

IMPROVING ORAL PERFORMANCE THROUGH INTERACTIONS FLASHCARDS

Jasson Urquijo

Centro Colombo Americano

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ABSTRACT

This report is based on an action research multiple baseline design study across five different qualitative aspects of spoken interaction used to evaluate the effectiveness of a flashcard system to improve oral performance in the ESL classroom. The participants were ten children attending third grade in a public school in Bogotá, and who were assessed as having low oral performance in spoken English language. Results showed that the Interactions Flashcards system was effective in improving oral performance in general and increasing levels in each one of the qualitative aspects of spoken interaction including range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence.

Key words: Speech Communication; English as a Second Language; Oral Performance; Class Activities; Elementary Education; Second Language Instruction; Direct Instruction Flashcards; Interactions Flashcards; qualitative aspects of spoken interaction.

INTRODUCTION

Interactions are used every day in our world and their mastery is an important skill for ESL learners to acquire. An interaction is the basic dialogue form and thus the building block of conversation. Some examples that are important are greeting someone in a hall, saying thanks to someone who gave you something, and providing your name to a person filling out a form for you. An interaction could be that a person asks, “A: What’s your name?” to which you answer, “B: I’m John Almond.” Previous researchers have referred to interactions as memorized phrases or routines that learners use and allow them to play a part in basic interaction while their analytic linguistic ability develops and allows them to communicate their needs and desires (Bassano, 1980). In sum, an interaction is a basic dialogue in the form A: / B: that a person performs in a communicative setting.

Although using appropriate interactions is an important skill, teaching these in the public primary schools in Colombian is not common. Content analysis of ten field logs compiled over the third and fourth quarter of the second semester, 2010, at a public girl’s school in Bogotá, shows that the kind of oral products learners achieve up to 5th grade is deficient to the point that learners do not perform any basic interactions well. However, the same analysis reveals that low oral performance is not caused by any learning disabilities students might have but rather by three main features. First, teaching practices favored in public schools focus on memorization of vocabulary. Second, activities in English classes tend to be non-communicative. Last, there are contextual constraints of space, time, and resources. Regardless of these conditions, there are many strategies to help a child learn interactions and move beyond the level of using single words or isolated vocabulary items to communicate.

Teaching routine formulas of prefabricated interactions can be tracked back to the 80's when it was tested as a possible strategy for learners in basic levels to be able to perform early communication (Bassano, 1980). Furthermore, previous research on teaching methods used to improve oral performance among basic learners in the elementary school can be found in an initial study regarding formulaic speech, according to which, there is evidence that in the initial periods of second language development, formulaic speech may be more substantial than creative rules (Ellis, 1983). More recent research regarding formulaic language and its role in second language acquisition points out how it has generally received only minimal attention within linguistic and second language acquisition theory (Weinert, 1995). However, its importance for everyday interaction has also been pointed out. Wray says we appear to rely on holistic processing in the course of normal interaction, not because to use the analytic system is impossible, but because it is an expensive strategy (Wray, 1998). Still, there are no studies readily available that deal with the effectiveness of ways to teach memorized speech segments to beginning language learners, nor for the particular case of using flashcards to teach interactions.

One purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching interactions using a flashcard procedure, Interactions Flashcards, to improve the oral performance of third graders. A second purpose was to develop a measurement of oral performance in order to have a quantitative indicator of the qualitative aspects of interaction according to the Common European Framework of Reference. The final purpose was to start a sequence of research procedures that aim at the identification of kinds of flashcards that can be designed in order to improve oral performance in students of English as a second language.

THE ISSUE

Low Oral Performance

The problem identified is that learners in elementary school have low oral performance in English classes. This issue was identified via content analysis of ten field logs that registered the third and fourth academic terms of the year 2010. The field logs revealed difficulties in learners' ability to produce oral outcomes in English.

The analysis also revealed that in comparison to written outcomes, oral outcomes were of much lower level. The factors affecting oral performance were found to be the lack of thinking time (classes are short), lack of concentration on task (there are many learners in class, about 40), and institutional interruptions (classes are interrupted for announcements or other school activities). The main indicator of low oral performance is that learners showed very little to no participation in English and poor quality of interaction. A very low percentage of the learners had an adequate oral performance in English.

The problem of low oral performance was confirmed by means of accuracy analysis of an oral interview with the following five open questions: 1) How are you? 2) What's your name? 3) What color is this? (showing an object), 4) What do you do in the morning? 5) What do you do at night? All of the questions relate to the A1 band of the Common European Framework of Reference, which is the level that, according to Colombian standards, learners should reach by third grade. This second analysis revealed that on average learners could only answer one of the five questions accurately.

THE INNOVATION

Flashcards

A description of the use of flashcards in teaching students of English as a second language (ESL) to interact by using dialogues for conversation should begin with a review of the literature concerning the form and content of flashcards. Flashcards are a type of data-based instructional strategy that is usually associated with the Direct Instruction (DI) procedures, described by Silber, Carnine, and Stain (1981) for teaching math. In this procedure, the teacher presents flashcards and provides immediate feedback to students after allowing some time for the learner to respond and then rewarding correct responses and providing models for correcting errors. Error cards are used again later in order for the learner to be able to master all of the concepts in the cards. DI flashcards, due to their procedure, have been used to master concepts and discrete items of curricula, especially in math (Karp & Voltz, 2000), and many times their use has been in the field of special education (Maccini & Gagnon, 2000).

Even though flashcards can be easily adapted to a variety of academic areas (Erbey, et al, 2011), in the field of language teaching, these flashcards are mostly focused on the mastery of sight words (Ruwe, et al, 2011), and thus they have become widely used as a way to learn vocabulary, and popularized under the name of vocabulary flashcards. The ways in which flashcards are used today have also changed the procedure under which they were conceived, changing from a teacher-centered DI flashcard, to a self-study flashcard. The widespread use of vocabulary flashcards is no surprise since the use of DI Flashcards aligns perfectly for teaching items of language that are isolated from context, or discrete.

In order to create flashcards that deal with something else than vocabulary, some design principles may also be adopted from their use in special education. Even though the students in this study are not developmentally delayed, they do face a number of contextual limitations that may well cause the same effects as learning disabilities. As such, it is interesting to explore Carnine's design suggestions of using big ideas; conspicuous strategies; efficient use of time; clear, explicit instruction on strategies; and appropriate practice and review (Carnine, 1997). According to Cardine, a wider application of these design principles, in instructional material and in actual teaching, could contribute to far higher achievement levels of performance (Carnine, 1997).

Furthermore, it has been shown, that a combination of direct instruction with strategy instruction can increase the positive effect that either one of the models has on its own (Ellis, 1993; Karp & Voltz, 2000). This means that strategy instruction can help learners gain the maximum benefit from techniques such as the use of DI Flashcards. But teaching a particular skill through the use of DI Flashcards and complementing it by providing information storage and retrieval strategies could actually be taken further by including a communicative component that uses the conversational element implicit in the use of flashcards to ensure a tool that would take students beyond the mastery of discrete items and the strategic storage and retrieval of information. The result of such process is a kind of flashcard that allows users to practice, remember and master basic interactions.

Interactions Flashcards

In language learning a flashcard is typically considered to be any card printed with pictures, words or numbers and used as part of a learning drill. Although this definition could be

good enough for the purpose of this study, there are other details of flashcards that would help clarify the specific features of the kind of flashcard that was designed in the execution of this project.

The main characteristics of a flashcard are size, content, topics, usage, and nowadays, due to the development of the information and communication technologies (ICT), format. Many of these characteristics are not differentiating. Two identical flashcards, except for their size, let's say one is bigger than the other, do not really have a different impact on learning. Flashcards are usually designed to be about the size of a playing card just so they can be easily handled in a deck, not because they would be more effective. Similarly, two flashcards that are the same, except for their topic, one for math and another for English, would probably have the same impact on learning. This is why flashcards can be used to learn virtually any set of information.

In elementary schools, flashcards are often employed to help students with memorization of basic math principles. When used to teach a foreign language, they are usually proposed to help students review vocabulary words and their meanings. One study shows a setting in which students print an unfamiliar word on one side of an index card and on the other side, they write the sentence in which the word was found, the dictionary pronunciation guide entry, and a paraphrase of the dictionary definition (Thompson, et al, 1984). This study showed that flashcards enhance interaction in the classroom and increase learners' confidence.

Other characteristics of flashcards could be considered differentiating. When using a flashcard, the particular procedure that is followed could affect the learning level. The

basic procedure consists of an individual holding up a card and showing one side of the card to another person, prompting a response. If the response is accurate, the next card is displayed and so on. However, some students use flashcards on their own to quiz themselves. There could be learning level differences between the social use of flashcards and their individual use. Also, the electronic variations of flashcards created and administered by computer software specially designed for this purpose and online flashcards that are available make it possible for students to have a procedural guide or study with sets of flashcards that are already made instead of creating their own. It may be that real flashcards and virtual flashcards have different effects on learning.

Perhaps, the most differentiating factor of flashcards is content. All flashcards by definition imply a question and an answer. A vocabulary flashcard shows a picture of an apple and when a person is shown that flashcard, they are to say “apple” in order to get the “correct” answer. Instead, today you can see cards with no question, like those that only have a word written on them, or ones that have the question and the answer on the same side even though the basic concept is that a flashcard is designed with a question on one side and an answer on the other. Furthermore, most of the flashcards for language teaching are vocabulary flashcards in which the content in the question/answer format is a combination of images/words. There are some other kinds of flashcards for language teaching that are definitions flashcards in which the content is word/definition. Another kind of popular language teaching flashcard is that known as synonyms flashcard in which the content is a question/answer combination of word/synonyms.

The kind of flashcards designed for the purpose of this study were called Interactions Flashcards due to the fact that their first differentiating characteristic, that of content, in the

format question/answer, is an interaction in the form A:/B:, for instance, A: Thank you./B: You're welcome. Also the second differentiating characteristic, usage, has been clearly changed from the typical DI procedure to a procedure that mixes the direct instruction with strategy instruction and communicative approaches to language teaching and learning.

METHOD

Participants and Setting

The participants of this study were ten third grade children with low oral performance in English. Participants were all female, ranging in age from 6 to 8 years, and who could not perform any basic interaction in English. The study took place within the English class of a third grade classroom at a public school in the south of Bogotá. All of the participants were in the afternoon session of elementary school. The English class was part of a standard elementary education English program consisting of a wide variety of students with low oral performance in English and no ability to deal with interactions. Data on individual students' oral performance was collected during the class in sessions that lasted approximately 10 - 15 minutes per participant at a location outside the classroom away from other children in order to reduce distractions.

Interactions Flashcards (IF) Procedure

The classroom activities planned and used with Interactions Flashcards is outlined in seven steps that lead students gradually from an initial encounter with Interactions Flashcards to the ability to converse logically without direct reference to them.

Step 1: Looking at samples. The first step is to introduce the Interactions Flashcards and develop familiarity with them. This can be done by bringing a set of Interactions Flashcards to class for learners to understand how they look and work.

Step 2: Creating. The second step involves plotting sample dialogues on the flashcards, which the learners do themselves, from a fixed set of interactions provided by the teacher under a specific context, called generative topic. Generative topics are decided depending on the school's curriculum, for example, greetings, personal information, spelling, etc.

Step 3: Personalizing. The third step is for learners to plot more dialogues on the flashcards, this time using the generative topics to propose the interactions they would like to learn in English. They can initially say what they want to learn in Spanish and then the teacher can provide the language input of the interaction in English. For instance, students would want to learn the interaction: A: “¿Cómo se llama tu mamá?” / B: “Se llama Ana.” The teacher provides the interaction: A: What's your mother's name? / B: It's Ana.

Step 4: Playing. The fourth step, accomplished by students in pairs, is to develop the interaction under the topic and sequence in the flashcards. Learners can turn this into a game since they try to get points by answering the most questions correctly using the Interactions Flashcards as a guide. Teacher modeling in this activity is a must.

Step 5: Testing. The fifth step is a testing exercise using groups of three or more students, in which one student holds up these flashcards containing linguistic input and tests other students on their ability to create a logical conversation by responding appropriately. Teachers can use the previous step in which they were playing and turn it into a more serious assessment moment by guiding learners to give corrective feedback to each other.

Step 6: Speaking. The sixth step begins with a brief role play exercise in which the teacher explains the rules of interaction, implicit in the Interactions Flashcards, and students pair off to create basic dialogues or conversations according to what they have practiced using the Interactions Flashcards. It continues with the gradual elimination of the use of the Interactions Flashcards for reference. Teachers motivate students by telling them they do not need the Interactions Flashcards anymore in order to be able to perform dialogues since they already remember how to interact.

Step 7: Interviewing. The final step consists of the recording of students' performance when executing dialogues without the use of Interactions Flashcards. Teachers interview learners by using the same interactions they have practiced and record their results. Feedback can be provided by pointing out which Interactions Flashcards learners need to work more on.

All of the steps above were carried out over the course of the first semester 2011. The English language standards for Colombia and the curriculum of the school were used as a point of reference in order to determine the generative topics and the fixed set of Interactions Flashcards learners were to create. A chart containing all the design elements was developed. A pace schedule served in order to organize the work in class. Both of the above were included in a booklet called Interactions Flashcard Project which provided general information. It included a description of the main project elements, such as the A1 and spoken interaction, descriptors (CEFR), and the oral performance achievement indicators from the Colombian standards for English, as well as a list of the generative topics and interactions used.

Performance was recorded for evaluation using tools specifically developed for this study: forms called RAFIC Charts and a measuring tool called RAFIC Quotient. RAFIC is an acronym for the qualitative aspects of spoken interaction: Range, Accuracy, Fluency, Interaction, and Coherence, which are mentioned in the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, Language Policy Division, 2010). RAFIC Charts are instruments to collect information under those categories and the RAFIC Quotient is a quantification of the results.

ORAL PERFORMANCE RAFIC CHART									
	SUBJECT	R		A		F	I		C
		PERSONAL		MEMORIZED		PAUSING	INTERACT		LINKING
		CONCRETE		LIMITED CONTROL		REPAIR	REPETITION		CONNECTORS
		WORDS	PHRASES	GRAMMAR	PATTERN	UTTERANCE	ASK	ANSWER	AND
ENGLISH									
1	Hi, how are you?								
2	What is your name?								
3	How do you spell it?								
4	What color is this?								
5	What are your favorite school subjects?								
SPANISH									
1	Hola, ¿cómo estas?								
2	¿Cuál es tu nombre?								
3	¿Cómo lo escribes?								
4	¿De qué color es esto?								
5	¿Cuáles son tus materias favoritas?								

Materials

All the participants used index cards to create their flashcards. One side of the card had part A: from an interaction in the form A:/B: in a size, format and design decided by the participant. The other side had part B: from the interaction so that the participants and

teacher could easily practice the interactions, give corrective feedback and play with the flashcards. A data sheet was used before and after work with Interactions Flashcards for each participant that consisted of the five qualitative aspects of spoken interaction being tested. Data sheets, RAFIC Charts, were marked for correct or incorrect answers using a check mark for correct and an x for incorrect. Correct and incorrect answers were later turned into a numeric indicator called RAFIC quotient.

Dependent Variable and Measurement Procedures

The dependent variable for all the participants in the study was correct oral execution of interactions. For the ten children a high level of oral performance was defined as the learner answering a question correctly or reacting appropriately to an expression before moving on to the next question. The questions asked, which corresponded to the questions learners used to create their set of Interactions Flashcards, were prepared in an oral interview which consisted of five open questions to which learners were to listen and answer orally.

The questions of the interview were: 1) Hi, how are you? 2) What's your name? 3) How do you spell it? 4) What color is this (showing an object), and 5) What are your favorite school subjects? Performance while answering those questions was recorded before and after the work with Interactions Flashcards by using RAFIC Charts. The RAFIC Quotient was then obtained by assigning a value of zero, or one, to each one of the aspects of Range, Accuracy, Fluency, Interaction, and Coherence, and adding those values in order to have a number between zero and five. The RAFIC Quotient is a quantitative way of measuring oral performance.

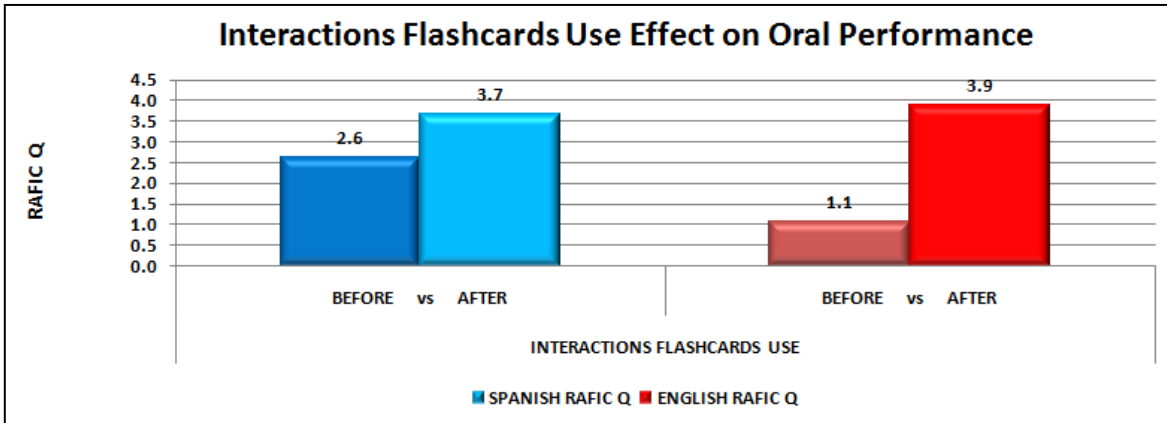
Additionally, in order to have a reference point to contrast learners' oral performance in English, a second interview was designed to record learners' oral performance in Spanish for the same interactions they were to be instructed in English. These allowed the identification of the baseline level of oral performance in English and in Spanish before the use of Interactions Flashcards and the later identification of level of oral performance in English and Spanish after the work with Interactions Flashcards. All of the above was observed for five points: Range, Accuracy, Fluency, Interaction, and Coherence.

RESULTS

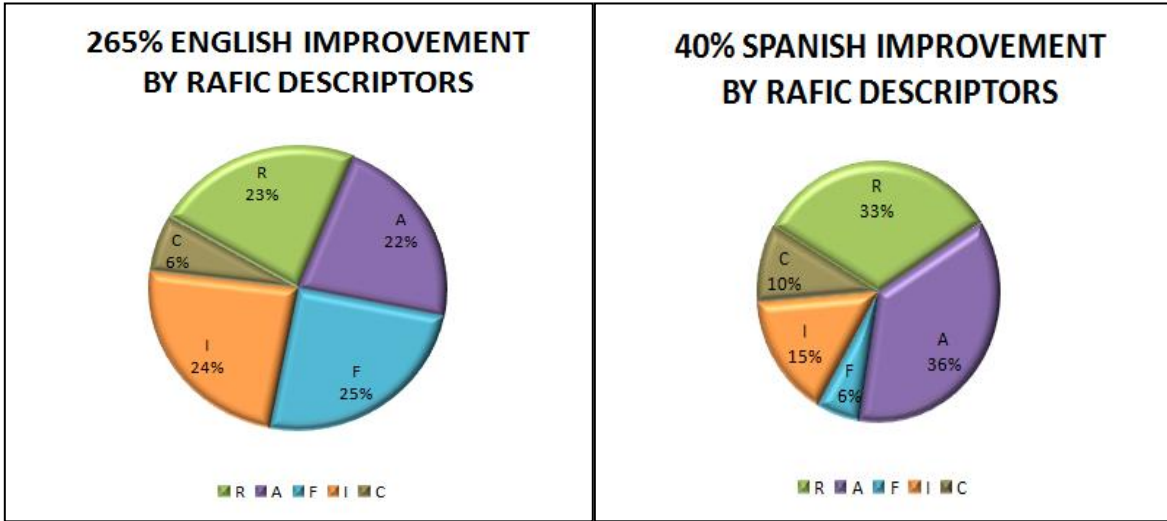
The findings show that Interactions Flashcards improve oral performance for three reasons. First, Interactions Flashcards foster the integrated upgrading of all of the qualitative aspects of spoken language. Second, Interactions Flashcards aid subjects' ability to deal with the generative topics given and serve as a tool for learners to accomplish achievement indicators within those topics. Last, Interactions Flashcards impact learners' behaviors and foster the development of social skills.

Oral Performance

After using Interactions Flashcards, the subjects' oral performance and ability to deal with the questions for the generative topics in English improved 265% from the baseline determined before implementation of the IF procedure. Also, the subjects' oral performance and ability to deal with the questions for the generative topics in Spanish, improved in 40% from the baseline determined before IF procedure.



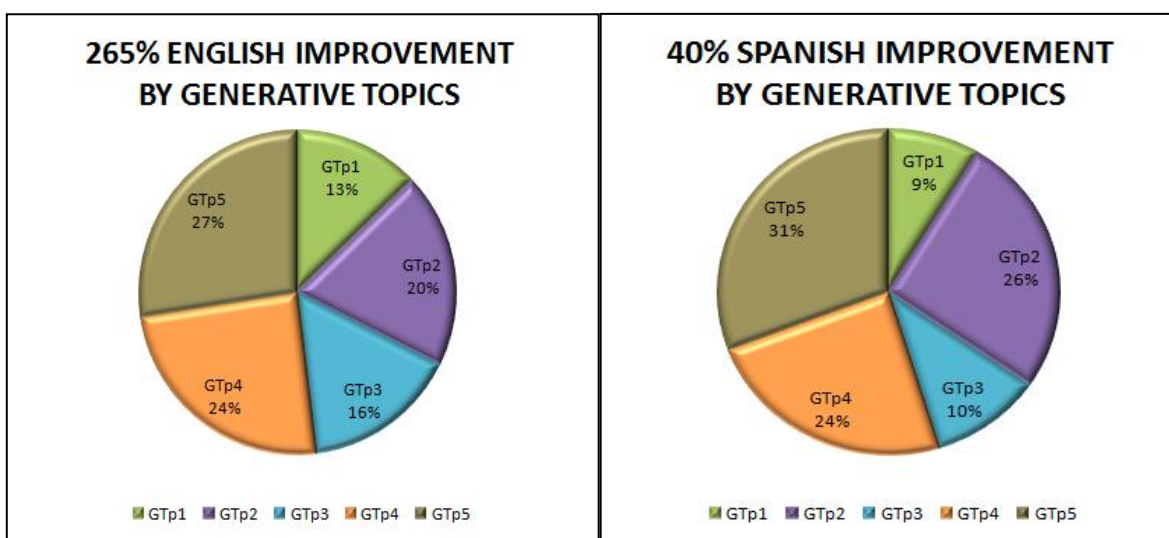
However, the improvement above can also be discriminated in the elements of the RAFIC in order to see which qualitative aspects of spoken language improved most after work with Interactions Flashcards. In English, the most representative descriptor was that of Fluency; in Spanish, the most representative descriptor was that of Accuracy. In English, the second most representative descriptor was Interaction, while in Spanish, the second most representative descriptor was Range. In English, the Accuracy descriptor was third, followed by Range, and Coherence, while in Spanish, the Interaction descriptor was third, followed by Coherence, and Fluency.



Generative Topics

Interactions Flashcards helped learners improve their ability to deal with the generative topics of greetings, personal information, objects and colors, places and things, and alphabet and spelling, in English as well as in Spanish, even though the Interactions Flashcards were designed for the five generative topics only in English.

In English as well as in Spanish, the most representative generative topic was that of alphabet and spelling, the fourth was that of objects and colors, and the least representative was that of greetings. However, while in English the second most representative generative topic was places and things, in Spanish, it was people's information. In English, people's information was third while, in Spanish, it was places and things.



Achievement Indicators

Interactions Flashcards proved to be a great tool for learners to accomplish the achievement indicators of the Colombian standards for English language in the generative topics given. They allowed subjects to greet others by using daily expressions to say hello and goodbye,

and to ask and answer questions about the way they are feeling, people around them, the color of objects they know, and places they are familiar with. Learners also stated their basic classroom-related personal needs by using daily expressions.

Learners' Behaviors

Interactions Flashcards have a positive effect on learners' behaviors because students considered them to be a great tool for achieving the goals set for their level, and thus they were more motivated. Interactions Flashcards fostered the development of social skills they need in order to deal with content in English. There are a number of skills that the Use of Interactions Flashcards fosters. 1) Subjects use non-verbal communication when they cannot answer verbally about their preferences, for example, they show agreement or disagreement by moving their heads. 2) Subjects use gestures in order to make their ideas more understandable, for example when they show each other in a card what they are saying. 3) Learners are constantly checking on their card if what they, or a partner, say is correct and, with a little leading, they turn the use of the cards into a game. 4) Learners are frequently and constantly faced with messages their partners say that they do not fully understand and their common reaction is to ask for repetition or clarification.

DISCUSSION

Most teachers would agree that flashcards can help people of all ages with memorization. Additionally, there are many approaches to their use, such as the strategic and the communicative, that allow us to see how simple flashcards have a perhaps unexplored

albeit vital role as part of the learning environment in the ESL classroom. For students at risk or with disabilities or contextual limitations, these approaches are crucial for the retention of new skills (Ellis, 1993).

In general, researchers and authors have emphasized the primary importance of not only promoting the use of oral skills such as instruction of formulaic speech for early communication, but there are also many ways to teach interactions to children in order to help them improve their oral performance. Furthermore, one strategy available to beginning learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) in order to learn interactions is the use of flashcards.

In Colombian public schools, a context in which there is resistance to change in terms of teaching methods, a lack of the use of communication for fostering learning, and great density of learners per class, little time devoted to English learning and shortage of resources, there is definitely a population of learners who appear to require a more structured and systematic approach when learning communication skills. One way to address the difficulties mentioned above and to provide a structural and systemic tool for teaching interactions is to use Interactions Flashcards.

However, giving flashcards the role they deserve in the learning environment of the ESL classroom is not enough since the greater the importance a teaching method is given in a class, the greater knowledge teachers and learners need to have of such method. This study did not just focus on making amazing flashcards, using DI as a basis and including strategic and communicative ideas, for studying, storing or retrieving information, but rather on how to make appropriate flashcards depending on the particular features of their genesis.

The findings in this particular study clearly show that the use of Interactions Flashcards allows for the improvement of the oral performance in English as well as in Spanish. The overall outcomes indicate a large increase in correct responses after implementing the Interactions Flashcard system. Also, a high ratio of mastered to unmastered interactions was also demonstrated. Besides that, Interactions Flashcards not only improve oral performance, but also subjects' ability to deal with generative topics, and on learners' behaviors. More surprisingly, Interactions Flashcards foster the integrated improvement of all of the qualitative aspects of spoken language since they help subjects improve their vocabulary range, their grammar accuracy, their fluent use of language, their asking and answering of questions for interactive communication, and their use of connectors to achieve coherence in English as well as in Spanish.

Interactions Flashcards can be considered a practical, low cost, easy to implement, and user friendly procedure to improve interaction for elementary school students with low oral performance in English, which additionally can have a positive impact on learners' oral performance in Spanish. The applicability of employing Interactions Flashcards procedures is still open for discussion and directions for future research need to be posed.

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