Collaborative and Self-directed Learning Strategies to Promote Fluent EFL Speakers

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Abstract

Speaking English with fluency is one of the most demanding challenges students and teachers face in many educational communities, and it has been claimed that fluency problems can derive from lack of practice during independent study. This research article reports on a mixed-methods study that analyzed the effects of using collaborative and self-directed learning strategies through speaking tasks aimed at developing oral fluency. This study was carried out with a group of 10 students with a pre-intermediate level (CEFR A2) in English at a Colombian university. Qualitative data from students' reflections, compiled through a survey, and the teacher's classroom observations was analyzed through the grounded theory approach. Quantitative analysis was aided by a protocol in which frequency counts of words and hesitations per minute for each speaking task were registered. The results suggest that fluency can be acquired collaboratively when learning from others and by making mistakes. Additionally, working collaboratively increases learners' confidence not only because they feel they are not being judged but because they learn to see that their mistakes are not just theirs. Thus, collaboration is positively influenced by self-directed learning, in that it encourages students to make personal reflections on their weaknesses and strengths, thereby involving them in decision-making processes that identify what is not working properly and what they should do to succeed.

Keywords: collaborative learning, oral fluency, self-directed learning

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Study

Speaking English in Colombia has become a necessity for those who wish to have better job opportunities and more comfortable lifestyles. Given that English is a way for citizens to get involved in the global economy as well as facilitate cultural openness, the Colombian Ministry of Education's National Bilingual Program, launched in 2004, supports various initiatives for learning and teaching English in Colombia. Colombians who have not learned English often attribute this to the costs involved and lack of access; however, many have also stated they would undertake studies to improve their employability and quality of life or to travel abroad. It is common to find job opportunities in Colombia that require at least a CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) B2 level of proficiency in English, even for positions involving technical, professional, or just occupational knowledge and skills (British Council, 2015). Therefore, the development of speaking skills in learners should be a priority, since it is clear that communicating properly in English would benefit not only Colombian citizens in their personal and professional lives but also Colombia as a country in the international context.

Emphasis on speaking practice is sometimes avoided by teachers due to their workloads, the numerous topics to be covered in syllabi, lack of time to listen to every student, and students' low motivation regarding speaking in front of others. These issues might stem from insufficeint planning as well as a limited use of speaking strategies that would encourage students to improve their fluency and oral skills through meaningful speaking tasks.

In some private and state educational contexts, it is necessary to consider students' language backgrounds, which can differ greatly from one student to another due to social and academic opportunities. As a result, students' attitudes towards learning a foreign language might be framed within personal interests and skills.

Heterogeneous language levels within the same classroom are frequently found, even when, as at the university where this tudy took place, a placement test has been used. Indeed, even within the same class there are often students with better receptive skills than others; these students simultaneously have better productive skills, perhaps because of having had the opportunity to travel abroad and gain confidence with speaking the second language. Certainly, this represents a great advantage over other students who feel ashamed to speak in the target language and do not take risks with speaking.

Therefore, the main purpose of the study described in this article was to answer the research question: "*How might fluency in speaking be fostered in a group of Colombian students through the use of collaborative and self-directed speaking tasks?*" The study also aimed to provide learners with tools that would help them become more confident and fluent when speaking in English. One of these tools was a collaborative learning environment in which students played active roles, negotiated, and contributed by exploring and taking advantage of their strengths to make decisions on behalf of the group.

1.2 Theoretical Considerations

From a general perspective, fluency in speaking can be defined in different specific ways, although the same general pattern characterizes most definitions: being proficient in producing speech that can be followed and understood with no effort. For instance, Brumfit (1984) describes the term as the ability to produce oral speech in natural forms, whereas De Keyser and Zamel (1987, p. 108) explain that speaking a language with fluency is characterized by the ability to sound "natural and normal, including native-like use of pausing, rhythm, intonation, stress, rate of speaking, and use of interjections and interruptions". Jones (2007) explains that oral fluency does not refer to the perfect use of language without interruptions or hesitations but to a confident oral production where listeners can follow ideas in a smooth form. Nevertheless, Bergmann, Sprenger and Schmid (2015) conclude from their research on the impact of language co-activation on L1 and L2 speech fluency that knowledge of language has a direct impact on fluency, since L1 learners make sure of the correct use of language in L2 before uttering a word to simplify mistakes and guarantee, according to their beliefs, a more efficient message. As defined by Segalowitz (2010), oral fluency is a complex cognitive skill that requires learners to use linguistic knowledge in a cognitively fluent way. Observing speech processing makes evident the limitations and difficulties students face in their oral production. It is not just a skill, but cognitive and complex, and thus depends on considerable practice, use of appropriate strategies, and setting meaningful and achievable goals.

Although many educators may consider it a challenge to develop oral fluency in the language classroom, theory and research point towards viable ways of achieving this goal. Various authors (such as Deutsch, Dooley, Henthorn, & Head, 2009; Dustmann & van Soest, 2001; Hunter, 2012; Nation, 1989) have discussed how to improve oral fluency in a foreign language. Likewise, with regard to foreign language educators' frequent concerns that students are not able to produce oral speech in the additional language that sounds natural and fluent, Hunter (2012, p. 30) observes:

A major issue that continues to challenge language teachers is how to ensure that learners develop accuracy and complexity in their speaking, as well as fluency …. a perennial struggle for teachers is how to develop both accuracy and fluency in students' speaking since one often seems to come at the expense of the other.

In a similar manner, the low levels of fluency initially observed in the participants in the present study led the researcher to look for strategies that might help them improve. Considering that the social context in which this study took place is monolingual, with Spanish as the native language, it was observed that participating students produced oral discourse characterized by continuous hesitation and interjections that at times interfered with meaning.

1.2.1 Collaborative Learning

The idea of working collaboratively has been implemented in many academic settings; decisions on working individually or in groups are sometimes made by individuals, depending on their learning styles and preferences. As seen from Vygotsky (1978) constructivist perspective, collaborative learning is a powerful approach in which individuals get together to build knowledge and achieve a common goal. From the same viewpoint, de Laat and Simons (2002, p. 15), who studied the influence and impact of collective learning, explain that:

The accelerating developments in our society make it necessary, but not sufficient, to have excellent groups of individuals in a workforce … people need to be able to work together in solving problems and innovating more accurately and more quickly.

These authors also emphasize the importance of a collaborative approach in enabling individuals to develop higher-order thinking skills that may have a greater impact on the outcomes they produce. Also important are the

benefits of collaborative learning, which Laal and Ghodsi (2012), in their review article, classify into social, psychological, and academic benefits, which can easily be expanded as integral parts of learners' lives as professionals, citizens and individuals.

Accordingly, it is important to analyze in greater depth what collaboration means. Roschelle and Teasley (1995, p. 70) for instance, describe this approach as a "coordinated, synchronous activity that is the result of a continued attempt to construct and maintain a shared conception of a problem". Additionally, Dillenbourg (1999, p. 1) describes collaborative learning as a situation "in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together". Collaborative learning is a meaningful and useful tool within an academic environment that takes advantage of the strengths and abilities of each participant and puts them together to achieve shared goals in more effective forms. For instance, Cohen (1994, p. 4) explains that "shared goals and tools can strengthen positive student interdependence", which at the same time might be perceived as an opportunity for learners to reinforce their skills.

However, working collaboratively—and for the purposes of this study when developing collaborative speaking tasks—may become more challenging if not all participants show the same level of commitment. To explain this challenge, Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986) describe the concept of *least collaborative effort*, which illustrates passive roles students may play when developing collaborative speaking tasks. The authors explain that "in conversation the participants try to minimize their collaboration effort" (1986, p. 28), which can be attributed to individuals who have low levels of confidence in speaking. These learners hide behind others who may have higher levels of confidence. Considering this challenge, it is important to plan pedagogical tasks that include authentic collaboration among participants in which all are provided with active and meaningful roles to achieve a final goal.

1.2.2 Self-directed Learning

This study also examined the ways that individuals develop their own skills and their involvement and commitment to their own learning processes. SDL is a necessary skill for the development of long-life learning (Sze-yeng & Hussain, 2010) and for learners who want to develop their capacities to construct knowledge autonomously. The use or promotion of SDL has been implemented in different institutional contexts, and researchers (de Bruijn & Leeman, 2011; Sze-yeng & Hussain, 2010) have reported benefits and positive effects when promoting this skill. In general, SDL refers to a:

"Learner's autonomous ability to manage his or her own learning process, by perceiving oneself as the source of one's own actions and decisions as a responsibility towards one's own lifelong learning. In an instructional context, it means that students are able to take initiative, with or without the teacher, in making decisions concerning their own learning." (Sze-yeng & Hussain, 2010, p. 1913)

Thus, self-directed learning (SDL) played a key role in the development of tasks designed to develop and enhance oral fluency in EFL students. Considering the characteristics of SDL, this study proposed a set of tasks in which participants were free to make decisions and develop autonomy with regard to the activities proposed and, therefore, self-direct their learning processes and styles based on their roles within a group. Similarly, Duque and Cuesta (2017) argue that a high degree of awareness about learning strategies leads students to become more responsible for their own results.

However, SDL cannot be described as mere autonomy given to students to make decisions and direct their learning development. During this study, both participants and the researcher played specific roles; for instance, as suggested by (Sze-yeng & Hussain, 2010) the teacher needed to become less of an authority figure and more of an active user with shared-power who interacted with other participants. This study also promoted the development of SDL within a collaborative learning environment, since there is evidence that both of these concepts can be blended effectively to develop learning (Abubakar & Arshad, 2015; Herman, 1983; Kelz, 2009; Mendieta et al., 2015). It has been found that, when individuals are engaged in cooperative learning activities, group work learning and self-learning are boosted if supported efficiently by facilitators who help students during the joint construction of conceptual knowledge (Fung & Lui, 2016). Besides, if self- and peer-assessment practices also occur, students not only boost their self-awareness and self-reflection skills but also enhance their abilities as critical, creative thinkers, effective communicators, and collaborative team workers, while also becoming more productive and effective learners (Harrison, Ohara, & McNamara, 2015).

Even though the present study was pursued from a constructivist perspective, each participant was assigned a specific role and responsibility that led to the development of self-direction. Thus, it was hypothesized that interactive and self-directive strategies would help participants enhance their oral fluency in independent and collaborative forms.

2. Method

This article describes a mixed method study was conducted within an action-research methodology in which the teacher became the researcher who identified the problem and tried to solve it through an innovation. It was carried out at a Colombian university and included 10 participants whose ages ranged from 18 to 22 years old and with a CEFR A2 English level. Participating students were enrolled in a pre-intermediate English course, which followed a blended approach, with 3 hours of face-to-face encounters (2 on Mondays and 1 on Fridays) and one-hour asynchronous virtual session per week. Over the course of the study, through the use of collaborative and self-directed speaking tasks, learners were expected to produce oral language with not only coherence and accuracy but also fluency.

The data collection stage took place in three stages. Firstly, students' oral participation was recorded in order to analyze fluency rates in greater detail; secondly, students took a survey after each speaking task so they could reflect on their performance and self-assess their progress; and, finally, during and after each task, the teacher reflected on students' performance to assess the relevance and efficacy of the tasks performed. Hence, three instruments were designed and used to measure students' oral fluency and keep a record of both participants' and the teacher's views.

Oral fluency was measured in terms of a quantitative analysis by using a *measuring sheet*. The aim of this instrument was to register the number of words and hesitations per minute by each of the participants in each of 10 speaking tasks. This instrument was chosen based on previous studies (e.g., (de Jong & Perfetti, 2011; Derwing, Thomson, & Munro, 2006; Kormos & Dénes, 2004; Lennon, 1990)) that have also used quantitative methods to measure oral fluency in foreign language learners. Kormos and Dénes (2004) conclude that, based on their research, "the best predictors of fluency are speech rate, that is, the number of syllables articulated per minute and the mean length of runs, that is, the average number of syllables produced in utterances between pauses" (2004, p. 6). Therefore, following the examples of instruments used in previous studies, the present study constructed a measuring sheet to log the numbers of words and syllables, hesitations, and interjections produced per minute. In addition, the effects of meaning and communication on fluency were also considered.

Addtionally, qualitative data on learners' perceptions or views on self-assessment was colelcted through two instruments: a student survey and the teacher's reflection notes. The survey was administered through a self-evaluation with 11 questions, each of which could be answered by one of 3 options: *absolutely, kind of,* or *can be better*. In this regard, Dunning et al. (2004) define self-assessment as an intrinsically difficult task, since it involves several psychological processes that conspire toward what they call "flawed self-assessment" (2004, p. 72). Accordingly, the author of the present study suggests that sometimes students' views of their own performance can differ from their teachers' due to overconfidence or fear, which might be an issue meriting further study. The teacher's reflection notes took the form of a journal in which the teacher's observations of every step in each of the interventions were written down. These observations included the teacher's perceptions, reflections, and suggestions regarding the performance of each participant. These notes were kept in the form of a chart organized around six questions about how accurately and appropriately the lesson plans had been designed, carried out, and developed.

To analyze the collected data, a mixed-methods approach combining techniques, methods, approaches, and language from both quantitative and qualitative traditions (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) was used. The main reason for selecting a mixed-methods approach was that by mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches the strengths of one method can mitigate weaknesses in the other (Gelo, Braakmann, & Benetka, 2008; Johnson & Turner, 2003). Triangulation of data was ensured by analyzing the data (both quantitative and qualitative) collected through the three different instruments, thus permiting differing positions to be examined separately before converging the overall results (Cresswell, Plano-Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). Quantitative data analysis made use of frequency counts for each of the 10 speaking tasks. Grounded theory was the selected approach to handle, manage, and report findings derived from the qualitative phase.

For the implementation, a series of 10 different speaking tasks, all focused on self-directed and collaborative work, were carried out over a 10-week period, with one task performed each week. Speaking tasks were implemented at the end of a given week after the topics in the syllabus had been covered and sufficient input in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation had been provided to students. Sessions were recorded in order to maximize time and facilitate the analysis that took place at a subsequent stage.

Collaborative work was necessary in every task, as each asked students to take on specific roles within the group, contributing to the construction of knowledge, working together on the revision and edition of tasks before presentation (to encourage high quality in terms of content and language), and providing peer-feedback when

speaking tasks were improvised. Self-direction took place throughout the process, including the development of the speaking tasks and during the self-assessments that occurred after lessons. Students were invited to reflect on their own language performances, strengths, and weaknesses and to think of ways to enhance their own learning and oral production. These reflections took place during the feedback stage. Sometimes, participants had the opportunity to watch or listen to recordings of themselves to promote critical reflection on their performances.

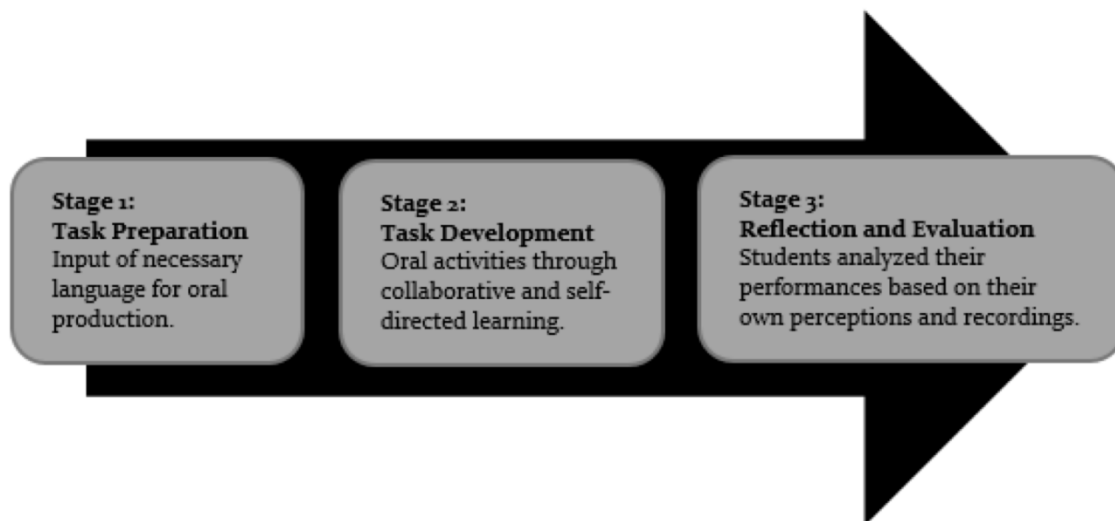In brief, the stages of the study described above are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Implementation cycle

The pedagogical intervention was divided into 10 sessions and was held over the course of three weeks. Each of the 10 speaking tasks was carefully described in a lesson plan form as shown in Table 1. This form included the tasks, purposes of the activities, suggested time, teacher's roles, and the kind of interactions that should take place during the class in order to help guarantee that the activities fulfilled the aims of the lessons. The lesson plan format also included additional information regarding lesson goals, tasks, competences and objectives, learning goals, assessment criteria, materials and resources, and anticipated problems (see Appendix D).

In general, the pedagogical intervention encouraged participants to develop tasks in a collaborative manner aimed at achieving a common final product used to measure oral fluency. As a final product of the stages illustrated above, students created interviews, TV shows, and advertisements and performed role-plays and show-and-tell activities.

Table 1. Sample lesson plan form

Teacher's Role	Stage	Aim	Procedure Teacher-student activity	Intera ction	Time
Model	Lead in / Preparatio n	To recall the participle form of verbs when referring to "achievements"	(Groups of 4) Students will compete by matching verbs with their correspondent participle form to complete the sentences in Annex 1.	SS	10 min
Encourager Facilitator	Presentati on / Modeling	To introduce useful expressions to express achievements	Step 1: (In the same groups) Students will view pictures (Annex 2) and express the message behind them. They will be encouraged to use expressions such as "it's important/necessary/essential to + verb, people have	SS SS	10 min

			changed/improved/damaged, etc		
			Step 2: Students will talk about what they have done in order to overcome /help the situations in the pictures.		5min
Encourager Guider Facilitator Monitor	**Practice**	To use new knowledge in real contexts.	**Step 1:** (pairs) Students will be provided with a real-life question (Annex 3) to prepare a 1-minute talk.	SS	10 min
		To peer-correct and contribute to improving speech.	**Step 2:** (pairs) Students will have their 1-minute talk.	SS	15 min
	Learner Self-Evaluation	To become aware of own learning	Students will self-evaluate their performance expressing feelings and final reflections.	SS	------
Encourager Monitor	**Problem Identification / Solution**	To learn how to solve possible language mistakes	Students will cooperatively provide feedback to classmates after each presentation in terms, of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation mistakes together with their proposal for correction.	SS	-------
			Teacher will reinforce feedback if necessary.		
Encourager Elicitor	**Wrap up**	To draw conclusions by providing arguments that support opinions.	Students will self-evaluate how much vocabulary they used and how fluent they spoke by filling in the assessment questionnaire (data collection instrument).	SS	6 min
	Expansion / Independent Study	To review the topics for the first partial exam	Students will make a list of dreams and ambitions including key words that will help them to talk about that during the exam.	SS	60 min

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative Data

Initially, the quantitative data collected though the first instrument, *the measuring sheet,* which consolidated the 10 speaking tasks of the 10 participants in the study, was analyzed. As previously mentioned, the number of words, syllables, and hesitations per minute were counted.

Table 2. Oral fluency scores

STUDENT	Pre-test			Intervention 1			Intervention 2			Intervention 3			Intervention 4			Intervention 5			Intervention 6			Intervention 7			Intervention 8			Post-test		
	#W	#H	M-C	#W	#H	M-C	#W	#H	M-C	#W	#H	M-C	#W	#H	M-C	#W	#H	M-C	#W	#H	M-C	#W	#H	M-C	#W	#H	M-C	#W	#H	M-C
Student 1	22	2	L	101	3	H	37	2	M	30	1	L	114	1	H	92	2	H	32	2	L	90	3	H	68	3	M	172	3	H
Student 2	34	4	L	48	2	M	48	7	M	56	1	M	63	1	H	120	0	H	81	3	H	112	2	H	73	4	H	123	1	H
Student 3	60	1	M	128	0	H	89	1	H	37	4	L	135	0	H	47	1	L	66	0	H	81	1	H	65	2	M	237	0	H
Student 4	15	1	L	71	4	H	42	2	M	86	1	M	53	1	M	79	0	M	54	0	M	73	2	M	63	2	M	217	1	H
Student 5	13	3	L	186	0	H	117	1	H	128	1	H	66	0	H	144	0	H	60	1	M	96	1	H	87	1	H	288	0	H
Student 6	120	1	H	101	0	H	38	0	L	36	2	L	48	1	M	46	0	L	72	2	H	66	2	M	94	2	H	135	1	H
Student 7	24	2	L	170	0	H	31	5	L	55	1	M	64	1	H	149	0	H	52	4	M	84	1	H	83	2	H	172	0	H
Student 8	81	1	M	90	3	H	68	1	M	43	1	M	53	4	M	122	0	H	38	2	M	62	2	M	93	2	H	182	1	H
Student 9	21	1	L	95	1	H	85	3	H	70	1	M	69	1	M	184	0	H	139	2	H	72	0	M	162	2	H	147	0	H
Student 10	46	5	M	92	1	H	60	0	M	56	1	M	58	0	M	201	0	H	106	2	H	64	1	M	87	2	H	288	1	H

Note: This table reports the number of words and hesitations produced by each participant during the 10 interventions of this study. It illustrates the general quantitative analysis that was used to measure oral fluency.

W = Number of words

H = Number of hesitations

M-C= Meaning and Communication: H= High; M= Medium; L=Low.

As can be seen in Table 2, the numbers of words and hesitations each participant produced during each of the 10 speaking tasks varied over the 10 weeks of the study. Some students spoke for less than or more than a minute, which made necessary to unify the scores by a rule of three.
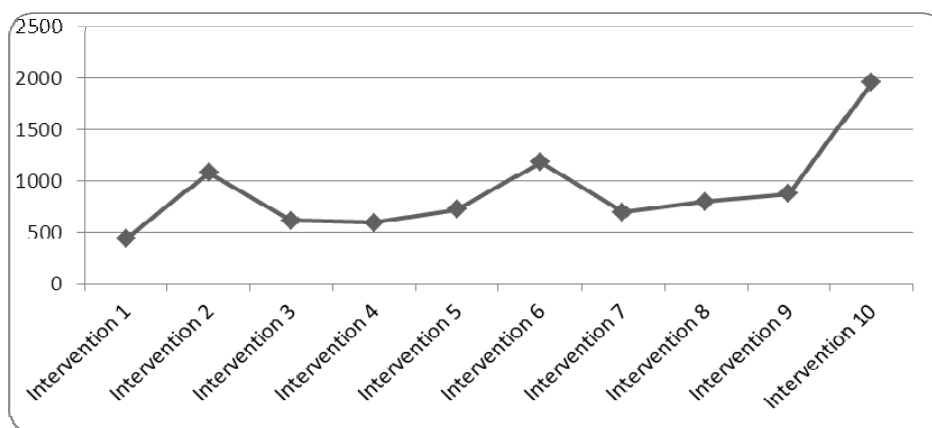

Figure 2. Number of words per intervention

The data presented Figure 2 show that from the pre- to the post-task there was a distinct evolution in the number of words uttered per minute. They also suggest that the first task, during which participants produced a very small number of words, served to motivate improvements seen in the second task.

The first task had been aimed at recalling vocabulary relating to physical and mental actions derived from verbs previously presented to participants in a mind map so as to raise student awareness of the great variety of actions relating to verbs. For example, for the verb "study," some of the related verbs could be "analyze", "practice, "read", and "comprehend". After a group of participants had filled in the mind map from a list of recalled verbs, these were exchanged between and complemented by other groups. Finally, students chose one of the verbs from the mind map to use in developing an idea, story, or description that would then use all (or most of) the verbs in the collaboratively built list. Giving students an activity for recalling vocabulary can often lead to stretches of silence and empty thoughts until others' ideas make them react. Here, the results were less promising than expected because, when students were asked to develop an idea, description, or situation of one of the verbs seen

in class, they produced monosyllabic speech. Their attention had been focused on storing the words in their memories. Linking new words with previous knowledge implies much more than just remembering words, but this would be a matter for another speaking task.

The second task, however, went beyond merely recalling vocabulary. Instead, students were asked to choose a magazine at random from a pile, read one of the articles, report on it to the class, and answer any questions from the audience. While reading, students could see the vocabulary in context, which made the topics easier to talk about.

The third, fourth, and fifth tasks asked students to talk about first-time events, achievements, dreams, and ambitions. The results suggest that talking about the past or future were not topics that excited them; despite the input given, there was nothing to say but simple sentences that did not develop complete ideas.

However, as shown in Figure 3, speaking tasks 6 and 10 (whose tasks required reports on an interview and a role-play with authentic scripts, demanding longer preparation from students), show that the number of hesitations per minute decreased considerably. This result might be attributable to the increased time allotted to task preparation during these interventions, which implied additional space to design, share, revise, edit, and rehearse.

It is to be noted that speaking task 7 showed a sharp rise in the numbers of hesitations, though it is hypothesized that this result is due to the particular type of task performed in this intervention, in which students had to role-play situations that were created spontaneously as they spoke. In speaking task 7, students received a piece of paper that presented them with a character and situation to act out. They had no time to prepare; as soon as a participant was presented with another character, they had to being the role-play by continuing with a story that was being built collaboratively.

The eighth speaking task, which again shows a slight decrease in the number of hesitations, asked students to present a collage representing their dreams, ambitions, and achievements as part of the final project for the course. This served as a speaking task summary in which students had to recall all the vocabulary and structures studied during the course.
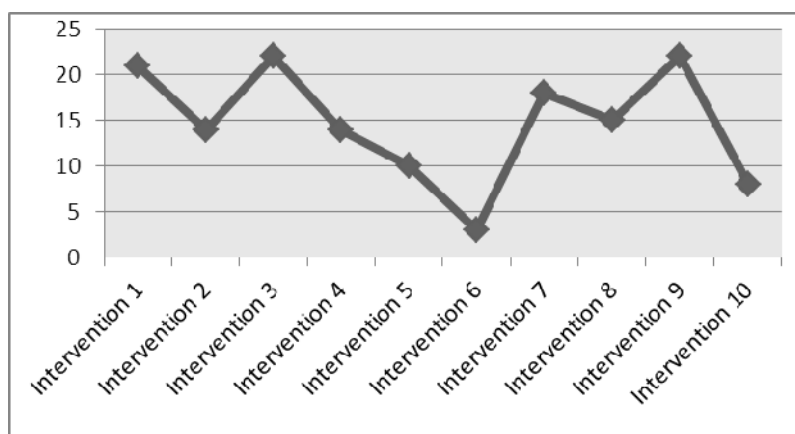

Figure 3. Number of hesitations per intervention

The ninth speaking task asked students to give an oral presentation about special occasions and social customs in a country of their choice. This required more the use of memory than of spontaneity since this task implied the oral report of a previous research on the country they had chosen. Thus, fluency can be easily interrupted when memory becomes the basis of knowledge. Figure 4 illustrates the results from this intervention in greater detail.
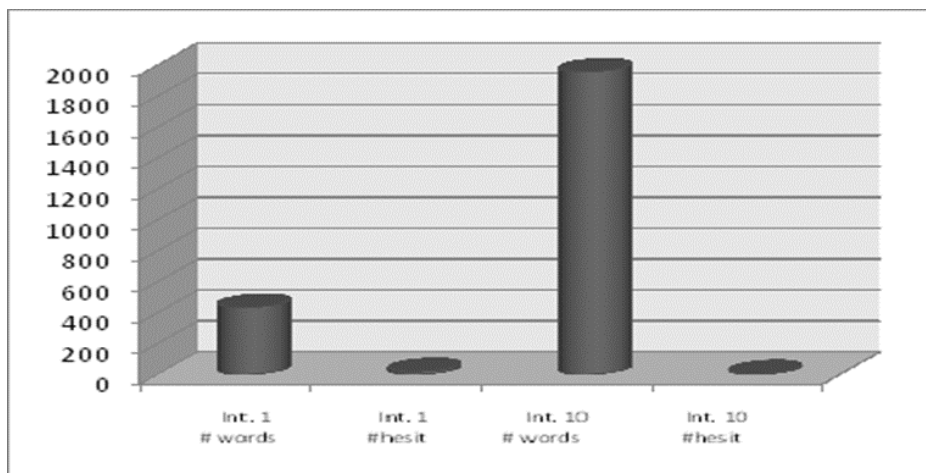
Figure 4. Comparison between number of words produced in pre- and post-tests

In general terms, Figure 4 illustrates an improvement in terms of the number of words participants produced during a specific amount of time. Conversely, it can also be observed that the number of hesitations did not change meaningfully; as noted previously, this result may have been influenced by the task type.

Regarding the effect of the strategy implemented and comparing the results from the first and last tasks, it was observed that, during the first intervention, students were not aware of fluency variations or what these really meant, and their spoken production was average for a class with many students of a similar level: monosyllabic answers with some difficulty in producing elicited information. Nonetheless, during the last intervention, students were able to observe and witness their achievements in terms of oral fluency and production.

3.2 Qualitative Data

Although the quantitative data illustrate that participants' oral fluency generally increased, it was necessary to complement the study with a qualitative analysis to validate the findings. The emphasis at this stage was on examining the students' and teacher's perceptions regarding the actions and processes that led to the noted improvement in fluency.

This qualitative analysis yielded categories that highlight the value of self-reflection as an individual and conscious process that encourages students to discover new attitudes and aptitudes towards learning. This develops self-directed learning, especially in a collaborative environment that fostered fluency in English.

Thus, the resultant categories—*team supportive work, implementation of personal learning strategies, enthusiasm, self-esteem,* and *consciousness of fluency performance*—along with representative samples from participants' data are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Categories from data analysis

Category	*Brief Analysis*	*Students' Comments*
Team supportive work	Students' ability to recognize their partners' strengths allows them to make tasks as successful as possible.	"Mi grupo es colaborador y ayudamos todos en la actividad." (S1, SE) "My group is collaborative and all of us helped with the activity"
		"Personalmente me parece que el grupo estaba muy comprometido." (S4, SE) "Personally, I think that the group was highly committed"
	Commitment and support among each of the members in a group is visible.	"My classmate was so responsability" (S5, SE)
		"El grupo trabaja muy bien juntos" (S8,SE) "The group works very well altogether"
	Respect to socio-cultural differences is evident. (TO)	

Implementation of personal learning strategies	Learners are involved in their learning process either in the preparing or production stages of the tasks.	"Hice una buen preparación antes de la presentación" (S3, SE) "I had a good preparation before the presentation"
		"I can practice more English and speak more in English with friends" (S7, SE)
	The implementation of personal learning strategies and resources in order to come up with a product is a required step for SDL.	"Have practice more to were more preparation" (S5, SE)
		"I can work on vocabulary and I can speak more in class" (S2, SE)
	Self-evaluation of results after each task and design of personal plans for improvement encouraged students to improve fluency. (TO)	"Siempre empleo las mismas palabras, debo mejorar." (S4, SE) "I always use the same words, I must improve"
Enthusiastic and positive attitude	Willingness to participate and compete exceeded habitual parameters of apathy and boredom of participants helping them to achieve certain goals. (TO)	"Me gusta este tipo de actividades" (S4, SE) "I like this kind of activities"
		"La actividad es muy divertida e interesante ya que tienes que pensar mucho en Inglés para defenderte."(S5, SE) "The activity is very funny and interesting since you must think in English a lot to stand up for yourself"
		"Estas actividades se han vuelto en una gran estrategia para que estudiemos con más amor y agrado." (S1, SE) These activities have become a great strategy to study dearly and with more pleasure"
		"Me gusta este tipo de trabajos." (S3, SE) I like this kind of work."
Self-esteem and anxiety	Self-confidence was considered essential to this study. When participants became aware of their ability to produce oral language, they became risk takers and dared to use the language spontaneously. (TO)	"Las actividades me han ayudado a controlar mis nervios." (S6, SE) The activities have helped me to control nervousness."
		"Estas actividades nos han dado mucha fluidez y seguridad." (S3, SE) "These activities have provided us with lots of fluency and self-confidence"
		"Me sentí mejor que en las clases pasadas." (S5, SE)"I felt better in the previous classes."
		"Se me facilita entender ahora lo que otros hablan." (S4, SE) "It is easier for me now to understand what others say".
		"Me siento más tranquila y así puedo pensar mejor lo que voy a decir." (S9, SE) "I feel quieter, so I can think better what to say"
Awareness on oral fluency	The more students participated in speaking tasks, the more fluent they became. Fluency awareness became evident when hesitations and interjections decreased. (TO)	"La actividad fue más fluida esta vez." (S2, SE) The activity flowed better this time:"
		"Últimamente me fluyen más las cosas." (S4, SE) Lately, things flow more with me."
		"Mi compañero me interrumpió y tuve que improvisar." (S5, SE) "My classmate interrupted me, so I had to improvise"

" Las actividades me permiten perder el miedo y hablar con mayor fluidez." (S3, SE) "Activities allow me to have no fear and speak more fluently".

Note: This table presents a general analysis of the categories that emerged from the teacher's observations (column 2) and students' self- evaluation (column 3) applied after each intervention during the study.

TO = Teacher's observation

S = Student

SE = Self- evaluation.

3.2.1 Team Supportive Collaborative Work

In accordance with the design of the activities, which promoted collaboration at all times, participants played an active role within their teams, as observed and recorded on the teacher's notes. One participant explained the purpose of team collaboration and became aware of the importance of having active participants with specific roles: "mi grupo es colaborador y ayudamos todos en la actividad" (S1, SE). From the same perspective, participating students became conscious of the harmony and positive environment that emerged from working collaboratively, as well as the impact it generated at the production stage: "el grupo trabaja muy bien juntos" (S8, SE).

Findings suggest that students took great interest in and had a positive view of working with their teams. Students assumed roles of responsibility within the teams to produce quality products. There was also evidence that students supported each other when needed.

3.2.2 Implementation of Personal Learning Strategies

When students had the opportunity to watch the recordings of their performances, they performed self-evaluations that led them to reflect on their studying or learning styles when preparing tasks. This helped them apply more appropriate and practical learning strategies. Some of them stated, probably without being aware, that they needed strategies to acquire new vocabulary or to enhance and improve the development of the tasks. As one of the participants explained their need to work on lexis: "I have to work on vocabulary and I can speak more in class" (S2, SE).

Similarly, another participant found that the lexicon they used was insufficient or insufficiently varied, and this informed their personal learning needs: "Siempre empleo las mismas palabras, debo mejorar" (S4, SE). These are some examples of participants' evaluation of their language performance. In addition, during observations it was possible to perceive gradual language improvements that may have been affected by the strategies students implemented to achieve the stated goals within their groups.

3.2.3 Enthusiastic and Positive Attitude

Some educators may consider it difficult to encourage positive attitudes in students, but achieving this specific result was probably one of the most significant outcomes from this study. Based on both the teacher's observations and participants' own viewpoints, enthusiasm and positive attitude were key components in the development of the speaking tasks. Interestingly, one of the participants explained how the strategy had motivated them to work: *"Estas actividades se han vuelto en una gran estrategia para que estudiemos con más amor y agrado"* (S1, SE). Similarly, another participant admitted that they liked the strategy and perceived it as a bridge to use of the foreign language: "La actividad es muy divertida e interesante ya que tienes que pensar mucho en inglés para defenderte" (S5, Q).

In general, students were willing to participate and listen to each other, even if they were competing for the best and most creative presentation. At the end of each speaking task, participants usually praised each other's performance and gave and received positive feedback.

3.2.4 Self-esteem and Anxiety

This category, closely related to that of *enthusiastic and positive attitude*, was also essential for improving fluency. As long as students felt they were able to produce oral language effectively and coherently, they started taking more risks with spontaneous language use. Comments from participants suggest that the strategy helped them reduce anxiety and served to enhance their oral fluency: "Me siento más tranquila y así puedo pensar mejor lo que voy a decir" (S9, SE); "Las actividades me han ayudado a controlar mis nervios" (S6, SE).

Furthermore, it was also observed that throughout the 10 sessions, participants' attitudes towards oral language production changed abruptly; they became less concerned about mistakes they made and showed more commitment towards the development of the task and their performance in class. In this reduced-stress environment, learners became less concerned about making mistakes when producing oral language, and this became less of a barrier for their continued development of the task.

3.2.5 Awareness of Oral Fluency.

Although students were not aware at the beginning of the study of the importance of fluency for their oral discourse, the data gathered showed their attitudes about this changed. Students had tended to speak monosyllabically, not only to avoid making mistakes but also because their lack of vocabulary impeded the development of ideas in the additional language. One participatant observed that the implemented strategy allowed them to produce more fluent language: "Las actividades me permiten perder el miedo y hablar con mayor fluidez" (S3, SE). Additionally, another participant commented on the positive change observed: "Últimamente me fluyen más las cosas" (S4, SE).

Similarly, the teacher also observed the partiticpants' increasing fluency, even though this developed slowly over the course of the study. Overall, participants were observed to increase their vocabulary range, enthusiasm, self-esteem, capacity for teamwork, and abiltity to implement personal learning strategies with direct and positive effects on their fluency when speaking in the target language.

Participants reported that they enjoyed the activities performed in the study and claimed these helped them improve their language performance. Addressing issues of low confidence and self-esteem were not main objectives for this study, but gains in these areas were nevertheless observed as students became more aware of their abilities to produce meaningful language within real and authentic situations.

4. Discussion

This study shows that the inclusion of constant self-directed and collaborative speaking tasks in weekly classes can foster oral fluency in participating students. When participants were provided with appropriate opportunities to use the target language orally, they overcame their fear. Furthermore, collaborative work helped learners share knowledge and experiences while growing in personal and academic contexts. The results suggest that students became risk-takers when speaking as they better understand that making mistakes is an essential par tof the learning process. Allowing students to build their own learning through mistakes, reflections, collaboration, and freedom can benefit both students and teachers. Teachers should be the principal collaborative source for students as they start their self-directed learning processes.

Students can make their speaking skill a personal strength once they realize they are able to express ideas, feelings, and thoughts without focusing only on linguistic forms. Participants' attitudes and new behaviors towards their speaking performance in the target language have important pedagogical implications and should encourage teachers to transcend traditional practices and approaches to better discover students' hidden oral abilities. Freedom is the key. Speaking is a skill that should not be tied to conditions nor elicited by force; on the contrary, speaking should allow people to express their feelings, thoughts, and ideas while having a good time and learning from others.

Nevertheless, certain limitations on this study may have affected the final results. Firstly, there was insufficient time to examine longer-term effects on participants' spoken fluency. Secondly, the use of only one speaking task per week might have become monotonous; many young people, including those from the sample in this study, prefer fast, varied, easy, and accessible tasks and experience the world differently from previous generations. Additionally, focusing classes on a specific skill (such as speaking) can result in other language skills being neglected. Language should be seen as a whole; communicative skills are linked to each other and should be treated in isolation. Even so, the time spent in this study on speaking tasks and, particularly, on improving students' opportunities to practice oral communication seems to have reinforced confidence with regard to using the additional language, which helped this study achieve its objectives—and is promising outcome overall.

In conclusion, further research should be undertaken with regard to progressively more demanding speaking tasks so as to better understand how their development affects learners' spoken fluency. Moreover, given the apparently positive effects the approach taken in this study seems to have had on students' speaking abilities, it would be interesting to see how similar approaches might affect writing abilities. Finally, it would also be worth conducting similar studies with larger sample sizes to better understand the effects of the strategies examined in this study.

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Appendix A

Measuring Sheet

Measuring Oral Production

Participant´s Name: _____

Intervention # _____   **Date** _____

Oral fluency scores

Number of words per minute	
Average number of words per participant (specify on time)	
Average number of syllables per word	
Number of hesitations / interjections per minute	

Meaning scores

Number of overt errors (verb tenses and conjugations)	
Number of incomplete sentences	
Number of broken words per minute	
Number of repetitions per minute	

Oral fluency scores

Number of words per minute	
Average number of letters per word	
Number of hesitations per minute	

Meaning scores

Number of overt errors (verb tenses and conjugation)	
Number of incomplete sentences per minute	
Number of broken words per minute	
Number of repetitions per minute	

Communication scores

Is there evidence of collaborative work?	
Is there evidence of interaction in the speaking tasks?	
Is there a communicative message in interventions?	

Appendix B

Student's Survey – Self Evaluation

Student's Name: _____

Date: _____ Lesson Nº: _____

SELF EVALUATION

	ABSOLUTELY	KIND OF	CAN BE BETTER
I followed all the steps proposed during the class.			
I liked the speaking activity proposed by my teacher. The activities helped me speak in English. I was able to use English to communicate with my partners.			
I was able to speak without hesitation. I was able to speak in English with fewer interruptions.			
I felt embarrassed while speaking. I liked working in teams or groups.			
I was able to work collaboratively while doing the speaking activities. I played a specific role with responsibilities. I enjoyed speaking in English during class.			

Comments

My strengths were

_____

_____

Areas I can improve

_____

Appendix C

Teacher's Observation Chart – Reflection Notes

TEACHER´S REFLECTION NOTES

Teacher's name:	Lesson No:	Date of lesson:

1. What were the greatest achievements while carrying out this intervention? Why?

2. Were the objectives reached? Explain. How did you realize this? Support.

3. Would you modify something for the purpose of enhancing fluency?

4. What was your personal perception regarding students' English speaking performance?

5. Have you observed improvement in oral fluency while implementing collaborative and self-directed tasks?

6. What other actions can be taken as part of the research validity?

Appendix D

Lesson Plan Format

LESSON PLAN TEMPLATE FOR INTERVENTION
Adapted from Dr. Joan Rubin's Lesson Planner, ICELT lesson plan template and Weekly Planner 2012-02
Department of Languages and Cultures, Universidad de La Sabana

Name of co-researcher: ANGELA GAMBA
University Code Number: 201111208

Institution: SABANA UNIVERSITY

Date of Class: DAY MONTH YEAR	**Time of Class:** 11 am. **Length of class:** 1h.
Week No. __6__ 7 09 2012	**Time Frame:** One class period
Class/grade LEVEL 3 / PRE-INTERMEDIATE	**Room:** G-110
Number of students: 20	**Average age of Students:** 19-20 years old
Number of years of English study:	**Level of students** A1 **A2** B1 B2 C1 C2

Lesson Number

1	2	3	**4**
5	6	7	8

Research Circle Leader: CAROLINA CRUZ

Set Lesson Goals

TASK: Talk about activities that have been performed through early life.

COMPETENCES:

- Express ideas about dreams, ambitions, and achievements.
- Give a clear presentation on topics related to dreams, ambitions, and achievements and answer predicable or factual questions.
- Keep up a conversation on a fair range of topics related to dreams, ambitions, and achievements.
- Intonate to sound interested.

OBJECTIVE: To encourage students to use the past participle of verbs by recalling information from personal experiences.

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achievements during their lives.

Learning to Learn Goal
Establish a **learning to speak goal** based on the use of background information and the activation of schemata.

time expressions used.

Assessment Criteria
Students will show evidence of the language goal when they express achievements in real life contexts.

Identify a topic for the lesson
Students will focus on "**Achievements during early life**", so they will work with authentic personal material (photos, letters, videos) so they find the new language real and meaningful.

Materials and Resources

Material 1 Handout	**Rationale:** This handout is aimed to make students match verbs with their participle form and use them properly in context.	Annex 1
Material 2 Pictures	**Rationale:** These pictures are aimed to activate schemata in students so they come up with ideas and develop the speaking task.	Annex 2
Material 3: Pieces of paper	**Rationale:** These sentences are related to activities performed during early life such as: • The number of times they have been to places of warm weather; they have cried; they have felt embarrassed, nervous, frightened, frustrated, etc; they have celebrated special occasions, they changed their minds, or they have made the wrong choice. • What they have done by their parents and by themselves; what they or people have done to save the environment, to protect animals, or improve the world.	Annex 3

Appendix E

Lesson Plan Format

CRITERIA	INTERVENTION 1	INTERVENTION 2	INTERVENTION 3	INTERVENTION 4	INTERVENTION 5
1. What were the greatest achievements while carrying out this intervention? Why?	Students were faced with speaking in English for the first time, and they experienced fear. They used previous vocabulary which was generally basic.	Students participated actively and became involved in the task. They were creative in using new vocabulary and grammar structures from a real life context.	Students used the new expressions to express first time events, and this helped their stories sound natural. They were more aware of past tense conjugation and use of connectors.	Students were encouraged to use the vocabulary and expressions checked in class, so they had the opportunity to see how meaningful and useful they were in real life contexts.	Students were able to talk without any extra help such as notes in papers, and fluency improved a little bit more. They were able to produce more words during their speech.
2. Were the objectives reached? Explain. How did you realize this? Support.	Completely because the idea of the pre-test was becoming aware of students' strengths and weaknesses.	Absolutely. In fact, my expectations were fewer. They were dressed according to the situation (journalists, presenters, and important and common citizens). They also decorated the stage with a poster, music, video, and pictures.	Yes, as mentioned in the question above, students used new expressions, vocabulary, and transition words in their talks.	No. Although students were asked not to read, they felt insecure and were not able to expand ideas apart from those they had already prepared. The grammar structure (present perfect) is still faulty.	Kind of, because although they were committed to the final product, there are still pronunciation mistakes that might alter meaning.
3. Would you modify something for the purpose of enhancing fluency?	Not yet.	Not at the moment. Although they used memory as a learning strategy that did not show evidence of real communication. I consider it a very good outcome for being only the second intervention.	Yes, I would provide them with better pictures that contain lots of details they could use to narrate important events. The use of models before activities can also help.	Yes, it is necessary to reinforce reading in order to provide grammar and vocabulary in context that allow them to have more ideas and vocabulary when speaking.	Yes, it is necessary to reinforce practice of pronunciation of words, especially their endings.
4. What was your personal perception regarding students' English speaking performance?	Their English level is higher than I expected. In fact, students were eager to express ideas.	They made mistakes (in terms of language and pronunciation) proper for their language level; however, I felt they enjoyed the task, owned their roles, and cared about a good quality final product.	They did it fine because they received lots of input regarding voice and expressions; however, they still need to be more creative and proactive in developing ideas. They just work because they are asked to. I need to think of activities that make them feel motivated.	They made mistakes related to verb conjugation word choice. They lack ideas and vocabulary to expand answers since questions are related to personal experiences.	They were free to produce their speech, and they were aware of including new expressions and structures studied during the course.
5. Have you observed improvement in oral fluency while implementing collaborative and self-directed tasks?	Not yet.	Not yet, because today's task allowed them to use memory. Although they did it very fluently (excellent preparation), oral fluency with a communicative purpose was not evident. What I did observe was excellent collaborative and self-directed work. They became responsible for their role and were respectful and careless for the success of their group's presentation.	Today I did. Although the last intervention was prepared, I think students are already aware of the use of the simple past and past continuous tenses when narrating past events, as well as vocabulary that can help them develop ideas.	Not yet. Although today's task gave them a little time to prepare their talking, and this pushes them to improvise language, students are still frightened of talking and developing ideas. They still depend a lot on notes and do not take the risk of talking about things that have not been prepared beforehand.	Yes, today they showed evidence of the benefit of making speaking a regular practice in their weekly classes.
6. What other actions can be taken as part of the research validity?	None yet.	Perhaps making students watch videos so that they can reflect on their performance and think of aspects to be improved. They could contribute with more ideas.	I will ask them to suggest speaking tasks that might find interesting.	I will ask just to five students per class and the other five will do it as independent work. I will rotate groups when students get bored when I ask each of them to participate.	Make students feel free to suggest and design their own speaking tasks that relate to their needs and interests.

CRITERIA	INTERVENTION 6	INTERVENTION 7	INTERVENTION 8	INTERVENTION 9	INTERVENTION 10
1. What were the greatest achievements while carrying out this intervention? Why?	Students were able to report on information they gathered through interviews. In addition, they came up with elaborated and well-structured ideas.	Students did not have time to prepare their oral participation, only the context given at the moment of the activity.	Students had to put in context all they have learned so far, so they were able to see the meaning of structures in real life situations.	Students showed evidence of research and learned about different cultures. New vocabulary was used.	Students became responsible for their own roles and worked together to come up with a high quality product.
2. Were the objectives reached? Explain. How did you realize this? Support.	Completely, because students reported information with no great efforts in terms of pronunciation or grammar structures. In addition, they supported information with Power Point presentations and/or pictures.	Kind of, because some were not able to follow the guidelines stated for their roles because it depended on others' work. With one student who did not follow the guideline, the roles of the others might be altered	Yes, although outcomes could have been better. Students limited themselves to a few expressions and structures just to achieve the task requirements.	Completely. Students were innovative and visual aids were neatly designed allowing them to refer to their topic with not much trouble.	Completely. In fact, students came up with results beyond the ones expected. They made a great effort and the results demonstrated that.
3. Would you modify something for the purpose of enhancing fluency?	Not this time. Students reported enjoying the activity a lot because they had the chance to share ideas and learn relevant information.	Yes, instructions must be clear and perhaps models of what is expected from students should be provided. Improvisation, the purpose of the task, cannot be planned.	No. Although a rubric that could guide them on the minimum to be considered for final products could be shared in order to encourage them to go beyond the minimum effort.	Yes, it is necessary to encourage students to use their own language when talking about topics they had to read instead of just copying information.	Not this time.
4. What was your personal perception regarding students' English speaking performance?	They did it pretty well. They still need more practice in order to reach the expected range fluency; however, the activity was smooth and natural.	They tried their best to the extent they understood what they had to do. While improvising, common mistakes arouse: verb conjugation, some missing subjects, and word choice.	Students could have been much more demanding with their own work. Perhaps they are tired because we are almost at the end of the semester.	Students did a great job. They worried about the information they would share with the class and they learned what they were going to say.	I felt proud of their work. They worked alone in the writing of the script and performance.
5. Have you observed improvement in oral fluency while implementing collaborative and self-directed tasks?	Yes, today they showed evidence of the benefit of making speaking a regular practice in their weekly classes.	Yes, despite roles not being fully developed, they were able to adapt their role to the situation given.	Yes. This task included all the topics studied so far, and students showed improvement of topics, vocabulary, and grammar expressions. Communication was more fluent and real.	Yes, students feel much more confident each time and this is evident in their speech.	Completely. There were students who had to improvise their scripts, and they did it really well. Language production flowed.
6. What other actions can be taken as part of the research validity?	Definitely, speaking tasks become meaningful once students feel they can see the world from different perspectives, and they hadn't realized the different truths around them.	Making speaking tasks every week becomes monotonous and instead of doing good, it can create negativity from students.	Combining speaking tasks with other skills in order to cover language learning as a whole.	Creating a checklist of items students might use to peer-assess their partners and create a peer-community for feedback.	Asking students to make a report of the process before, during, and after the final performance.

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