

Tareas integradoras de habilidades comunicativas en inglés para mejorar la expresión oral
en estudiantes de secundaria

Skill-Integrating Tasks to Improve Students' Oral Expression in English in Junior High School

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Resumen

En el presente artículo los autores revelaron puntos de vista teórico-prácticos que sustentan la enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés en la secundaria básica. Se tuvo como objetivo analizar desde la teoría y la praxis concreta la necesidad de una clase de inglés en secundaria donde se integraran las habilidades comunicativas que constituyen la finalidad del programa, en función de la elevación de la calidad de la expresión oral como propósito primero del nivel, dadas las insuficiencias detectadas. Se emplearon métodos teóricos, como análisis-síntesis e inducción-deducción. De los métodos empíricos se emplearon el análisis documental, el cual complementó las generalizaciones teóricas de los autores sobre la relación integración de habilidades-optimización de la expresión oral, y sus

Abstract

The authors revealed their theoretical and practical views on the teaching-learning of English in junior high school. The main objective focused on analyzing from theory and practice, the need of planning a lesson of English in junior high where skills are integrated to improve oral expression, which is the central skill in the level, so as to palliate insufficiencies detected. Analysis-synthesis and induction-deduction were methods used theoretically. Documentary perusal and theoretico-methodological modeling were part of the empirical methods, which contributed to the generalizations on the nexus between skill integration and oral expression and the devising of skill-integrating tasks. The material presented allowed the activation of an awareness of the problems discussed and the rendering of a

criterios valorativos sobre la enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés en el nivel de marras, así como la modelación de tareas integradoras de habilidades para optimizar el aprendizaje en los estudiantes. Los análisis realizados sobre el tema permitieron elevar los niveles de concienciación por parte de los maestros de los aspectos tratados. En segundo lugar, se presentó un cuerpo teórico-metodológico de trabajo para su modelación en clases.

Palabras clave: Educación Secundaria Básica, inglés, enseñanza-aprendizaje, habilidades comunicativas, tareas integradoras, expresión oral

theoretical and methodological corpus to crystallize in the actual lesson of English.

Key words: Junior High Education, English language, teaching-learning, oral skills, skill-integrating tasks, oral expression

Introduction

The main objective of this work focused on analyzing from theory and practice the need of planning a lesson of English in junior high where skills are integrated to improve oral expression, which is the central skill in the level, so as to palliate insufficiencies detected. The teaching of English as a foreign language not only contributes to linguistic accuracy but also to the construction and reconstruction of knowledge. This is nothing more than the improvement of the basic habits and skills that allow people to communicate in English.

Teaching and learning English is a priority in the Cuban System of Education. It responds to economic, social, cultural, political and diplomatic realities. The main goal of the English subject in terms of language is to develop communication and an acceptable level of communicative competence in English, which takes place in the interaction of two or more persons. The subject contributes to the students' formation of their vision of the world, and will reinforce the curriculum of Junior High School by favoring the education of responsible and committed students.

The development of oral expression aims at achieving a better communicative competence. The skill has been given great attention both at national and international levels. Authors such as Antich, (1975); Abbot [et al.], (1989); Byrne, (1989); Terroux and Woods, (1991); Ur, (1996); Medina, (2006) among others, have offered valuable contributions. Developing oral expression is an aspect of a great priority within the main objectives of the subject. Oral expression is used for many functions. Through oral expression people can establish relationships, to find out information and compare viewpoints with others. Oral expression is the key for communication. By considering what oral expression tasks can be used in class, and what specific needs learners report, teachers can help learners improve their oral expression and overall oral competence.

Factors of a manifold character have shaped the development of oral expression. The results of tests and tasks done by students of junior high school during the 2013-14 school-year, and the assessments made, rendered recurring difficulties in the development of their oral expression within the English subject, especially in terms of the insufficiencies detected in skill integration.

The syllabus declares the following objectives of the English subject, which are related to the integration of skills:

1. Comprehend simple texts through visual, oral and written exercises.
2. Communicate orally and in writing by describing and interchanging information related to activities, experiences, persons and places in present, past and future tense.
3. Listen to different conversations demonstrating comprehension through oral and written tasks.

As can be seen, the objectives of the subject do refer to the integration of skills. This is a positive element that should be considered when dealing with the topic. However, in the process of the investigation the authors also found different insufficiencies concerning skill integration in English. This was detected in class, through the revision of documents, lesson observations and interviews to teachers.

These can be summarized as follows: They have poor results in the different tests applied because of insufficiencies in the mastery of the four communicative skills, in particular oral expression; the students are afraid of speaking due to the interference of their mother

tongue, their poor vocabulary and their lack of accuracy and fluency. They also have problems with pronunciation; teachers do not exploit the potentialities of the contents for the development of the lessons, concentrating only on one skill and failing to use the material in hand with an integrated perspective; teachers use one-skill mechanical and structural exercises that do not encourage the development of the students' oral expression.

The authors of this article consider that skill integration has a great influence on learning English and developing an appropriate oral expression, as is revealed in the quotation below:

“[...] A simple but effective way of ensuring that skills are integrated is to get the learners to collaborate, in pairs or in groups, on fluency-focused tasks. Integrated skills activities are important because: they provide opportunities for using language naturally, not just practicing it, many pair- and group work activities call for a variety of skills, sometimes simultaneously, in order to involve all the learners, students seem to learn better when they are engaged on activities which involve more than one skill”.¹

Therefore, the insufficiencies spotted and declared establish the necessity of exploring ways to improve oral expression of students through skill integration in the English subject in Junior High School.

Materials and Methods

From the theoretical area were used the analytic–synthetic method for the studying of the separate features of the observable facts and putting them together to draw conclusions. Also, the inductive–deductive one to get to deductions on the elements under analysis, and modelling to structure and devise tasks to achieve skill integration.

From the empirical area were used observation of lessons to give arguments on the research, interview to professors to obtain information on aspects related to the preparation and presentation of the English lesson, analysis of written documents to obtain critical information on the organization of the process.

¹Byrne, Donn. Teaching Oral English, p. 113.

Results and Debating

A variety of factors has influenced the development of oral expression in the context of study of this work. The results of tests and tasks done by students of Junior High School during the 2013-2014 school-year, and the assessments made, rendered recurring difficulties in the development of their oral expression within the English subject, especially in terms of the insufficiencies detected in skill integration. Lesson observation and interview to teachers proved that English oral communication is not properly treated in junior high, and that skill integration is not consciously and systematically exploited to improve oral expression.

It was detected that there was not enough oral practice with 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 skill with integrating procedures. The lesson observation session detected that oral communication activities linked with other skills are not applied, or applied at a very general level, that time is consumed by explanation and copying, that the students hardly talk and are unmotivated.

An interview was applied to five teachers of English and offered the following:

1. They give stressed importance to oral expression, but they do not make reference to the students.
2. They declare there are many ways to achieve oral communication, but the time and the sequence of lessons is too poor to develop the skill, or to integrate many skills no matter how important they are.
3. They state that they try to do their best, but it is difficult due to time. Listening is the one mostly used.
4. They state that oral practice is not properly implemented or combined with other skills, that they design some activities, copy others from books, that skill integrating activities are rarely prepared.

With the application of the method of analysis of written documents (Syllabus) the following was obtained. In the analysis of the subject it was stated that the teaching of the English language has as an end the development of the cognitive-communicative competence. This concept implies the expression, interpretation and negotiation of meanings in the interaction between two or more persons, or between a person and a written or oral text. The exercises

are centered only on one skill at the time, what shows that the treatment and evaluation of the four skills is carried out one by one and not integrating them. In the Methodological Orientations is declared the necessity of the realization of activities that favor communicative interaction, not skill integration. A reference to skill integration is appreciated in the item of reading, and within it, only in the post-reading exercises.

With this analysis the authors realized that some sections of the syllabus declare the importance and necessity of skill integration, while others don't. These empirical methods demonstrated that much is to be done still to improve the teaching-learning process and the development of oral expression through skill- integrating tasks.

From an interpretation of what really happens in the communicative act, language teachers, among others, use the following terms, which describe the four skills of the language: listening, speaking, reading and writing. This is a generalized use and some specialists still maintain it: Antich, (1975); and Ur, (1996).

In the decade of the 80s, other authors approach a different way to name these skills in teaching: listening comprehension and reading comprehension. Antich, (1975); Abbott [et al.], (1989); Byrne, (1989); Terroux and Woods, (1991); Brown, (1994). Likewise, during this period oral expression and written expression began to be used too. Antich, (1975); Byrne, (1989); Brown, (1994). This expresses in a better way the exactness of the content of the verbal skills. So, they are assumed by the author.

Oral expression has received a wide treatment lately because of the importance of this skill development. Its formation and development implies two abilities: a receptive one (listening) and a productive one (oral expression), so it is a dual process which includes the sender or speaker (who encodes the message) and the receiver or hearer (who decodes the message). It is an interactive process in which in a dynamic way the roles are interchanged.

Byrne (1989) states that: *“The main goal in teaching the productive skill of speaking will be oral fluency. This can be defined as the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably, accurately and without too much hesitation (otherwise communication may break down because the listener loses interest or gets impatient)”*².

² Byrne, Donn. Teaching Oral English, p. 13.

In reference to this topic, the authors sustain that to attain this goal, you will have to bring the students from the stage where they are mainly imitating a model of some kind, or responding to clues, to the points where they can use the language freely to express their own ideas. The development of the oral ability is a good source of motivation for most learners.

Another definition given by Medina (2006) is:

“The oral expression is the process through which the student – speaker, in interaction with one or more persons and in an active position, carries out the double role of receiving and coding the message, with the aim of satisfying his communicative needs in the foreign language. The development of this skill covers a wide spectrum, from the approach based on language and which emphasizes accuracy, up to the one based on the message and which emphasizes meaning and fluency; and its highest aim is that the student should be able to develop communicative acts with the necessary competence. This is mainly the ruling skill in the teaching-learning process of foreign languages and its effectiveness depends on the integration with the rest of the verbal skills on the strong entailment between affective-motivational and cognitive elements”³.

These authors have offered important criteria for the development of English communication and the analysis of this information allowed the researcher to determine that there is an ample variety of proposals, approaches, techniques, procedures, principles, and exercises; provided with the intention of improving the effectiveness of the teaching–learning process of English as a foreign language.

After the study developed, the authors assume the definition of oral expression offered by Medina (2006) and presented on page thirteen. It is assumed because it refers to the students learning the foreign language, it views the skill from the communicative perspective and it includes the integration of skills, which is central to the objectives of this article.

The context is favourable, given the right conditions and proposal of tasks, to integrate skills in class so that students find other ways to use the language and practice different skills at the same time. While one of the skills is the objective of teaching, the others may act as a means for its development and develop themselves at the same time. Listening and speaking

³ Medina Betancourt, Alberto Román. Didáctica de la Lengua Extranjera con Enfoque de Competencia, p. 46.

are treated first due to the primary character of oral communication where listening is the basis for speaking. Reading precedes writing as the basis of it, and the later is considered an instrumental skill. This means writing is not an objective in itself (except in specialized courses), but a means for the development of listening, speaking and reading.

Skill integration aims at achieving a better communicative competence. This theme has received attention both at national and international levels. Authors such as Antich, (1975); Byrne, (1989); Brown, (1994); Ur, (1996); Medina, (2006); among others, have offered valuable contributions. Following is offered a definition by Olivé⁴:

(Skill integration): *“The combination of two or more skills of the language in the teaching-learning process of English to attain a further goal, which can be the improvement of one particular skill; or their integration in follow-up stages to complete a sequence of learning or comprehension in the same process.”*

Integrating the four main language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) has shown to be very beneficial in the foreign language classroom. It is a truth that we rarely use a single skill when communicating, so it makes sense to focus on more than one skill at a time. Considering that communication requires the integration of the four skills, it makes sense that language is taught in a communication promoting way. There are several advantages for using an integrated skill approach. It exposes English language learners to authentic language and challenges them to interact naturally in the language. Learners rapidly gain a true picture of the richness and complexity of the English language as employed for communication. However, with a segregated approach, it is difficult to use language in a meaningful way. For example, when students are focused on only one skill at a time, such as writing, it is not very meaningful or very likely that they will ever be focused on just writing while they are communicating.

Another advantage to using an integrated skill approach is that it stresses that English is not just an object of academic interest nor merely a key to passing an examination; instead, English becomes a real means of interaction and sharing among people. This also relates to motivation, and it is more likely for students to be motivated to learn a language if they are able to use it to interact, rather than to just have knowledge about the language. A third

⁴ This quotation is taken from draft notes offered by Olivé Iglesias, Miguel Ángel for a prospective article.

advantage of an integrated approach deals with the teacher's side of the process. Teachers are able to track students' progress in multiple skills at the same time.

Also, skill integration allows for growth in all main skill areas at the same time, this allows students to be able to use their strengths in order to help them grow in their weaknesses. In other words, if a student is particularly strong in reading, they may be able to use this skill to help them with listening. This advantage also relates to motivation, because if the learner is a weak reader, but a very strong speaker, they may be prevented from becoming discouraged and unmotivated to continue learning the language. Integrating the language skills also promotes the learning of real content, not just the dissection of language forms. Finally, skill integration, whether found in content-based or task-based language instruction or some hybrid form, can be highly motivating to students of all ages and backgrounds.

Finally, in order to integrate the language skills teachers should consider taking these steps:

- . Learn more about the various ways to integrate language skills in the classroom.
- . Reflect on their current approach and evaluate the extent to which the skills are integrated.
- . Choose instructional materials, textbooks, and technologies that promote the integration of listening, reading, speaking, and writing, as well as the associated skills of syntax, vocabulary, and so on.
- . Even if a given course is labeled according to just one skill, remember that it is possible to integrate the other language skills through appropriate tasks.
- . “With careful reflection and planning, any teacher can integrate the language skills and strengthen the tapestry of language teaching and learning. When the tapestry is woven well, learners can use English effectively for communication.

Following are offered examples of tasks that can be modelled for the integration of skills in the subject of English:

Task 1

Work with a partner. Ask questions to find out what he/she thinks about the following activities. Ask questions like: “Do you enjoy (talking on the phone)?” “Do you like (going on picnics)?”

Activities

Hate

Dislike

Like

Love

Talking on the phone

Eating alone

Spending time with your family

Singing

Reading

Watching TV

Studying English

Playing volleyball

Going on picnics

Listening to music

Swimming

Spending time with friends

Watching professional baseball games

Window shopping

Cycling

Taking walks

Drawing or painting

a. After you finish, read to the class what you found out.

Skills involved: oral expression, listening and reading.

Task 2

Describe how you would want your prince/princess charming to be like.

- a. Specify his/her personality traits.
- b. Get ready to read it aloud.

Skills involved: oral expression, listening and reading.

Task 3

Write on a sticky label your first name, your family name, your favorite color and your favorite hobby. Then, stick it on to your clothes and wander about the classroom until you find someone with whom you share something according to the label.

- a. Establish a conversation with the partner you selected and try to find as many things in common between you and your partner as possible: likes, dislikes, preferences, etc.
- b. Get ready to make a class report about any surprising discoveries and coincidences.

Skills involved: writing, oral expression and listening.

Task 4

Write on a piece of paper what you like to do the most. All the pieces of paper are going to be collected and put in a box.

- a. Pick up one sheet of paper and try to guess who wrote it and why you think so.
- b. The owner of the sheet of paper is going to confirm or deny your answer.

Skills involved: writing, oral expression and listening.

Task 5

Imagine the classroom is empty: no furniture, no people, nothing. Create your ideal classroom arrangement taking into account your preferences.

- a. Share your project with your partners.

Skills involved: writing, oral expression and listening.

Conclusions

Oral communication is essential for the development of an appropriate culture and the exchange among human beings. Oral expression in ninth graders was detected as a problem: the procedures and exercises elaborated by the teachers were not sufficient, and hardly ever considered the integration of skills as an effective weapon to develop oral expression.

The different phases of the article allowed presenting a theoretical and methodological corpus by detecting and describing the situation of the scope of the research and making theoretical analyses, and presenting five examples of tasks that can help in the integration of skills in English to improve oral expression in the students. So the chief objective was accomplished.

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