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A SYSTEM

**OF TASKS TO IMPROVE ORAL COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH
FOR STUDENTS OF LEVEL A1**

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SISTEMA DE TAREAS PARA MEJORAR LA COMUNICACIÓN ORAL EN INGLÉS EN ESTUDIANTES DEL NIVEL A1

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ABSTRACT

Since the dawn of mankind, there was a need to communicate in the activity and practice men carried out as a social being. Communication is defined as a process by which we assign and convey meaning in an attempt to create shared understanding. The teaching of English does not escape the methodological principle of language is primarily oral. To contribute to the development of oral communication in foreign languages, since the Common Frame European of Reference, much research has been done. Regarding the specific area of this investigation, the author has found studies carried out on communication, detecting that students receiving English as a foreign language most of the time are not motivated or interested. Therefore, we need to find ways to improve oral communication trying to be as motivational and realistic as possible. An example of that are the communicative tasks we propose, apply and validate in the process of this research, achieving good results improving the students' oral communication skills in English.

Keywords:

Common European Framework of Reference, communication, oral communication.

RESUMEN

Desde el surgimiento de la humanidad, nació la necesidad de comunicarse para poder realizar las actividades del hombre en su actuar diario como ser social. La comunicación se define como un proceso mediante el cual asignamos y transmitimos significado en un intento de crear un entendimiento compartido. La enseñanza del inglés no escapa al principio comunicativo de que el lenguaje es primariamente oral. Para contribuir al desarrollo de la comunicación oral en lenguas extranjeras desde la perspectiva del Marco Común Europeo de Referencia, se han realizado muchas investigaciones. Respecto al área específica de esta investigación, el autor ha encontrado estudios realizados sobre comunicación, detectando que los estudiantes que reciben inglés como lengua extranjera la mayor parte del tiempo no están motivados ni interesados por su estudio. Por lo tanto, es necesario encontrar formas de mejorar la comunicación oral tratando de ser lo más motivadores y realistas posibles. Un ejemplo de ello lo constituye el sistema de tareas comunicativas que se proponen, aplican y validan en el proceso de esta investigación, logrando resultados positivos al impactar positivamente el desempeño cognitivo de los estudiantes en lo referente a las habilidades de comunicación oral en inglés.

Palabras clave:

Comunicación, comunicación oral, Marco Común Europeo de Referencia.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of mankind, there was a need to communicate in the activity and practice men carried out. This language emerged as the principal means of communication that placed them in the highest scale of the animal world.

Communication is the process of attempting to convey information from a sender to a receiver with the use of a medium. The communication process is complete once the receiver has understood the message of the sender. Communication requires that all parts have an area of communicative commonality. Communication is defined as a process by which we assign and convey meaning in an attempt to create shared understanding.

Everyone is involved in the process of communicating throughout language particularly using the English language. English is one of the most spoken languages in the world if we combine native and non- native speakers.

It is important to state that English is the language of business, international communications, digital technology, aviation, diplomacy; it is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Besides, the knowledge of English is required in several fields of life, professions and occupations.

Therefore, it has a great importance as a foreign language, from the political, economical and socio-cultural viewpoints; especially here in Cuba where it is needed to establish international relations in order to improve the economy and some other fields of life. For all those reasons the English language has been included in the syllabuses of all levels of education, from Elementary School (starting in third grade) to University Majors.

The teaching of English does not escape the methodological principle of language as primarily oral. Thus, language will be focused on and will be exploited in the activities proposed here as communicative, and will be aimed at facilitating the teaching - learning of the subject as a complement of the all-around formation of the students of the University.

To contribute to the development of oral communication in foreign languages, much research has been done: Chomsky's, (1965); Hymes (1966); Littlewood (1981); Finochiaro (1983); Brumfit (1985); Byrne (1989); Yule (1990); Richards (1992); Rivers (1997); Leung (2005); Barnlund (2008); and Lin (2010). University graduates are expected to be confident in oral communication so that they can function effectively in the academic and professional settings.

Research in Cuba is also ample: psychologists, linguists and methodologists have investigated, based on communicative conceptions. In Cuba, communication has been approached by: Faedo (1998); Medina Fernández (2005). These authors have offered important criteria for the development of English oral communication. All of them coincide that the main goal is to teach English by means of the communicative approach.

Regarding the specific area of this investigation, the author has found studies carried out on communication, detecting those students receiving English as a foreign language most of the time are not motivated or interested; they just try to learn the basics to pass a test or to overcome the objectives of the course. This was the result of:

a) Program analysis.

b) Student's surveys who work at "Conrado Benitez" campus.

c) Interviews to teachers who work at "Conrado Benitez" campus.

d) Lesson observation.

From these instruments and techniques, the fallowing regularities arose:

- The students attempt to speak has been difficult, due to the lack of oral practice they have, and the few activities aimed at developing oral communication.

- The students of A1 level use just a basic vocabulary in the speaking lesson and, it is really hard for them to go beyond the productive level.

- Activities do not respond to their necessities and expectations.

- The work in pairs, trios or groups is not the priority of the English lessons mainly because of the lack of time to develop it correctly

- The content used is not functional and far from being related to their major regarding the importance of motivation.

Therefore, we need to find ways to improve oral communication in the language Centre English students of level A1 of Carlos Rafael Rodriguez University.

The practical contribution of this research is the tasks to improve oral communication in the language Centre English students of level A1 of Carlos Rafael Rodriguez University.

DEVELOPMENT

Fist we need to focused on the theoretical elements concerning oral communication and the principles of communication methodology for the teaching of it.

In order to present the results of this research a first concept must be clarified

The author of this research is identified with the definition that states that communication is the articulation of sending a message, through different media whether it be verbal or nonverbal, so long as a being transmits a thought-provoking idea, gesture, action, etc.

In a simple model, information or content is sent from a sender/ encoder to a destination/ receiver/decoder. In a slightly more complex form a sender and a receiver are linked reciprocally.

One problem with this encode-transmit-receive-decode model is that the processes of encoding and decoding imply that the sender and receiver each possess something that functions as a code book, and that these two code books are, at the very least, similar if not identical. This is also known as communicative commonality. Although something like code books is implied by the model, they are nowhere represented in the model, which creates many conceptual difficulties.

This communication process requires a vast repertoire of skills in intrapersonal and interpersonal processing, listening, observing, speaking, questioning, analyzing, and evaluating. The use of these processes is developmental and transferred to all areas of life: home, school, community, work, and beyond. It is through communication that collaboration and cooperation occur.

The word **communicate** comes from the Latin verb, **communicare**, meaning **to make common to many, share, impart, divide.** This concept is very important in understanding communication. When we communicate, we share or make common our knowledge and ideas with someone else.

Communication is defined as "the sharing of ideas, information and feelings. It is a two-way process that involves a sender, a receiver, and a message. Communication also involves feedback – the response that tells if the receiver *got the message*" Plattor, (1981).

Communication is also viewed by Vicente González Castro (1988), as "*an interchange; an interrelation, a dialogue, a process associated to men's needs that cannot exist without language".*

Communication plays a fundamental role in the way that information coming from human beings denotes their personality. Thanks to it the general intellect of a human being, the peculiarities of his/her thoughts, his /her memory and volition are shaped. Besides it facilitates the development of personal complex qualities such as ideal and appropriate self- assessment among others. It is a very important process for any human activity; it reflects the objective necessity of human beings to associate, cooperate and interact among themselves.

Communication can be better understood when we see it as a process and a product. As a process it is the transmission and reception of messages; as a product it is the shared meaning. Both aspects have much to do with the concept of communication because of the insights they offer.

Communication is carried out through verbal and non – verbal items or elements. Verbal communication uses words to exchange the message, and this includes both spoken and written words. Non – verbal communication completes the message exchange with gestures, facial expressions and body movements. Both techniques are combined to make communication more effective, it is important to master both, subject and content of the message and the expressions to be used in order to have the receiver comprehend the message.

Oral communication, while primarily referring to spoken verbal communication, typically relies on words, visual aids and non-verbal elements to support the conveyance of the meaning. Oral communication includes discussion, speeches, presentations, interpersonal communication and many other varieties. In face to face communication the body language and voice tonality plays a significant role and may have a greater impact on the listener than the intended content of the spoken words.

Many authors have given several definitions of oral communication. The author of this research will quote some relevant authors and their definitions about oral communication.

Faedo (1988), defines oral communication as "an audio oral activity where there is a process of dialectical interchange among the speakers".

Oral communication is defined by Byrne (1989), as *"a two-way process between a sender and receptor, or receptors, and it requires the productive ability of comprehension or listening ability with comprehension".*

According to Gordon (1995), oral communication is *"the process of coding and decoding of signals, all the verbal messages are codes of the language, and they are equivalent to feelings and not the feelings themselves".*

González, et al. (2001), states: *"communication represents the way of human interaction. It expresses interaction among human beings, and it is a way of interaction in itself, which is closely related to man's activities, having an active character both for the sender and the receiver".*

The author of this investigation considers that Medina's (2005), definition of oral communication is the most important. He defines oral communication as "an interaction between two or more people who integrate all the verbal skills taking into consideration cognitive elements, both effective and motivational", and it is precisely the concept the author of this investigation follows, because it is the most complete of all. The author considers oral communication as the main skill in the teaching of foreign language because the main objective of any language is to communicate, and its efficient development depends on the integration of verbal skills and the effective and motivational elements.

It is also important to point out that the main goal in teaching the productive skill of speaking is oral fluency and accuracy, the latter can be defined as the ability to express

oneself intelligibly; and fluency can be defined as the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably, accurately and without too much hesitation.

Principles of communication methodology for the teaching of oral communication

Teaching English to the speakers of other languages claim nowadays, for an approach to language teaching which emphasizes that the goal of language learning is oral communication, the communicative approach to the English teaching-learning process as a foreign language facilitates the innovative and practical character of teaching.

Thus, foreign language learning is a process concerned with the ability to interact communicatively with the other people through speech or writing. It is not a matter of learning language forms and functions, but of learning how to use them properly through communication.

Faedo (1994), suggests some principles of communicative methodology for the teaching of oral communication:

1. Active linguo-intellectual performance.

- Communication through communication.
- Class should be student-centered.
- Teacher should activate student's knowledge.
2. Individualization.

- Take into account personality, aptitudes, motivation of the students.
- Respect student's specific features.
- Students should express freely.
- Exercises flexible (adaptable to necessities and functionality).
- Correction paramount (contextualized).
3. Functionalism

- Primacy of the communicative functions.
- Use of communicative contextualized activities.
- Linguistic implicit and explicit.
- Basic for the content selection.
4. Situational character of teaching.

The linguistic material should be selected according to the communicative functions to be taught and not just the other way around, and then these communicative functions should be taught (or trained) by means of situations. A communicative situation should include the following items:

a. The speakers and their social relationship. It means if they are husband and wife, customer and clerk, father and child, etc. This fact determines the register of the language to be used.

b. The communicative exercise

c. The setting

d. The time

e. The topic to be deal with

f. The performing purpose (the student should know what s/he accomplishes the communicative exercise for; not simply for the sake of speaking or listening, but because s/he has got to do something with the information or the communicative message).

5. The innovative character of the verbal activity.

Communicative teachers recognize the value of repetition in foreign language teaching, but they disregard mechanical repetition. It may be achieved by means of changing the communicative exercise; situations and partners constantly. The linguistic system is best learnt when the speaker's attention is focused on the communicative purpose of the utterance.

6. The innovative character of foreign language teaching is also achieved by taking into account the following key elements in the communicative language teaching.

a. Information gap

b. Choice

c. Feedback

d. Mistakes are not always mistakes.

In the teaching - learning process of oral communication in the language centre students of English level A1 of Carlos Rafael Rodriguez University, there are difficulties such as: lack of coherence when expressing ideas, low levels of fluency when settling a conversation, wrong pronunciation of elementary utterances of the language. For these reasons, the author considered necessary to observe the students during their acting and to interview the professors linked directly with the students.

It was detected that there is not enough oral practice by the students during the lessons. The tendency is to teach structurally, and most of the time teachers do not give the sufficient treatment to the oral skill. Teachers are not able to teach real life contents or a contextualized activity because the activities proposed are not sufficient or varied.

It was noticed that teachers have a set of very general activities for any kind of teaching and in many of the cases these are not related in any of the cases to their motivations, expectations, etc. Most of the time, the students' aim is to write or hear and not to communicate orally in the target language.

In the third question according to the students´ opinions, they all play a passive role in the oral activities; because they do not have the oral skills develop. Some of them also stated that they need to develop the necessary vocabulary as well as the grammatical knowledge and that there is a lack of teaching aids.

Also, most of the students, mark that the activities they do the most are written and writing-related to, complete sentences, extracting ideas from texts, organizing sentences, selecting choices and some others.

The lesson observation session detected that oral communication activities are not applied, or applied at a very general level, that time is consumed by explanation and copying, then the students hardly talk and are unmotivated.

All the teachers considered that the activities do not express real – life situations and demand do not correspond with the student's levels.

In another question all the teachers considered that their students lack the necessary skills to engage in oral communication on the basis that they do not have the sufficient vocabulary and grammar, and there are not enough teaching aids needed to contribute to the development of the aforementioned skills.

We need to analyze the term task; many authors have studied, analyze and defined the term of task. For instance, studies carried out by Mariño (1999); Rodríguez (2001); López (2004), among others who recognized the importance of task as a means within and out of the lesson.

In order to know the significance and the place of tasks within the teaching – learning process, it is necessary to know the task essence and to adopt the corresponding definition, because it depends, in a huge part, of the concept the projection and application by teachers. It is important to state that the theoretical study of task was derived from ideas of authors like Álvarez (1995); González, et al. (2001). All these authors conceive it as the essential cell of the teaching – learning process.

It is important to state that this proposal also takes into consideration the definition of communicative task. The characteristic of communicative tasks which makes them different from the other types of task is that language can be better learned and taught through interaction in task performances. Communicative tasks are activities based on fluency, they involve the students in comprehending, manipulating and producing or interacting in the target language and their attention is more focused in meaning than in form. The key in a communicative task is that it is based on a real life situation.

There are different kinds of communicative tasks and each one has their own characteristics, but what is common to all is that their main objective is to produce oral communication, and that is the objective the author of this investigation pursues.

Procedures for successful oral tasks.

In order to ensure the success of an oral task, these procedures are suggested to teachers:

a) Purpose: The students should understand the purpose of the task.

b) Introduction: The introduction and instruction should be clear and precise. The task is explained, as well as its level of difficulty. The linguistic material is provided and the grammatical, lexical and functional demands that task are going to imply are solved.

c) Appropriate response: The teacher begins the task with example of proper response (the teacher demonstrates). The students fulfil the main communicative task.

d) Time: A time limit should be set for the development of the task.

e) Reaction: At the conclusion of the task, the students discuss their reactions or the knowledge they feel they have gained. Do the analysis and evaluation of the work done and of the level of consecutiveness of the task; and a plan review or improvement (grammatical, phonetic, etc.) is elaborated.

A very large number of oral tasks can be developed in the language classroom for this purpose. This is the part of the lesson where teachers can best apply their creative energy, imagination, above all their knowledge of own students and of their particular needs. Here are presented some tasks, which may serve as a starting point for possible lessons.

Analysis to corroborate the effectiveness of the proposal to improve oral communication in English level A1 Language Centre students of Carlos Rafael Rodriguez University.

In this item the results obtained from the practical implementation are presented.

An analysis is made of the instruments applied and the comparison of the results obtained from them. Through the test procedure it was necessary to apply a pre-test to determine the real level of oral communication the students have. After applying the tabulation of the general results of the pre-test the following results were shown:

- 55.5% (15 students) had serious problems with fluency over an oral activity. It of course showed the low level of communication through the spoken language.

- 33.3% (9 students) were not able to use correctly the communicative functions.

- 11.1% (3 students) were not accurate enough concerning the use of lexical and grammatical items as well as correct pronunciation to communicate orally.

All these results evidence the students' limited oral communication. Therefore, the students' linguistic formation was not in correspondence with the demands of the level. Once the pre-test was applied and the results were analyzed, everything was ready to introduce the tasks intended to improve the students´ oral communication.

During the application of these tasks it was noticed that the students' interest and motivation began to increase gradually. It favored the students' attitude towards oral

tasks. As well, the professor found the tasks more dynamic, exciting and interesting than the traditional ones.

After having applied the tasks proposed it was necessary to apply a post-test, to check the effectiveness of these tasks to solve the students' ineffective communication through the spoken language.

The general results of this post-test proved that the tasks were truly effective and valid. This fact is supported by the data below.

- A 92.6% (25 students) improved their fluency

- An 85.1% (23 students) were able to use correctly the communicative functions.

- Finally, it could be noticed that 77.7% (21 students) was motivated to learn how to communicate through the spoken language and consequently learn more English by means of developing the oral skill.

It means that the type of tasks proposed led the students to a conscious preparation to participate and learn how to use English as a means of communication.

The pre – test demonstrated that in the first activity related to recognition level based on only one communicative function, the sample control got 55.55% failed; in the second activity related to the reproduction level 59.25% failed; and in the third activity 74. 07% failed.

On the other hand, for the post – test the author devised a task that integrated some of the communicative functions studied, that is why the results were better demonstrated, taking into account that the 27 students (100%) could recognize and reproduce part of the communicative functions and only 1 student (3.70%) could not get to the production level.

The comparison of the results clearly illustrates that the tasks proposed are valid and effective since they contributed to increase A1's students´ oral communication during the English lessons.

CONCLUSIONS

After the application of different methods, it was corroborated that oral communication in the university students of Carlos Rafael Rodriguez University is affected. The need to improve their English oral skills led the author to propose in this research, tasks to solve the problem.

The tasks to improve English oral communication in the students were elaborated in correspondence to the students´ interests and the integration of the cognitive, affective and motivational components of the teaching-learning process.

With the application of the tasks their effectiveness could be verified, by comparing the results obtained in the post-test with the ones obtained in the pre-test.

Thus the author considers the objective of the research have been accomplished.

Despite the difficulties related to objective issues of materials to work with, such as books, audio-visual materials and basic resources that affect us on a recurring basis, the material used to achieve the objective proposed for this research was achieved. As a result of it, some issues were also identified that deserve to be investigated in order, among other things, to contextualize the ways of teaching, taking into account the new considerations provided by the Common European Framework for Languages Teaching.

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