, presenting something they have learned about, or describing a picture as part of a game to a partner-may develop a different set of communicative experiences than those exposed to only singing and teacher-centered questions and answers. Therefore, it is one of the aims of this student teacher observation study to find out teachers' use of complex or simple cognitive processing practices to promote verbal communication in the foreign language class.

Opportunities to move during classroom speaking interactions

When learners are not allowed to move freely within the class setting, opportunities for speaking interactions in the target language are obviously reduced. A more dynamic setting for interaction, where students stand up and can choose to speak to any other classmates, favors authentic and more diverse verbal

interactions, making communication a more natural process and facilitating multiple learner styles (in this case, kinesthetic learners). Movement can even be part of classrooms with a lack of space if appropriate arrangements are made in advance.

Error treatment: Fluency versus accuracy

The CEFRL (2001) and general literature (e.g., Cameron, 2001) recommend that initial- and intermediate-level teachers should focus on fluency as opposed to accuracy, so that students can develop their skills more naturally and learn from their mistakes by trial and error. Accuracy can be emphasized in more advanced levels, where some errors are not admissible. When teachers interrupt interactions in order to correct, students may see it negatively, undermining their self-esteem (Rubio, 2007) and avoiding eventual participation (Rubio and Martínez, 2011).

Use of native and foreign language in class

Another aspect that promotes or impedes language learning is the use of the first and foreign languages in class. Since quantity of input is directly connected to quantity of output (Krashen, 1982), teachers should "use as much of the target language as possible" (Cameron, 2001, p. 209). Moreover, a claim to the use of strategic language in the class is sometimes recommended (Schwarzer, 2001). The extent to which the first language should be used in the foreign language classroom is receiving increased attention. It is becoming more and more widely accepted that some L1 use is inevitable and useful. Cognitively, it supports the development of competence in the L2, and practically, it can help reduce the time spent on complex explanations (Cummins, 2007).

Notwithstanding, anecdotal evidence suggests that in the context where this study took place, some teachers did not speak the foreign language in class other than while reading from the text or teaching a selected group of words from the list of vocabulary. Probably due to a low level of communicative competence or a lack of knowledge (techniques and procedures) to implement speaking, they did not venture into the use of the foreign language for real communicative needs in the class. In fact, some of those teachers claimed that they did not use the foreign language in class because their students' level is so low that they would not understand.

Methodology

This study aimed to gain insights into the student teachers' teaching practices in the classroom, in order to promote verbal interaction within an interesting sociolinguistic context. The research questions were:

- What is the estimated amount of time used for verbal activities in the class?
- What types of verbal activities are used?
- Is there movement in the class during verbal activities?
- What type of error treatment is observed (fluency vs. accuracy)?
- What is the estimated amount of time used for the foreign and the native language in the class?

Research Procedures

As part of a methods class for teaching foreign languages, student teachers were offered a questionnaire. The questionnaire was answered based on the estimation of the student teachers after a 45-day internship in the foreign language class. The overall purpose of the assignment was to further students' insights and discussions in the methodology class used in conjunction to this student teacher experience. Although we are aware that the observations are not completely accurate, we found it extremely useful as a tool for professional development and pre-service teacher reflection. Following is the questionnaire used by the student teachers while observing the class.

- Time dedicated to the speaking skill;
- Type of verbal activities (role-play, question-answer, presentation, description, singing a song...);
- Opportunities to move during classroom verbal interaction;
- Error treatment: Fluency versus accuracy;
- Use of native and foreign language in class.

Then, the above questionnaire was completed by the student teachers placed in different cooperating teachers' classrooms in Andalusia, Spain. This choice afforded one crucial advantage: Instead of self-reported data, this survey reported observed data collected by student teachers working in the above-mentioned situations for 45 days. The students' estimations were based on their overall experience during their student teaching scenario. They are the students' perceptions of the phenomena described. The main purpose of this exercise was to help them reflect on their own teaching. However, we found their estimations interesting, worthy of publication and a potential avenue to further more objective research.

In this study, it was considered that presenting a questionnaire directly to the teacher would entail certain problems regarding subjectivity in the answers, such as the Hawthorne effect suggests. Therefore, 63 university students who, as part of their practicum, were in primary schools for an observation

period of 45 days were asked to anonymously report on the observed teachers' methodology. In order to ensure a wide representation, data came from both public and semi-public primary schools that were assigned in both rural and urban areas, some according to the students' place of origin.

A questionnaire was designed to help student teachers center their attention on crucial aspects of the classroom activities designed to improve speaking in the foreign language class.

Analysis of data

SPSS statistical application has been used for the calculation of parametric data of this descriptive study. The time dedicated to speaking practice in contrast to other skills has been calculated, observing the means and their standard deviations. Similar processes have been applied for the other items of the questionnaire.

Results

Estimated time for language skills teaching

The first item of the questionnaire asked the respondents to estimate the time the teacher devoted in classroom instruction to both declarative and nondeclarative knowledge: grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening, reading and writing. Although it may be difficult to estimate subdivisions among these items, these were the perceived estimations of the student teachers after 45 day of observation in the class.

The results are shown in the figure below.

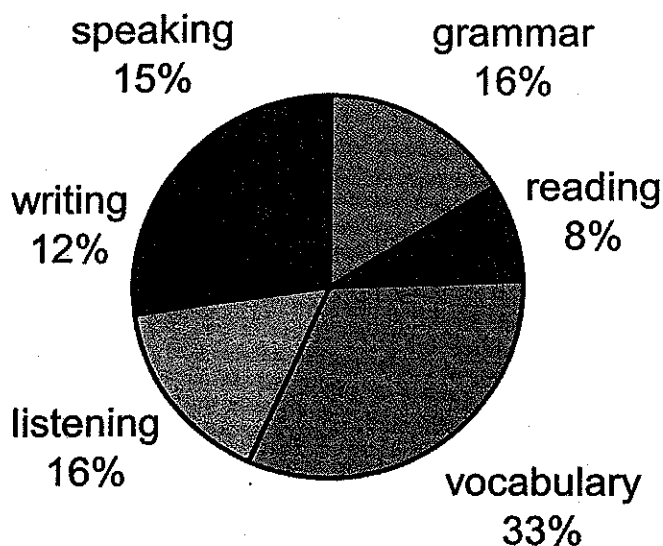


Figure-1: Results of item 1: Time Dedicated to Declarative and Non-declarative Knowledge.

In a superficial analysis of the data, more time is employed for speaking and listening than reading and writing. Presumably,

spoken language skills receive higher attention than written skills, which is normal for a primary level English class. However, a closer look at the standard deviation values of grammar (18.6), vocabulary (21.5) and speaking (14.5) shows that the data is widely spread in the data set (see table 1).

Table-1: Results of Item 1: Standard Deviations.

Standard deviations		Standard deviations	
Grammar	18.6	Listening	12.9
Reading	7.2	Writing	10.2
Vocabulary	21.5	Speaking	14.6

A large standard deviation indicates that the data points are far from the mean, which indicates that the teachers dedicate either a considerable amount of time or a much-reduced time for grammar, vocabulary, and speaking. This result is congruent with Item 2 of the questionnaire: It is interesting to note that 19 percent of teachers observed rarely included speaking activities in the target language.

Type of verbal activities

Figure 2 summarizes the findings of the prototypical activities to practice speaking in the classes observed. The student teachers marked which types of activities were typically employed in their classrooms.

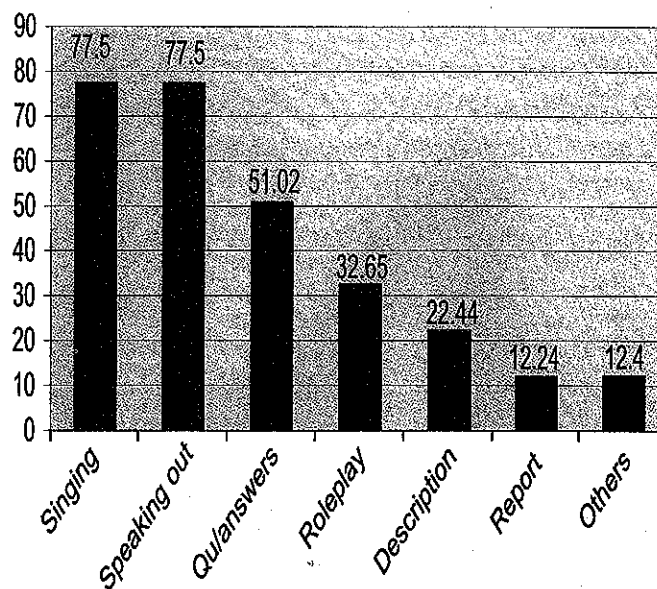


Figure-2 : Type of verbal activities implemented in the classroom

As the data in Figure 2 show, singing, speaking out loud in front of the others and answering teacher's questions out loud in front of others are the activities that teachers usually choose for speaking practice. This data is significant because typical activities in this 63-classroom survey are viewed as low-level

communicative activities, according to the literature surveyed in this study. Singing does not necessarily involve complex cognitive and linguistic processing, but merely utterance recall (according to what the CEFRL [2001] describes as communicative efficient). Furthermore, it does not require interaction, nor does it have a communicative purpose. Similarly, answering teacher's questions does not usually involve a natural and spontaneous act of speech. These results indicate that students have little opportunities for peer interaction. Moreover, speaking activities are usually carried out in a teacher-centered manner.

Classroom movement during verbal interaction activities

Movement to create multiple options for interaction in a learner-centered approach is an important ingredient to foster verbal communication (Rubio, 2002). This fact is especially important in primary levels, where 80 percent of the population has a kinesthetic perceptive learning style (Reid, 1987). The second part of Item 3 has been included to see if communication is encouraged within a more dynamic or static classroom context. The results suggest that 60 percent of the teachers allowed students to move in the room, while 40 percent of the teachers did not allow students to move while practicing their language skills.

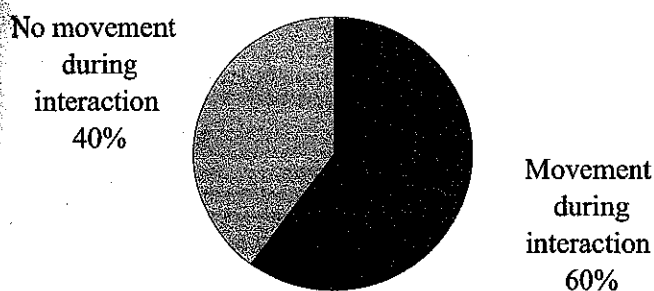


Figure-3 : Results of Item 3: Movement versus lack of movement during verbal interaction.

Error treatment: Fluency versus accuracy

The treatment of errors is another aspect that may facilitate or impede verbal interaction. A focus on accuracy would mean that interactions might be stopped for correction and that the focus would be placed in form rather than meaning.

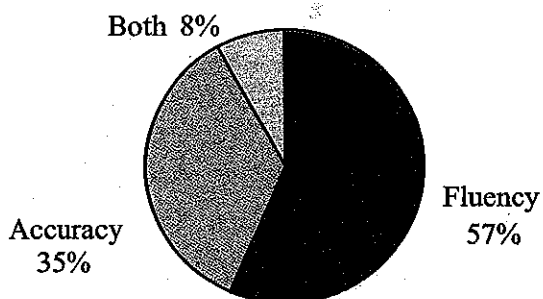


Figure-4 : Focus on accuracy versus fluency.

As it is illustrated in Figure 4, more teachers focus on fluency than on accuracy when students speak. However, 35 percent of the teachers observed focused more on accuracy than on fluency.

Use of native and foreign language in class

Student teachers were asked to provide an estimate of the time teachers used the native or foreign language during their 45-day period of observation. The results of Item 5 indicate that the teachers observed used Spanish for 63 percent of the time in class, while 37 percent of the time they used English. Therefore, it can be assumed that Spanish was the teachers' main vehicle for communication in classroom instruction. It has been argued before, and research on this area states (e.g., Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, 1982), that linguistic input and output maintain a strong degree of interdependence, although some researchers have pointed out that interactive input is more important than noninteractive input (Long, 1985; in Ellis, 1994, p. 273). In any event, the use of the foreign language has a strong influence on students' learning; thus, a much greater emphasis should be placed on using the language as a means for communicating rather than as simply a subject matter of study.

There are other possible explanations to this finding: Some elementary level teachers do not possess appropriate levels of English to conduct the class in the target language. The first author of this piece also found anecdotal evidence of this possible explanation as part of the many of the workshops conducted with similar teachers in the same region. In sum, there might be a lack of didactic knowledge about the use of the native and foreign language in the class in a strategic way; additionally, the option of using English often does not exist because teachers' verbal skills in English are too low to carry out classroom instruction in the target language.

Finally, Item 6 attempted to find potential reasons why speaking is not a main part of classroom instruction. More than one reason could be chosen. Teachers' lack of techniques (40.32 percent) and classroom behavior (30.64 percent) were found as the main reasons, and the level of English (12.90 percent), the type of activities offered in the textbook (9.67 percent), and other reasons (40.32 percent), such as lack of time, low teacher motivation, and belief that the children's level is too low to use English, were also included.

Limitations of the study

Although student teachers conducted classroom observations for 45 days, which is a considerable amount of time, the answers in the questionnaire were based on their estimations. Because certain degree of subjectivity cannot be obviated,

further research is needed to ascertain the reliability of their observations across cases.

Conclusions

The intention of this study was to survey foreign language teachers trying to develop communicative language ability in the primary classroom in Andalusia.

To validate the information provided by this study, further research is needed. First, a replication of the study in secondary level in Andalusia would help to measure content validity of the questionnaire and to have an accurate picture of the current situation in both levels of mainstream compulsory education. Second, another replication in different communities in the world would be necessary to provide more data to begin to be able to make comparisons among different contexts.

However, the results of this study suggest that there are two groups of teachers: a larger group that dedicates appropriate time for speaking activities, and a smaller group that neglects speaking altogether. Although the second group is smaller than the first one, the number is still significant.

The results obtained showed that a considerable number of teachers never use speaking activities or they only implemented types of speaking activities in which very little interaction is produced (i.e., the teacher asks a question, and then the student answers). These types of activities do not involve complex cognitive and linguistic processing. Verbal activities in which the learners have to use the language for a communicative purpose are not generally included as part of the teachers' classroom instruction in the sample (n=63).

Another relevant result is that within the group of teachers that did dedicate enough time for verbal speaking development, the prototypical choice for classroom practices was not as complex and authentic as it could have been. Although most of the teachers observed allowed their students to move freely while working in the foreign language, a substantial amount still preferred to have students working from their desks without moving in the classroom, even in the primary grades. The fact that 40 percent of the teachers were not concerned with movement during classroom verbal interactions shows that the opportunities for interaction among students are very limited. It has been argued in this paper that movement not only facilitates verbal interaction, but also provides occasions for repetition and reinforcement of learning. Furthermore, results also show that 40 percent of English primary teachers interrupt students' interaction to correct errors, thus undermining a more natural and spontaneous communication.

It is very encouraging that most of the teachers seemed to prefer the use of fluency versus accuracy when dealing with

verbal language development in their class. However, the choice of when and how to use the native or foreign language in class was not systematic. Finally, the foreign language appears to have been used roughly 37 percent of the time. Researchers have repeatedly acknowledged the importance of contact with the language. As Long (1985) says, language acquisition is an implicit process in which linguistic rules are internalized by extensive exposure to authentic texts and particularly to comprehensible input. ... When applied in instructional settings...teacher input will enhance comprehension, and enhanced comprehension will in turn promote acquisition. (p. 213)

The explanation for these results can probably be found in part in a general lack of knowledge on the part of teachers about how to implement speaking activities and to control classroom behavior. It is also a possible explanation that some teachers do not possess the language proficiency needed to conduct the class in the target language. As a result, the verbal skills were not promoted, undermining the development of communicative language ability.

Teachers, researchers and policy makers interested in developing verbal practices that promote communication in localized communities such as Andalusia, Spain, should look at this proposed survey as one tool to help them develop better verbal language practices in their own communities. Because of the results of this particular study, it is clear to us that the development of a teacher-training program to address the findings of this research is necessary. Potential workshops would include the development of a repertoire of different verbal language activities for teachers to choose from, the development of sound classroom management techniques to allow teachers and students to explore movement as part of the classroom context, and-most important-the development of teachers' confidence in the use of the target language in the classroom context, both by strengthening it and modeling it during the week-long workshop.

We are including in this paper a draft of a checklist for the development of speaking in the foreign language class. This checklist can be used as a self-assessment tool for the reflective teachers to use in order to evaluate their own teaching techniques in speaking.

In conclusion, the future of our multilingual teaching communities needs to be addressed and modeled on a regular basis in order to transcend the above-observed duality between theoretical ideas and classroom practices.

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