Oral Skills Development Through the Use of Language Learning Strategies, Podcasting and Collaborative Work[1]

El desarrollo de la habilidad oral a través del uso de estrategias de aprendizaje de lengua, los podcasts y el trabajo colaborativo

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Abstract

This article describes an action research project carried out at a public school in Ibagué, Colombia. Through a qualitative approach, the project aimed to illustrate the impact of using podcasting, language learning strategies and collaborative work in the development of tenth graders' oral skills. The intervention involved planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating oral tasks including contextualized and meaningful settings; students' performance was analyzed with the help of surveys, questionnaires, and the podcasts themselves. The results evidenced how students were positively influenced by these strategies to improve their oral skills.

Keywords: Language learning strategies, metacognition, podcast, collaborative work.

Resumen

Este artículo describe un proyecto de Investigación-Acción llevado a cabo en una escuela pública en la ciudad de Ibagué, Colombia. A través de un método de investigación cualitativo, el propósito del estudio fue el de ilustrar el impacto del

uso de podcasts, estrategias de aprendizaje de lengua, y el trabajo colaborativo en el desarrollo de las habilidades orales de estudiantes de décimo grado. La intervención incluyó la planeación, implementación monitoreo y evaluación de tareas de habla que hacían uso de escenarios contextualizados y significativos. El desempeño de los estudiantes se analizó con la ayuda de encuestas, cuestionarios, y los mismos podcasts. Los resultados evidenciaron cómo los estudiantes fueron influenciados de manera positiva por estas estrategias para mejorar sus habilidades orales.

Palabras clave: Estrategias de aprendizaje de lengua, metacognición, podcast, trabajo colaborativo.

Resumo

Este artigo descreve um projeto de Pesquisa-Ação realizada em uma escola pública na cidade de Ibagué, Colômbia. Através de um método de pesquisa qualitativo, a finalidade do estudo foi a de ilustrar o impacto do uso de podcasts, estratégias da aprendizagem de língua, e o trabalho colaborativo no desenvolvimento das habilidades orais de estudantes de 2º ano do Ensino Médio. A intervenção incluiu o planejamento, implementação monitoramento e avaliação de tarefas de fala que usavam cenários contextualizados e significativos. O desempenho dos estudantes foi analisado com a ajuda de enquetes, questionários, e os mesmos podcasts. Os resultados evidenciaram como os estudantes foram influenciados de maneira positiva por estas estratégias para melhorar as suas habilidades orais.

Palavras chave: Estratégias de aprendizagem de língua, metacognição, podcast, trabalho colaborativo.

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Introduction

Being able to successfully communicate ideas orally is a fundamental skill in language learning and represents a huge challenge for beginners. Especially at a high-school level, students usually struggle with expressing themselves and would usually avoid active participation in communicative activities, which can hinder their language learning process and can affect their attitudes towards the language.

With that concern in mind, we decided to put into practice different Language Learning Strategies (LLS) which could make language learning more effective and also fun for students (Oxford, 1989), and at the same time involve Collaborative Work which could allow to generate more communicative opportunities, maximize learning (Crandall, 1999), and have a positive impact on students' relationships and psychological health (Smith, 1996). Complementary, it was decided to take advantage of Podcasts as a tool which could help create a more learner-centered pedagogy and generate authentic engagement (Middleton, 2009).

The objective of this project was to analyze the impact of taking into account LLS, Collaborative Work, and the usage of Podcasts for planning and performing speaking activities, on the development of students' oral skills, therefore, the questions that guided this research project were the following: *What implications does the use of cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective language learning strategies have in the students' speaking development? What and how language learning strategies are evidenced during the development of speaking activities by 10th graders?*

This project was carried out taking into account the cyclical process of Action Research (AR) as described by Kemmis & Mctaggart (1988), which involves intertwined cycles of observation, reflection, planning and acting. For this study, two interventions were applied where the voices of the students were heard, as their interests and ideas were considered in the planning of the tasks. It was found that students improved their fluency and accuracy and most of them were able to put new vocabulary into practice in a meaningful way; also, students appeared to be more confident and self-regulated their emotion when they had to participate in different oral activities in the classroom.

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Literature Review

Language Learning Strategies

In order to understand what LLS refer to, it is necessary to recall some concepts from the cognitive theory. Shuell (1986) describes the way that individuals are said to 'process' information and defines the thoughts involved in this cognitive activity as 'mental processes'. Such processes are required in all learning procedures and according to their nature they have been classified under three categories: cognitive, metacognitive and social-affective. The strategies identified by different authors as being part of language learning, are called LLS.

Oxford (1989, p. 235) asserts that "Language Learning Strategies are behaviors or actions that learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable". With that in mind, the application of self-regulation procedures are determining in this implementation, given that even when students work collaboratively, each one has specific roles and duties that they self-regulate to lead to effectiveness of oral projects.

In view of that, LLS can be considered as those thoughts, actions, and decisions in the style of students' productive skills (speaking and writing) that configure the language background that students build with each communicative experience. In conformity with this theory, the construct of this analysis is based on types of strategies divided into higher categories of cognition, metacognition and social/affective strategies.

Cognitive learning strategies

Rubin (1981) identified six general strategies that may contribute directly to language learning:

Clarification/verification. This process is implemented by the students once they require information about meaning, pronunciation or the application of any communicative statement, in this way, students expand the formal knowledge of the language and validate the productions of words, phrases or sentences in order to communicate effectively.

Guessing/inductive inference. It refers to the kind of strategies which take into account already internalized knowledge coming from different sources in order to understand a particular concept or language form and deduce a precise rule for a given situation.

Deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning has to do with a general decoding process of different communicative situations in

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order to infer meaning for the understanding and the organization of the language as a whole.

Practice. It refers to the kind of strategies which help establish a sound source of information regarding language forms which the learner refers to while looking for accuracy. These strategies include: imitation, rehearsal and repetition

Memorization. It is the ability for retaining and storing any kind of information in our mind that is internalized and available to be used when necessary; this strategy is mediated by the use of repetition and practical uses to ensure the capture and retain the information.

Monitoring. It refers to strategies that learners use to verify the use of linguistic and communicative structures; the learner notices errors and face them to improve their production. This strategy requires a high level of engagement and consciousness for students to evaluate and validate their learning.

Metacognitive learning strategies

Metacognitive strategies can be defined as thinking about our own thinking. These strategies are meant to "oversee, regulate, or self-direct language learning" (Wenden & Rubin, 1987, p. 25), which means that learners try to take control of their own learning process by planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning activities (Wenden, 1982, 1986). Learners who use this kind of strategies are able to create profound learning and improve performance (Anderson, 2002) as they understand what is that they need to acquire knowledge.

Social/affective strategies

These strategies involve "either interaction with another person" or exercising control over emotional or affective responses to learning (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 45). Such strategies could involve asking questions for clarification or discussing one's worries about language learning with another person. Generally, they are considered applicable to a wide variety of tasks. Some strategies are:

- Cooperation, or working with peers to solve a problem, pool information, check notes, or get feedback on a learning activity.

- Questioning for clarification, or eliciting from a teacher or peer additional explanation, rephrasing, or example.

- Self- talk, or using mental control to assure oneself that a learning activity will be successful or to reduce anxiety about a task.

All strategies mentioned before were presented to students, and they were encouraged to use them as they required them. Accordingly, different strategies were used by students, depending on their needs and objectives and also the type of activities they were to carry out.

Collaborative Learning

Vygotsky (1978) affirms that Collaborative Learning is a method for helping students strengthen their confidence in themselves which can be achieved through performing tasks by groups or peer work. He also presents the idea of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which a more experienced individual helps create an appropriate environment for the development of knowledge and skills in others and himself.

Accordingly, we understand cooperative learning as carefully structured group work which provides opportunities for students to learn and use the language by maximizing the peer interaction in the classroom, such work being the basic context for communicative practice (Crandall, 1999) and the development of collaborative dialogues which allow for language learning opportunities and the building of knowledge (Rivera, 2010).

Podcasting

In this study Podcasts were incorporated because they offer teachers one outlet for technology integration. Podcasting refers to the authoring of or subscription to audio and/or video files, these files can be downloaded and played back on a wide range of mobile devices such as MP3 players and iPods (Dale & Pymm, 2009). Podcasting holds the capacity to capture and share learning voices (Middleton, 2009) in an effort to communicate, create, and share ideas, it can also be a recording created by a teacher to enhance the learning and teaching process within and beyond the classroom or a podcast or radio program created by pupils. Increasingly, the term is also being applied to video (vodcast) as well as audio recordings.

The use of podcasts is said to have the capability of improving students' motivation (Hegelheimer and O-Bryan, 2007) and attitudes towards the class (Li, 2010), and when implemented as a form of cooperative work can also enhance students understanding of the subject matter and improve students interaction (Stoltenkamp et al. 2011). Furthermore, the implementation of Podcasts has also reportedly shown good results boosting students' listening and speaking proficiency (Lu, 2007).

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Methodology

Research Design

Action Research (AR) as defined by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p. 1) "is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices". Hence, the implementations carried out during this research process attempted to guide the teaching and learning process towards more successful and appropriate practices.

This study made use of a qualitative approach to analyzing data with the aim of understanding how the blend of LLS, Podcasts, and Collaborative work could impact students' oral skills. The information collected through surveys, questionnaires, and podcasts was triangulated following the approach of Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007), to determine convergence of information from different sources, then it was analyzed following Glaser and Strauss' (1967) precepts of Grounded Theory (GT) to reconfigure the information into categories by comparing diverse content in the data collection. This methodology set the way for us to address and analyze data in order to deepen in the analysis and come to clear and meaningful results.

Context and Participants

This study was carried out with 40 students of 10th grade from a public school in Ibagué (Colombia) whose ages ranged from thirteen to seventeen. The school is located in the outskirts of the city and most of its students come from a low socioeconomic context. Consequently, students are not unfamiliar with different types of social issues which affect their school life and which are mostly related to parents' unemployment, dysfunctional families, sex, and drugs abuse.

Regarding English classes, different factors such as lack of institutional resources, educational policies, and students' conflictive contexts are believed to affect students' attitudes and proficiency in a negative way. In spite of difficulties, the educational community is characterized for being receptive and getting involved in students' activities; there is still a good atmosphere and students have positive attitudes when they are aware of what they can gain and learn if they modify some behaviors. Some limitations found in the study had to do with students' low language proficiency, some of their beliefs regarding group work, and also the amount of students and the limited time allowed to the English class.

Data Collection Instruments

The data were collected using instruments that provided relevant and sufficient information for a qualitative analysis.

Needs analysis survey. This was the initial instrument with four questions to identify which of the four communicative skills students wanted to improve, it triggered students' thoughts about what they wanted to learn in class, how they wanted the class to be, and their interests and ideas to improve.

LLS survey. This instrument was designed to collect information and quantify students' cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective, strategies. A second part of this instrument involved open questions about the students' perceptions regarding LLS, podcasting and collaborative work.

Podcasts. Two final podcasts were presented by the group of students, these were socialized with the teachers for feedback and later these were transcribed and analyzed in order to examine how students advanced or were jammed along the reaching of the goal.

Data analysis and Results

Once we had collected information, it was analyzed and triangulated in order to find patterns, furthermore, principles of GT (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) allowed us to determine commonalities or dissimilarities and revealed some code categories and subcategories related to feelings (fears, worry, nerves, stress, and anxiety), students' awareness or procedures (Self-regulation, self-monitoring, self-confidence, and LLS usage) and accuracy in oral production (vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation, and grammar). Each one of the categories were grouped in a chart for deeper analysis and triangulation revealing deeper patterns and categories related to (1) speaking improvement, evidenced enhancement on vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and fluency; (2) useful LLS, cognitive, metacognitive, and social or affective type; and (3) psychological resilience, students' improvement of fears, stress, nerves, and lack of confidence, and also self-regulation, self-monitoring, self-assessment, and self-confidence.

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Speaking Improvement

For starters, the needs analysis survey allowed to identify that 74% of students wanted to improve their speaking skills more than listening (17%), reading (7%) or writing (2%). These results showed

how important it was for students to be able communicate orally in the target language, or as Hymes (1972) puts it, to have the capacity to communicate effectively within a particular speech community. In this area, the analysis showed that students were able to improve this capacity mainly in the following respects:

Vocabulary. The ability of learners to successfully expand their vocabulary, which is an essential aspect of learners' language development (Harmon, Wood, & Keser, 2009) (Linse, 2005), was dynamically expanded through this study. Comparatively speaking, at the beginning of the implementation students' were less aware of the importance of using the right words, and were therefore not interested in expanding their vocabulary. Nevertheless, as the study progressed it was evidenced how, through a planning stage, students could naturally increase their vocabulary without being forced directly to do that. The challenge for the students' improvement in this area was the chance to talk about their own life and real interests. The meaning of some words was reasoned through processes of inference and clarification, strategies from the cognitive order.

Grammar. Grammatical competence refers to the knowledge of grammatical resources and the ability to put them into practice (Artunduaga, 2013), be it in a written or oral way. In this respect, during this study students evidenced a development of this competence and were able to orally express themselves with improved grammatical accuracy. At the beginning of the implementation, students frequently omitted subjects and produced syntactical mistakes, made inappropriate word choices, used wrong verb tenses, and showed lack of coherence and cohesion. These mistakes were noticed when podcasts were listened and transcribed. After the collaborative assessment, teacher's feedback and the identification of these mistakes, students were able to self-correct and self-regulate their mistakes and were more precise to record their dialogues, providing then more appropriate and carefully applied grammatical resources.

Pronunciation and fluency. Pronunciation has a great deal of responsibility for intelligibility (Seidlhofer, 2001), and consistently, in this study it was one of the aspects students were the most eager to improve as they felt the need to successfully communicate their ideas. Students felt motivated to achieve pronunciation accuracy and devoted a lot of time to the improvement of this skill, some of them repeated their intervention as many times as necessary, gaining confidence and self-regulating their linguistic processes. Students showed great awareness, hard work, and commitment in the process of improving their second podcast and more successfully express themselves

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Most useful LLS

Data analysis allowed us to identify the students' learning strategies that helped them to improve their oral skills. The most relevant strategies found through all the instruments were:

Practicing. (Cognitive strategies) It was a behavior that students assumed in class and at home in order to attain high quality in their performance, given this would guarantee a cognitive contribution to them. Students said that such practice strengthened their learning every time they gave information or studied for their presentations.

Additionally, when students practiced together, they enjoyed and assisted each other, they gained confidence to ask freely about their doubts; accordingly, it could be inferred that students strengthened their self-esteem and found reasons and intrinsic motivation to enhance performance and keep going each time better than the last.
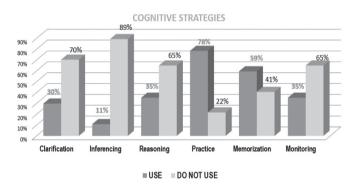

Figure 1. Percentage of students who use each one of the Cognitive Strategies.

Planning. (Metacognitive strategies). It was a quite necessary stage, Figure 2 displays that 70% of learners implemented this strategy. We found that when students had enough time to discuss about a topic, a task or even about their role, it became meaningful to them because they were actively involved on the reflection. In the same way, when they were autonomous to decide about something that was appealing to them, they negotiated, made decisions and transformed what may have been a boring task into a more engaging and productive activity.

Other procedures that emerged in planning had to do with monitoring and self-assessment, given that learners noticed errors (both linguistic and communicative) and observed how messages were received (Rubin, 1981).
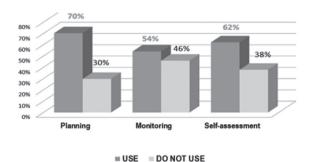
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Figure 2. Percentage of students who use each one of the metacognitive strategies.

Cooperation (Socio-affective strategies) 76% of students selected cooperation from this group of strategies and it was one of the most relevant methods in this study, once into the groups of work, they discussed to help individual members better their attitudes therefore they were able to work together as a team. This experience was meaningful for the majority of students who took advantage of collaboration to improve individual challenges, some students affirmed that they helped, motivated and supported each other.

Smith (1996) revealed several positive outcomes from cooperation such as achievement/productivity, positive relationships, and psychological health, accordingly, we confirmed that students perceived cooperation as an opportunity to support each other, not only in terms of language proficiency but also to regulate their emotions.
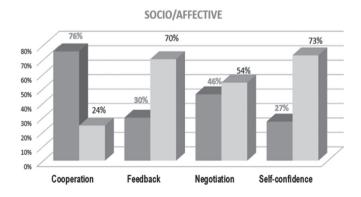

Figure 3. Percentage of students who used each one of socio/affective strategies.

Psychological resilience

Resilience refers to the "adaptation and survival of a system after perturbation, often referring to the process of restoring functional equilibrium, and sometimes referring to the process of transformation to a stable new functional state" (Masten, 2001, p. 9), in other words, it has to do with being able to adapt and recover from different psychological threats. In this study resilience was possible because of the safe environment activated by working in collaboration, which also facilitated students' to avoid feelings of stress, nerves, lack of confidence, and anxiety.

Moreover, students who had the capability to check inside and evaluate themselves evidenced the highest metacognitive levels that represent their own awareness to reflect upon what they were learning, how they were acting, and which could be the easiest way of learning. It was found that students self-assessed their behavior, their relationships with others, and their oral productions and attitudes; they also increased their self-confidence because socializing was an effective way to correct each other. Such behaviors were evidenced in comments such as the ones below:

"I'm giving the best of me and I want to achieve my goals, such words motivate me to change and keep going…" [3]

"I commit to improve my work and allot more time to present good quality activities…" [4]

"I have concentration and speaking problems, but I am progressing…"[5]

"In previous activities when I made wrong, I did not present my activities again, now in collaboration I felt sure and motivated to keep working and improve".[6]

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[3] *"Estoy dando lo mejor de mí y quiero lograr mis metas, **palabras así me motivan a cambiar y seguir adelante…**"*

[4] *"Me comprometo a mejorar mis trabajos y **dedicarle más tiempo** para presentar actividades de buena calidad".*

[5] *"Tengo problemas de concentración, de habla pero voy avanzando".*

[6] *"En actividades anteriores, cuando me equivoqué, no presenté mis actividades nuevamente, ahora en colaboración, me siento más seguro y motivado para seguir trabajando y mejorar".*

Conclusions

Working with LLS could be one of the many alternatives that English teachers have around in order to guide and empower their students to strengthen their language skills. Yet, we find it essential that teachers introduce students to the use of cognitive, metacognitive and social or affective strategies through the use of Collaborative Work and technological tools such as Podcasting in order to construct better educational environments in general.

On the whole, LLS are behaviors or actions that learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable (Oxford, 1989); in this study we noticed how students strengthened their mental processes, increased their own consciousness regarding their own learning development, and helped them to control their emotions and gain self-confidence and self-esteem, all of which was evidenced in their performances in which linguistic features such as fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, or grammar were visibly improved.

The use of technological tools such as podcasting was suitable to help these tenth graders improve their oral skill, students felt comfortable to perform in class because through the process of creating the podcasts they overcame fears and concerns and felt prepared and self-confident to do their oral interventions directly, face to face. Podcasting facilitated students to self-regulate and self-monitor their performance as they could listen to their recordings many times and make corrections to produce better utterances improving pronunciation, fluency and grammatical issues.

Collaborative work was supportive as it involved processes of psychological health in participants since students were able to control their fear, stress and, anxiety they started to enjoy the task. In collaboration, students felt secure and sure to participate in class, they uncovered great abilities they did not even know they had. The challenge to work in groups encouraged their patience, creativity, organization of ideas and task design. All the groups improved together and exchanged genuine ideas towards the same objective.

The use of LLS, Collaborative work, and Podcasts can help students to understand and regulate the quality of their performances and learning overall and contribute to the development of the language system that the learner constructs and that affect learning directly (Rubin, 1987). Moreover, as it was evidenced during the implementation of this project, students can enhance their motivation, achieve higher levels of self-confidence and self-esteem (psychological resilience) when they are given the opportunity of developing and presenting their own ideas.

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Allowing students time for planning is fundamental for the development of meaningful and contextualized learning processes, given that students have the time they need for organizing ideas and interacting around tasks which require involvement, analysis, reflection, and production.

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