

PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTIONS TO FOSTER ENGAGEMENT AND IMPROVE ORAL SKILLS AMONG FUTURE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH¹

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Abstract

The oral performance of Spanish future teachers of English is an essential linguistic aspect that requires thorough attention. This aspect is not only important but also vitally necessary, as achieving adequate oral performance on a daily basis is crucial for teachers of English. This study addresses emotional stressors in the form of anxiety or frustration, as well as mistakes related to their mother tongues' influence, which affect the demographic and, hence, determine the use of appropriate pedagogical strategies. In order to tackle these two issues, a classroom intervention was performed with a group of twenty students enrolled in a Bachelor of Teaching program. Before attempting any pedagogical innovation, a semi-structured questionnaire was conducted to gather data about their difficulties and motivations. The results led to a twofold intervention; first, sets of pedagogical strategies were tailored to improve their attitudes towards participation in oral English instruction; secondly, an array of participatory activities were designed and implemented in order to correct their most common oral mistakes. The success of the intervention indicates that improving classroom engagement is possible by working on the student teachers' oral competence; this, in turn, promotes improvements in attitude and increased confidence in oral skills.

Keywords: motivation, feedback, oral skills, anxiety, teacher training, ELT.

Resumen

La producción oral de los futuros profesores españoles de inglés representa un aspecto lingüístico de enorme importancia que requiere una atención minuciosa. El estrés emocional en forma de ansiedad o frustración y los errores relacionados con la influencia de su lengua materna determinan el uso de estrategias pedagógicas. Para hacer frente a estas dos cuestiones, se llevó a cabo una prueba pedagógica en el aula. Antes de ponerla en práctica, los alumnos rellenaron un cuestionario semi-estructurado para recabar datos sobre su motivación y las dificultades que

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encontraban. Los resultados obtenidos dieron lugar a un trabajo doble. En primer lugar, se confeccionaron un conjunto de estrategias pedagógicas para mejorar sus actitudes. En segundo lugar, se diseñaron y se pusieron en práctica una serie de actividades participativas con el fin de corregir sus errores orales más comunes. Tras la realización de las pruebas, los resultados positivos indicaron que una mayor participación del alumnado, así como el trabajo en la competencia oral de los estudiantes, son claves para fomentar una actitud más segura y correcta en el ejercicio de las habilidades orales.

Palabras clave: motivación, retroalimentación, habilidades orales, ansiedad, formación del profesorado, ELT.

1. INTRODUCTION

English has become an international language. In an era of globalisation, English is used as a common means of communication thanks to its use as a *lingua franca* in many places around the world (Crystal 2012; Phillipson 1992). Naturally, this global phenomenon affects the training that future teachers of English should receive since, no matter what level they will be teaching at, they will primarily be using their oral skills for communication purposes. Therefore, their oral performance is an essential linguistic characteristic that requires thorough attention at higher education levels, especially in their education as teachers-to-be (Chen 2008). In addition to this, as non-native speakers, it is important that prospective teachers of English know how to use the language in social interactions in order to transmit an appropriate use of language to their future students (Echevarría Castillo 2009). Thus, two different but interrelated aspects must be considered in regard to oral performance and training: students' engagement and accuracy. The combination of these two elements may improve the quality of English Language Teaching (ELT) training. In order to achieve a comprehensive approach to these two issues, a classroom intervention was designed combining motivation enhancement and oral performance improvement. Although this intervention was limited in time and number of participants, the structured procedures and pedagogical implications used here may help to orientate and advance further interventions. Moreover, the positive results obtained elucidate possible future actions in this same direction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The oral performance of future Spanish teachers of English is an essential linguistic facet that requires attention. This aspect is not only important but also vitally necessary, as achieving adequate oral performance on a daily basis is

essential for teachers of English. However, it has been reported that most students demonstrate a lack of confidence and motivation when communicating in English, something that makes them shy away from classroom participation (Park and Lee 2005). Moreover, several authors have noted that emotional stress in the form of anxiety or frustration is a common feeling amongst Spanish future teachers of English. In addition, there is evidence of a close relationship between anxiety and oral performance among them (Rubio 2004; Arnáiz and Pérez-Luzardo 2014; Horwitz *et al.* 1986). According to research developed by these scholars, speaking skills are the students' primary source of anxiety. To counterbalance the negative effects of anxiety, motivation has been reported as a useful and positive element in foreign language learning (Gardner *et al.* 1992). Motivation has traditionally been related with desire and favourable attitudes towards learning a language (Gardner 1985). In fact, it is a construct that comprises cognitive, affective, and behavioural characteristics (Gardner 2007). Although Gardner's team developed the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) to measure motivation, this model has some deficiencies in testing foreign language learners' contexts (Dörnyei 1994). Other authors such as Rodríguez and Abreu (2003) have defended the stability of general foreign language classroom anxiety. However, there is a consensus of opinion that the implementation of motivational strategies may contribute to lessen the effects of anxiety in the learning of a foreign language and to the increase of students' self-esteem at the same time (Rodríguez and Abreu 2003; Rubio 2007). Some studies indicate that motivation may be enhanced by an adequate learning environment, including the instructor's performance (Noels *et al.* 1999) as much as the nature of the activities performed (Kim 2009; Young 1991). What is more, Gardner (2007: 14-15) defends the implementation of motivational strategies in the student's educational context, that is to say in "the immediate classroom situation," as these sorts of interventions, he argues, can play a role "in the individual's level of integrativeness." In sum, there is reasonable evidence that immediate intervention in ordinary learning environments may contribute to increases in motivation and decreases in anxiety. In light of this, and considering the ever-increasing importance of English as a means for communication internationally, instructors should be highly concerned with their students' expressive abilities in English.

In terms of accuracy and oral skills, some of the most common sources of anxiety in conversation classes include having to improvise speech, perform publicly in front of others, the fear of negative evaluation (Kim 2009), and communicating with a native speaker (Çagatay 2015). It has also been reported that students tend to make common mistakes that are intimately related to influence often coming from their mother tongues (Cenoz 2000). This fact would determine the use of strategies based on congruence (the discovery of similar structures and elements between two languages), correspondence

(relationships between forms and rules of the first language and the foreign language), and difference (attention to structures and elements alien to the mother tongue) (De Benedetti 2006). To develop these skills, pedagogical theory feedback may be an adequate instrument as it provides support to learners and fosters their motivation to continue learning (Ellis 2010). In particular, corrective feedback improves accuracy in the short and long term (Storch and Wigglesworth 2010; Wigglesworth and Storch 2012) and has been shown to be highly effective at helping students become aware of their learning process (Qi and Lapkin 2001).

While motivation and oral performance enhancement have been widely studied separately, there is a need to explore pedagogical possibilities and implications that combine these two aspects, particularly for the training of future teachers of English.

3. PURPOSE

In light of the aforementioned considerations, this article explains a one-semester intervention with a group of twenty students enrolled in the first year of the Bachelor of Teaching programme at the University of Burgos. The course “English Language I” was prerequisite to attain the English Professional Skills Diploma, which would enable them to become English teachers. Although the initial required level was B-2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, not all of them were confident and fluent enough in the second language to continue onwards. In order to tackle these two major problems, (1) anxiety and (2) their lack of motivation and accuracy, a comprehensive classroom intervention was performed.

4. METHODOLOGY

The classroom intervention was organised into four major steps, each one having its own instruments. First, it focused on detection of the students’ fears and uncertainties. For data collection, an initial semi-structured questionnaire was designed and carried out on the first day. Second, in light of the results extracted, a motivation enhancement phase took place. Third, an activities implementation phase was performed. Finally, a final questionnaire was distributed in order to evaluate whether the measures taken had contributed to an improvement in class oral performance and in motivation. The particular design and implementation of each phase is detailed as follows:

4.1 Initial semi-structured questionnaire

A semi-structured questionnaire was designed in order to examine the students' perceptions of their motivation and performance in oral English (Appendix I). The three topics selected were anxiety levels, motivation, and difficulties in speaking. This preliminary survey was conducted during the first week of the semester and the information gathered was essential in the further design and implementation of subsequent pedagogical steps.

In general, the students' answers indicated that some of them usually feel nervous because they were afraid that people would make fun of them, others expressed worry about their accent, and others were unaccustomed to speaking in public. Regarding motivation, their answers showed that they felt the most comfortable when participating in an activity they enjoyed, such as a role-play situation or group debate with three to four participants. Finally, they admitted that their difficulties with speaking activities were due to shyness, lack of vocabulary, and insecurity about English grammar. For instance, to question 4 "*When your teacher asks you to perform an oral activity, how do you feel?*" one student answered: "When I talk (speak) in front of the class I feel judged by my teacher and classmates." Another student wrote: "I am not used to speak(ing) in public and I am terrified."

In terms of fluency and accuracy, the students indicated that they were able to use the English language as a tool for work. They were able to communicate in English about ordinary topics and could apply their linguistic knowledge to educational contexts. Moreover, they affirmed that they could understand ideas, conversations, and texts in English, provided they were within their field of expertise. However, they were unable to interact with native speakers with fluency and spontaneity because of their fear of making mistakes. They could produce clear and detailed texts on various topics but encountered difficulties when they had to defend and discuss them in public. In particular, for question 3, "*Among the production skills you prefer*" (Appendix I), ten students ticked speaking as the most difficult skill to develop. Among other reasons they noted: "It is difficult to think in another language" and "For me it is very difficult to find the right words to express my opinion." Then, when asked to choose a preferred skill, sixteen students chose speaking. Some of their reasons were: "I like communicating with people from other countries," "I prefer speaking because it is easier than writing," and "it is a challenge for me to reach the accurate intonation and the correct pronunciation just to make English people understand me."

With all the information gathered, the instructors proceeded to implement the following steps of the intervention.

4.2 Motivation enhancement phase

In order to lessen anxiety and enhance motivation among the students, our intervention focused on increasing group integration to facilitate the students' oral performance. Due to time restrictions, action focused on external motivators. Sets of pedagogical strategies were tailored to improve their attitudes and motivation for participation in oral English instruction. Two aspects were selected. First, the setting was analysed and changed into a more friendly, relaxing, and motivating environment. It is well worth noting that the average university classroom still consists of rigid walls, parallel lines of desks, and chairs facing a stage at the front where the teacher is expected to give a lecture, as well as a fixed blackboard and audio-visual devices as teaching tools. Unfortunately, these physical spaces do not favour movement, dialogue, or democracy. On the contrary, they align with the "banking concept of education" (Freire 1970) that has been repeatedly criticised as ineffective, hierarchical, obsolete, and, above all, not motivating (Graman 1988; Shor 1993). In view of the foregoing considerations, finding a suitable space was a priority to enhance extrinsic interest among the future teachers of English. For this purpose, a new classroom space and disposition was required. Second, the trainers' attitudes and performances were reviewed and modified. The combination of these two strategies helped to orientate the course dynamic along a more engaging and participatory praxis.

4.3 Activities implementation phase

At this stage of the intervention, it was necessary to obtain relevant information about the most common mistakes made by the students. To this end, an empty grid was designed. In the classroom, the students were asked to fill it in with the most common errors they could detect. As Appendix II shows, these were collated under three main topics: pronunciation, grammar, and accuracy. More specifically, the information gathered showed that, in terms of pronunciation, the students noted that they tended to omit final consonants. Grammatically speaking, a systematic misuse of irregular verbs in different tenses was highlighted. Also the influence of their mother tongue was perceptible in the omission of the "-s" when using the third person singular of the present simple tense, as well as in the absence of the auxiliary verb when constructing questions and when placing the adjective after the noun. With regards to vocabulary, a list of the most common false friends was made with the students' contribution. Some of the examples included the use of "actually" instead of "nowadays," "argument" instead of "plot," "bland" instead of "soft," and "assist" instead of "attend." As expected, many of these mistakes were due to

influence from their mother tongue. Finally, the list was printed and posted on the classroom wall in order to help the students keep their most common errors in mind, as well as the appropriate words and expressions that could replace them.

Once these mistakes were identified, a battery of oral activities was planned. Among the wide variety of relevant oral activities, debate, role play, and storytelling were selected according to the answers given in the initial questionnaire. Debate is an appropriate developmental activity for improving oral discussion skills. Using this activity, students gain the opportunity to practice their ability to express and defend their ideas in the foreign language. As such, in-classroom debate promotes the expression of personal opinions, during which anxiety takes a secondary place. Role-play is another useful and successful speaking activity. The students have the opportunity to put themselves into somebody else's shoes in credible situations. Role-play is fun and motivating because it uses real world situations. The instructor acts as facilitator and their role becomes a secondary one as well. Finally, storytelling is also a very useful activity to improve oral skills because students, after having read or listened to a story, are asked to recreate and retell the story so that they have the opportunity to develop their language complexity with a focus on doing so accurately and fluently. Moreover, by practicing the different verbal tenses used in storytelling, they also develop the ability to use these important narrative structures with increased fluidity.

Once this phase was concluded, the most common and frequent mistakes needed to be analysed (see Appendix II) so that specific feedback tasks could be accordingly tailored to monitor the outcomes. For this purpose, the students' performances were recorded with their consent in order to better analyse their speech mistakes. At the end of each production, oral feedback was included. This feedback phase was implemented in two different ways. First, the instructors listened to the recordings and the students were asked to score all the mistakes they noticed. To facilitate this task and ensure participation, the recordings were heard twice and then the students were asked to double-check their findings. In this sort of activity, changing partners once or twice proved quite useful as it provided them with an opportunity to exchange their own hypothesis about the correct solution. Furthermore, listening to the recordings helped students to monitor progress and it provided diagnostic information. Once the students became aware of their mistakes, they were in a better position to know what they needed to improve. In the second feedback activity, the most significant errors were collected and then handed out to the students. They were then asked to work in pairs to find the errors. These feedback activities helped them to identify errors quickly and more easily.

After the feedback stage, some reinforcement activities were devised. These included reconstruction of conversation, listening with a quiz, and drawing a story, amongst others (Humphris, Micarelli and Catizone 1998). Reconstruction of conversation is a controlled speaking activity that focuses attention on a particular linguistic form. The aim of this type of activity is to invite students to reconstruct a very short dialogue or a sentence. They are asked to formulate a hypothesis about what the speaker(s) wanted to express and to interchange cognitive and linguistic knowledge. Generally, this activity is designed on an individual basis and focuses on particular mistakes. Its purpose is to help students reflect on the structures of the target language. On the other hand, listening with a quiz contributes to the development of oral skills and grammar accuracy in a context of reduced anxiety through the use of a game-like competition. Here the class was divided into two groups. The students repeatedly listened to a spontaneous conversation four or five times and then the groups formulated questions about what they had just heard. The opposing team was invited to correct the questions before answering. Peer correction takes place throughout the game. Finally, drawing a story consists in telling the students a story while they are asked to draw an event or passage from the story. Only drawing is permitted and written words are not allowed. At the end of the storytelling exercise, the students work in pairs to reconstruct the story orally, following only the drawings.

In sum, this phase combined feedback and reinforcement activities with alternating obvious and subliminal correction of oral performances. As a plus, variation of individual, pair, and group methodologies enhanced peer interaction and correction in a very natural way.

4.4 Final semi-structured questionnaire

Once the activities implementation phase was completed, a final semi-structured questionnaire was distributed to elicit the results of the interventions (Appendix III). This phase is important in assessing our progress towards meeting the initial objectives that had been set.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to improve student motivation and oral competence in English, appropriate action was taken in two steps, consisting of a motivation enhancement phase and an activities implementation phase respectively. The results of these two phases are presented below.

Regarding the strategies implemented for motivational purposes, management arrangements were needed in order to request a new and more flexible space where frequent distribution changes could take place. A department seminar turned out to be the best option. There, a mobile blackboard and folding chairs could be easily sorted according to the requirements of the different activities. Also, the large size of the classroom would allow the development of simultaneous activities, and the absence of a stage was also a plus. Unlike the previous setting, the physical possibilities of this seminar would likely favour collaborative tasks and communicative interaction. It is our belief that a careful choice of classroom setting and atmosphere can have important implications such as improving students' external sources of motivation. Of course, the teacher's attitude and performance during oral instruction is also a relevant source of motivation; friendliness, tone of voice, self-presentation, active participation, and attitudes help to modify the students' degree of anxiety. Thanks to the implementation of these changes, the distance between the instructors and the students was reduced and the frequency of spontaneous interaction on the side of the students grew. The teacher's role focused on encouraging students to express themselves whilst avoiding any authoritarian attitudes. All in all, the designed activities were student-oriented and based on peer interaction, thus emphasising the trainers' role as conductors rather than instructors. In sum, reduces in stress during oral performance were found to be positively correlated with the teacher's adoption of the role of facilitator.

Also, the answers given by the students in the initial questionnaire (Appendix I) orientated the design of the activities. According to their answers, a majority of the students preferred working in pairs. Some of their reasons were "If you have any doubt you can ask your mate intimately" and "you can better understand your mate and if there's something you don't understand you can ask him/her to repeat the word, the sentence, etc." Furthermore, when asked what kind of oral activity they preferred, they all chose 'role-play activity' and 'debate;' nobody chose 'monologue'. Accordingly, the reinforcement activities explained above were designed following these indicators.

After the implementation of the previous phases, the students' perceptions were collected through a final questionnaire (see Appendix III). Their answers indicate that they felt active in their English classroom thanks to a more appropriate context. In particular, the suitability of the classroom was rated 5 by fifteen students and 4 by five students. Also the role of the teacher in the development of the activities was rated 5 by eighteen students and 4 by two students. Additionally feedback tasks, and responses to feedback itself, were perceived as very effective strategies to improve their oral performance. In particular, a vast majority preferred working in groups: ten students preferred working in groups, seven students chose working in pairs, and three students

preferred working with the rest of the class. All the participants acknowledged the effectiveness of feedback activities and two added a comment: “Feedback helps us to reflect on the structure of the language” and “We are obliged to think and find our mistakes.” These answers lead to the conclusion that they had experienced reductions in the fear associated with making mistakes and correcting their peers. Only a few students felt that they had experienced very little to no improvement at all. Also, in relation to reinforcement activities, while some students indicated that they had not been very interesting, others affirmed that they had made them aware of their mistakes and had even helped them predict mistakes. Finally, to the question “*Has your attitude towards speaking in English improved?*,” fifteen students answered that they felt more motivated, less anxious, and more self-confident. Five students left it blank.

6. CONCLUSIONS

There is a significant relationship between motivation and oral performance in second language learners. The more motivated students are, the less anxious they become, and the more natural their speech turns out to be. At the same time, their oral performance is frequently littered with mistakes related to the influence of their mother tongue. While these deficiencies have been widely studied separately, there is a need to explore pedagogical possibilities and implications in the combination of these two traits. Thus, the aim of this study was to design and put into practice a pedagogical intervention that would work on motivation, on the one side, and accuracy, on the other, in order to foster engagement and to improve oral skills among a group of future English teachers.

In regard to their motivation and engagement, results indicate that when the instructors step aside and focus is placed on interaction among peers, students’ participation and interest increase. For this, an adequate physical space is relevant as it may stimulate a more dynamic interaction. Facilitating reflection through the use of the students’ oral performances contributes to a more meaningful and natural interaction among peers. In sum, student-oriented attitudes and activities contribute to a decrease in levels of anxiety. This allows for higher degrees of self-assurance and fosters their engagement with class activities.

In terms of language accuracy, results demonstrate that feedback helps students to reflect on the structure of the target language. Likewise, it obligates them to look for and analyse their mistakes. This intervention demonstrates that it is highly rewarding for students to find their mistakes and succeed in correcting them. Furthermore, during this process they become aware of their

mistakes and feel able to predict them. This stage also contributed to self-correction thanks to the feedback tasks and the reinforcement activities implemented. Consequently, the students reported increased self-confidence and more motivation. They felt better in their English class and had less fear of making mistakes and being corrected by peers.

Undeniably, this intervention has its limitations. In particular, the sample used was limited to twenty students and cannot, therefore, be regarded as representative of pre-service Spanish ELT students. As such, the inclusion of more and larger groups in similar interventions would be desirable in order to more adequately test the validity of this pilot intervention. Also, the inclusion of groups of students at higher levels of instruction could contribute to a wider range of results and conclusions. Nevertheless, the pedagogical implications of this intervention are quite broad, and may help unearth a path towards the construction of more holistic strategies for the practice of second language teaching. Considerations need to be more wide-ranging; having a favourable educational context is relevant to fostering a natural and participatory oral performance. Integrative interventions that focus on the students' naturalisation of speech are necessary. To that end, the harnessing of elements beyond purely linguistic instruments may be required in order to stimulate real improvements in student participation and accuracy.

APPENDICES**Appendix I****Initial Questionnaire**

1. Rate 1 to 5 the language skills you feel are most important (1 being the lowest and 5 the highest)

	1	2	3	4	5
Listening					
Reading					
Speaking					
Writing					

2. According to your experience as a student, which is the most difficult skill to develop for you?

Listening

Speaking

Reading

Writing

Briefly describe your reasons.

.....

.....

.....

3. Among the production skills you prefer:

Speaking

Writing

Why?.....

4. When your teacher asks you to perform an oral activity, how do you feel?

Relaxed

Tense

It depends on the type of activity

.....

5. During an oral activity, you prefer working

Alone

In pairs

In group

Why?.....

6. What kind of oral activity do you prefer?

A monologue in front of the class

A role play with a partner

A debate

7. Explain what are your difficulties in each of the types mentioned in the previous question

Shyness

Lack of vocabulary

Unaccustomed

Any other difficulty

Explain.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

8. Which are your most common oral linguistic errors?

Phonetics (e.g. *errors of pronunciation*)

Morphology (e.g. *errors in the conjugation of verbs, word formation, the correct use of an article, etc.*)

Morphosyntax (e.g. *errors in the conjugation of verbs, word formation, the correct choice of an adjective, the correct use of an article, etc.*)

Syntax (e.g. *errors in the choice of a proper article, determiner or quantifier to precede a noun or noun phrase, the use of a correct adjective, the choice of the person and tense of the verb, etc.*)

Vocabulary

Thanks for your help!!!

Appendix II

<i>Category</i>	<i>Type of error</i>
PRONUNCIATION	Final consonants are missing Pronouncing the vowel that the spelling suggests The sounds /d/ as in <i>had</i> , /b/ as in <i>pub</i> Word and sentence stress
GRAMMAR	Verb <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ wrong use of irregular past simple tense and past participle ▪ misuse of verb tenses and time ▪ omission of <i>s</i> of the 3rd person singular of the present simple ▪ omission of auxiliary verb in questions: <i>You went? Look I pretty?</i> Word Order <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ adjective after noun
ACCURACY OF VOCABULARY AND EXPRESSION	False friends <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>actually</i> instead of <i>nowadays</i> ▪ <i>argument</i> instead of <i>plot</i> ▪ <i>bland</i> instead of <i>soft</i> ▪ <i>assist</i> instead of <i>attend</i> ▪ <i>disgust</i> instead of <i>desplease</i> ▪ <i>embarrassed</i> instead of <i>pregnant</i> ▪ <i>exit</i> instead of <i>success</i> ▪ <i>library</i> instead of <i>bookshop</i> ▪ <i>parents</i> instead of <i>relatives</i> ▪ <i>to realise</i> instead of <i>to make</i> ▪ <i>topic</i> instead of <i>cliché</i> ▪ <i>to record</i> instead of <i>to remember</i> ▪ <i>sensible</i> instead of <i>sensitive</i> ▪ <i>conductor</i> instead of <i>driver</i> ▪ <i>to contest</i> instead of <i>to answer</i>

Appendix III

Final Questionnaire

1. Rate 1 to 5 your improvement in your oral skills (1 being none and 5 being very much)

	1	2	3	4	5
Listening					
Speaking					

2. Rate 1 to 5 the suitability of the classroom to perform the appropriate activities (1 being very bad and 5 being very apt)

1	2	3	4	5

3. Rate 1 to 5 the role of the teacher in the development of the activities (1 being poor and 5 being very helpful)

1	2	3	4	5

4. In your opinion, which type of activity has been more helpful to develop your oral skills?

Individual

In pairs

In teams

The whole class

Explain why.

.....

.....

5. Has your attitude towards speaking in English improved?

Yes

No

Explain.

.....

.....

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